

Star Trek: Pytheas Secrets and Lies

By Brother Benny

***Historian's Note:** This story takes place from mid September 2378 to early October 2378; beginning approximately seven days after the events of Broken Bridges.*

Prologue

Starbase One

Earth orbit

Stardate 55713.2 (September 18, 2378)

Admiral Sitak entered her office and Captain Leza Astar stood up. The admiral raised an eyebrow in what a human would have called surprise.

'I did not expect to see you until the trial.'

'That's what I wanted to talk to you about, Admiral. I have read all the charges against and I wanted to plead guilty to all counts with one proviso.'

Sitak said nothing for several moments. 'Your actions are not entirely logical but I will hear you out. For legal reasons I should record this meeting. Is that acceptable?'

'Yes ma'am.'

'Computer, begin recording.'

'Recording,' the computer replied.

'What is your proviso?' Sitak asked.

'I would like to give you and you alone my reasoning for my actions.'

Sitak raised her left eyebrow again. 'Very well, you may proceed.'

'In regards to the charge of violating General Order 283, I was obviously aware of the threat that the Dominion posed to ourselves and when I learned about the Vorta Imperium I believed that because the political alliances of the Alpha Quadrant in the Mirror Universe were far more sundered than ours, there would be no hope for them if the Imperium attacked in force. They Imperium were looking for the Changelings which they had overthrown in a genocidal war. The Imperium had already destroyed *Terok Nor* and laid waste to Bajor as a warning to everyone else. The Klingon-Cardassian Alliance was blinded by their hatred for the Terran rebellion and I knew with certainty that unless I forced a temporary alliance, the Mirror Universe would crumble further.'

'Why should the mirror universe be of concern to you?' Sitak asked.

'If the Vorta subjugated the Alliance and the rebellion, they would have learned of our universe and the fact that we defeated the Dominion and I believed it possible they would look to destroy the Founders in our universe as well. None of us are equipped for another such war, and this time it would have been far more costly.'

Sitak appeared to consider her argument. 'That is an interesting hypothesis. Did you run any computer simulations to confirm this?'

'There was no time, Admiral. As a Starfleet Captain operating on the frontier, it is not always possible to adhere to the strict regulations laid down by our forebears although of course we always try our best. I did what I did to save billions of lives in two universes, perhaps more. You have the luxury of performing computer simulations now, and I willing to sit in a prison cell while you do that. I believe I will be proven correct in my hypothesis.'

'After our meeting I will be speaking with Admirals Coburn and Janeway regarding these matters and we will follow where the evidence takes us as laid down in the Uniform Code of Starfleet Justice. Since we are going through the charges, let us move on to the charge of accessory to genocide.'

'Doctor Maxx determined that the disease was not curable. He believed that the Cha'lav deliberately created the virus in order to destabilize the Kursican sector, making it ripe for takeover. Doctor Maxx believed that if he were to beam down to the surface he would be able to find a cure. Based on the evidence he presented to me, I did not agree with his assessment.'

'You do not hold a medical degree and neither do you have medical training, Captain. On what evidence did you base your decision?'

'Several other species had been infected with a species-specific mutation of the infectious virus and some of them had survived because of Doctor Maxx's actions. However, a number of them did not survive because Maxx did not have similar enough DNA on file to create an antivirus. There were no caninoid or lupine species in the Federation DNA database from which to construct a cure.'

'The Alshain are a caninoid species, Captain, and we do have their DNA sequence in the database.'

'I presume you have looked at the evidence, Admiral?' Astar asked. 'Maxx tested the Alshain DNA and found it completely incompatible with that of the Resoto.'

'I see.'

'I had no way of knowing whether the disease had mutated or whether it would become contagious to the crew once it was airborne. Although millions of people died, it was necessary to save my crew and the rest of the galaxy.'

'I am not one hundred percent sure of your reasoning on this matter, Captain, but I will investigate the evidence. Finally, there is the matter of the prime directive violation regarding the Eeroth.'

Astar sighed. This was going to be the hardest part of the entire conversation. 'I have no excuses or reasons for my actions on the Eeroth mission. Although I was under the influence of a very unusual poison, there is no excuse for my actions and how I represented Starfleet and the Federation.'

Admiral Sitak had been standing for the entirety of their conversation but now she moved to her desk and picked up a padd. After reading through some of its contents, she looked up at Astar. 'I have here testimony from Captain Logan and the interim head of the Eeroth government. They have accepted Captain Logan's report on your behaviour and admit that the terrorists in command of their government and armed forces did not represent their legitimate government. It is therefore my decision to drop the charge of prime directive violation.'

'Thank you, Admiral.'

'Do not thank me yet, Captain. I believe that some of your actions not represented here do show that your command decisions are lacking. Admiral Janeway erred in offering you command of the *Pytheas*. You are hereby demoted to the rank of Commander.'

'To whom do I report?' Astar asked, accepting her punishment.

'Because of the nature of the *Pytheas*' mission into the Delta Quadrant, I have decided that you should be assigned to the *Pytheas* as the executive officer unless your commanding officer deems you unfit for duty.'

'Yes ma'am.'

Sitak handed her another padd. 'I do have a special mission for you, but you will need your commanding officer's approval.'

Astar accepted the padd and glanced at the contents. She raised an eyebrow herself when she saw the mission, more at the people involved than the specifics, but it was surprising nonetheless.

'Is this the first move in eliminating the threat they pose permanently?'

'We believe they have a significant number of operatives within Taskforce Vanguard and it is our hope that you will rendezvous with the fleet at some stage and be in a position to remove each and every one of them. We will interrogate them and use what they give us to capture and interrogate more. It is a logical course of action.'

'I agree, Admiral, but it is an extensive undertaking. Who will be involved?'

'For now, just you and your commanding officer although both of you have independent authority to bring others in as needed, provided you can trust them without a single doubt.'

'We'll bring them to justice,' Astar said, promising and hoping she could deliver.

Chapter One

USS *Pytheas*

Utopia Planitia

Stardate 55713.7 (September 18, 2378)

Lieutenant Commander Xeris had not been called to testify against Captain Astar and had therefore been elected to oversee the extensive refit required to make the *Pytheas* spaceworthy again, since no first officer had yet been assigned. He had recently learned that the trial had been cancelled because Captain Astar had had a private conversation with Admiral Sitak. No one of course would learn the contents of the conversation, but the result was surprising. Astar had been demoted and the new XO had instantly become the captain, before he or she had even set foot on the ship.

'By the Great Trough, what have you done to the bridge?'

He turned at the sound of the voice, as did every other engineer on the bridge, and stood up as the rotund Tellarite in civilian clothing approached. 'I'm the chief engineer of this vessel, and currently in command. Can I help you?'

'Yes, yes, I saw your jacket. I'm talking to the young Sty-born maggots infesting the bridge.'

Xeris raised an eyebrow as he caught the Tellarite's meaning.

'We're under orders,' the starbase engineer in charge of the repairs said to the new arrival.

'Who are you exactly?' Xeris asked again before the Tellarite could bluster the young lieutenant into a shouting match.

'Captain Mora glim Cheer, your new commanding officer.'

Xeris choked back a laugh and imagined the look on Astar's face when she found out, and came face to face with the man. 'I look forward to working with you, sir.'

Cheer nodded and then looked around the bridge. 'There is much that is different. Who ordered the changes?'

'That would be Starfleet Command,' the Romulan answered, 'because of our

new mission into the Delta Quadrant.'

'What are the changes?'

Xeris scowled. 'Read the specs, sir. I'm busy trying to get everything operational.'

Cheer stepped into Xeris' personal space. 'You have time. Commander Astar is involved in delicate negotiations at the moment and is not due back on board until the repairs are complete.'

Tamping down his ire at the Tellarite's blunt assessment, Xeris nodded. 'Aye sir. As you can see, the rear of the bridge remains as it was but there is now a third chair on the command dais for the diplomatic officer, when he or she is assigned. The flight control console has been moved fifty centimetres further back to accommodate the new transparent aluminium viewscreen. Behind the viewscreen is extra shielding to prevent another helmsman from being blown out into space by decompression if the bridge is hit,' he added, remembering the report of Ensign Larson's death.

'Anything else?'

'Yes sir, all seats on the bridge now come with restraints. The entire bridge module was replaced and the additions have been put in since then.'

'Excellent,' Cheer replied. 'I will be touring the ship. You have the bridge.'

Everyone breathed a sigh of relief once the turbolift doors closed. 'Back to work, I want to make sure the bridge is fully operational by the time he returns.'

The turbolift doors opened and Lieutenant Commander Sheena Gonzales stepped out onto the bridge. She glanced around the module at the numerous changes for a moment before Xeris strode up to her.

'Sheena, we have a Tellarite as our captain.'

'I know, I just got his security profile a moment ago. I was wondering if I could have a word with you about him.'

'Sure,' he put the tools down and turned to the lieutenant. 'You have the bridge.'

'Aye sir,' the young engineer replied with a grin.

Once in the ready room, the Betazoid dropped all pretence of decorum and kissed her lover passionately. Xeris returned the passion and they were locked in the embrace for a seeming eternity.

'Did you really want to speak about our new commanding officer?' Xeris asked when she finally released him from the embrace.

'Yes, actually,' Gonzales replied. 'I understand he's a fairly gruff person?'

'Let's say that I look forward to the confrontations between him and Astar.'

Gonzales sighed. 'How are the repairs coming?'

'The warp coils are being completely replaced and the hull plating is being checked over section by section. Internally, we're sealing the hull breaches and upgrading the remaining isolinear chips to bioneural circuitry. The bridge module was successfully replaced and the required changes have been made to accommodate our mission into the Delta Quadrant. The library database is being purged and reinstalled and we're getting a full software upgrade.'

'Are we still on course for our departure date?'

'We are, provided that all personnel have been assigned.'

'You're speaking of the new diplomatic officer?'

Xeris nodded. 'There's been no word despite my repeated attempts to contact Starfleet Operations. I need to know who is being assigned so I can have my people make any necessary adjustments to their quarters.'

'I've got good news and bad news on that front.'

Xeris sighed. 'Let me have the good news first, I could so with some.'

'You don't need to make any modifications to her quarters.'

'Her? Someone has been assigned?'

'This is the bad news. Her name is Zaera, she's...'

'Romulan, yes I know.'

Gonzales arched an eyebrow. 'You know her?'

'When I was still in the Empire, she was a colleague of mine,' the Romulan replied. 'We both worked for the Romulan Ambassador to the Federation. I was the engineer of his personal shuttle and she was his attaché.'

'She resigned her position a few years ago and became a senator's aide where she remained for several years until her defection to the Federation. Officially, she is a civilian diplomat assigned to the ship. Do you have any idea why?'

'None. Why do you ask?'

'She specifically requested this assignment.'

'Why?'

'That's what I want you to find out,' Gonzales answered. 'She is hiding something and I want to know what it is. We don't need any more additions to the crew with hidden agendas.'

'You read her thoughts?'

'Only her surface emotions as I do with everyone when I'm interviewing them. Every time she spoke of you, which was far too frequently, her emotions spiked but I couldn't pick up any more than that. She is an expert at hiding her feelings, almost like a Vulcan.'

'Wonderful, just wonderful,' Xeris sighed and touched Gonzales' cheek lightly. 'I can assure you that I have no idea why she is here.'

It wasn't strictly true. He had an inkling as to why she was here, but there was no way he was going to reveal that information.

Chapter Two

Starbase One

Earth orbit

Stardate 55713.8 (September 18, 2378)

Commander Astar left Admiral Sitak's office empty handed. The admiral could not risk the padd getting into the wrong hands and it had been wiped of its contents once Astar had read them. In regards to that assignment, she was on her own. Prior to her meeting with the admiral she had seen one of the family members of her deceased crew and now she sought him out to put an end to the feelings she had coursing through her. She saw Jamal Mahtani's father sitting at a table outside a café and felt herself choke up. The man blamed her for his son's death, even though she had been in stasis at the time and close to death herself. Seated beside him was a Trill man that she didn't recognise but she noticed that he wore the uniform of the Trill Symbiosis Commission. He was likely there to make his own determination on her fitness to continue being joined. There was always the possibility that the symbiont would be forcibly removed if he decided that she had broken the inviolate rules of the Commission.

The Trill saw her and began to rise, a frown set on his face, but she covered the intervening distance faster than he expected and he sat back down again. 'I am not here to speak with you at this time, Commander.'

'I would like to speak with you, however,' Astar countered, 'but I would also like to speak with Mister Mahtani.'

'Commander, I do not know if that is such a good idea,' Mahtani replied sadly. 'I'm not sure it would be right.'

'Perhaps not, but will you hear me out?'

Mahtani nodded and the Trill scowled. 'I'll be in my quarters, Commander. I should be ready to see you in about two hours.'

'That will be fine,' she said and took the Trill's place beside Mahtani.

'What do you want to say to me, Commander?'

'I wanted to apologize for your son's death. I know you blame me, but what you may not know is that I was in stasis at the time and close to death

because I had been poisoned by my executive officer. He is the one who killed your son.'

'Has he been incarcerated?' Mahtani asked, his face almost completely devoid of emotion.

'Unfortunately, we learned that he was an impostor. We returned him to where he came from, and it was one of the reasons why I was being court-martialed.'

'I see.'

'I don't expect you to forgive me, and I am not asking for it. I'm not sure what I would do in your position, but I only ask that you realize your son died trying to protect the crew from a homicidal individual and without him we would all be dead. He died a hero.'

Mahtani was silent and Astar took the opportunity to pull a small box from her pocket. She slid it along the table and Mahtani took it. He opened it and looked inside, then looked at her uncomprehendingly.

'It is a medal for conspicuous valour. My actions may have been questioned but your son's were not. I am only sorry I could not have a ceremony for your son.'

'Commander, my wife and I will hold a traditional mourning ceremony and we will present this to the family at that point. Thank you for coming and explaining the situation to me. I hope you won't get in trouble for doing so.'

Astar shook her head. 'I avoided the classified specifics.'

Mahtani clasped her hand. 'Thank you, Commander.'

Astar only nodded because she was too choked up to respond. After a moment, Mahtani released her hand and she calmed herself down. 'I am sorry to leave now, but I must meet with the Trill you were speaking with earlier.'

'That is not for another hour or so.'

'I want to keep him off guard. He's here for a reason other than what he told you, of that I'm sure. I intend to find out what it is. And I have several more families to speak with.'

Mahtani smiled wanly. 'I hope they go well, Commander.'

'Thank you.'

* * *

Kelon Mal sighed when the chime sounded. 'Enter.'

Astar walked through the door and paused when she saw the disarray in the quarters. 'What's going on in here?'

'I am in the process of packing, Commander, not that it is any of your concern.'

'Why were you here, anyway?'

'I was going to observe your trial and decide whether your symbiont should be removed or not based on your actions.'

'And now?'

'I have received a full report from Doctor Maxx and I am satisfied that there is no harm to the symbiont by keeping you joined, for now.'

'For now?'

'Yes, I expect a full report from whomever your chief medical officer is every six months to make sure that it stays that way. If there is a wide enough deviation from the norm I will have you recalled to Trill for symbiont removal.'

'What if the symbiont doesn't want to be removed?'

'The Guardians will determine that. In the meantime, please return to your duties and leave me to pack.'

'Why else were you here, Kelon?'

'Did you check up on me?'

'Of course, I always make it a point to know who I'm dealing with. You haven't answered my question, why else are you here?'

'You are not the only Trill in Starfleet, Leza. I routinely check on the Trill away from the homeworld to see if they are faring well, as do my colleagues, though we are not usually so obvious about it. This was a special instance.'

'You're not with the Symbiosis Commission are you?'

Mal smiled. 'No, I'm not. The Watchers exist for a different purpose.'

'I see. I suppose it is a secret purpose?'

'Exactly.'

'Then why are you revealing it to me?'

'I was asked to,' he replied and handed her an isolinear chip. 'This contains everything you need to know about the Watchers, and what to look out for.'

'Let me guess, we never had this conversation and you were never here?'

Mal nodded. 'Goodbye, Leza.'

He smiled as she sighed and left his quarters for her next stop, wherever that would be. His reason for being on Starbase One was now over and it was time to go home for a well-deserved break. At least until the next problem presented itself.

Chapter Three

USS *Pytheas*

Utopia Planitia

Stardate 55721.5 (September 21, 2378)

Captain Mora glim Cheer fingered the fourth pip on his collar as he entered the bridge from the open door to his ready room and immediately removed his hand, placing it at his side. The bridge had been in darkness since late the night before when the repair structure suffered a major power loss due to unknown circumstances. Whatever it was had crippled the *Pytheas* as well. The entire ship was dark and all on-board personnel had been relocated to *Starbase One* until the situation was resolved. Starfleet Security were all over the place and scouring every square millimetre of the starship and structure for evidence of tampering while the engineers were busy trying to fix the problem.

As his eyesight adjusted to the lesser light of the bridge he noticed a solitary figure standing by the command chair. 'Commander?'

She started at his voice and turned around to face him. 'I didn't know you were there...sir. I just needed some quiet time.'

'It's all right, Commander. I understand. I was going to get something to eat on Earth. Would you care to join me?'

'Thank you for the offer, but no. I have to go and see someone.'

'Not a problem,' he replied knowingly and entered the open door of the turbolift, fully prepared to climb down to the shuttlebay. He needed the exercise but he knew that he was fighting an uphill battle against the ravages of time and genetics. Though he had been able to hide his condition from some of the chief medical officers from other postings, there was coming a time when he would not be able to do any longer and he decided to stop hiding from it and changed his mind about climbing down the turboshaft. He held on and tapped his combadge.

'Captain Cheer to *Starbase One*.'

'Starbase One, *go ahead, Captain*.'

'One to transport to Starbase infirmary.'

'Is it urgent, Captain?'

*'Negative, but the *Pytheas* has no internal or external power.'*

'Acknowledged, standby.'

He had only to wait a moment before he was transported across to the Starbase infirmary. Doctor Maxx was waiting for him alongside another doctor. 'What seems to be the problem, Captain?'

Cheer looked to the Andorian doctor, back to Maxx, and sighed, though it came out as more of a snort. 'I am suffering from what you have called Tellarite Foot and Mouth Disease, but it is an aggressive strain.'

'What do you call it?' Maxx asked as the other doctor went to a computer terminal.

'Something unpronounceable in Federation Standard,' he replied.

'You should be taking regular medication,' the Andorian doctor said. 'Are you?'

'No, I have been managing the condition using herbal remedies from home, but they no longer suffice, Doctor...?'

'zh'Thera,' she replied and handed the Tellarite an ampoule. 'The computer will be able to replicate this for you.'

'Zh'Thera was a nurse on the *Christchurch* when Astar was a Lieutenant Commander,' Maxx said, excited to know someone else who worked with his aunt.

'Lieutenant Commander Astar was a strong-willed woman,' zh'Thera told them.

'She still was as a Captain, until she threw away her career,' Maxx countered.

'I told you she has a plan, Arlon. She always has a plan.'

'At this point I don't see it, Doc. I don't get why she plead guilty to something she could have got away with.'

'Guilty conscience?' Cheer asked. 'She made a number of questionable decisions.'

'She was under the influence of a powerful poison and nearly died. I would say she did remarkably well.'

'Perhaps,' the Tellarite said but decided not to press the issue.

'Starfleet security to Captain Cheer,' a voice issued from his combadge.

'Captain Cheer here, go ahead.'

'Until further notice, the USS Pytheas and its repair structure are off limits. Under no circumstances are your people to return to the vessel until the area is secured by us and you are notified. Is that understood?'

'I understand,' Cheer answered. 'Could you tell me at least what has happened?'

'Unfortunately it seems that there was an attempt to destroy the vessel and structure but whoever set the device didn't do a good job of it. We're analysing it now.'

'Understood, Cheer out,' the Tellarite said sourly and turned to Maxx. 'Doctor, could you please assemble the senior staff for a meeting in one hour. I wish to discuss shore leave for them.'

'Aye sir,' Maxx replied and hurried out the door.

As Cheer left sickbay himself he was nonplussed by the near-destruction of what had so recently become his vessel. Considering that the ship had been commissioned just six months earlier, the crew under Astar's command had upset a rather large hornet's nest and it behoved him to suggest the possibility of Cha'lav involvement to Starfleet Security, but he had to receive the permission from Project Cobalt first.

He tapped his combadge. 'Computer, locate Admiral Ranar.'

'Please speak with Admiral Sitak regarding the location of Admiral Ranar,' the computer replied.

'Interesting. Computer, please locate Admiral Sitak.'

'Admiral Sitak is in Starbase Operations.'

'Captain Cheer to Admiral Sitak.'

'Admiral Sitak here.'

'Admiral, I would like to discuss the location of a mutual colleague.'

There was silence on the other end of the open line for a brief second. *'Please meet me in Starbase Operations as soon as possible, Captain.'*

'Acknowledged, Admiral. I will be there shortly.'

Cheer reached the Starbase Operations centre less than five minutes later and found Admiral Sitak in conversation with a captain and two commanders. As soon as she saw him she excused herself from the others and walked over to him.

'Admiral?'

'Admiral Ranar was found dead yesterday morning. There is no apparent cause of death at present.'

'It may be linked to the attempted destruction of the *Pytheas* yesterday,' he told her and at her raised eyebrow informed her of the incident. 'I believe Starfleet Security should be investigating both incidents concurrently.'

'Considering the secret nature of the project, I believe your senior officers should investigate the incidents. Project Cobalt is now under my aegis, Captain, and as such all reports regarding the *Pytheas*, her mission, and the current incidents should be directed at me.'

'Aye sir,' Cheer replied noncommittally.

Chapter Four

House of Emmanuelle Walker

Paris, France

Stardate 55721.7 (September 21, 2378)

Commander Leza Astar materialised outside the house of her former commanding officer and sighed as she walked up to the front door. She was wearing civilian clothing as she wasn't sure whether she wanted the woman who had once been her best friend to know she had been demoted. By the time she reached it a moment later the door was open and Emmanuelle Walker stood in the entrance, a scowl on her face. Astar stood in front of her former commanding officer's wife and took a deep breath.

'What are you doing here?' she asked. 'I thought I told you I never wanted to see you again?'

'I came to tell you the truth about what happened at Merias III, the Scarab Nebula, and the Delta Quadrant and VechaQ IX.'

Walker's eyes widened. 'Why now?'

'Because I have realised that the truth should always come out, no matter what the cost.'

She stepped aside to let Astar inside. 'All right, but what if I don't like what I hear?'

'You won't like what I have to say, I guarantee it. But you should know the truth, the truth that Starfleet Command wouldn't tell you. The truth about what really happened aboard the *Monarch*, and the *Galaxy*.'

Walker nodded and the two women walked into the living room. 'So tell me what happened.'

Astar sighed. 'Sofia Petrov was an agent of an illegal agency within Starfleet called Section 31, and even telling you this could get me careered out of Starfleet, not just demoted.'

'Demoted?'

'Long story. Anyway, Petrov used Ben to get his cooperation so she could complete her mission in the Scarab Nebula, stopping an ancient probe from

falling into enemy hands, and she did that by seducing him. I know he told you about the affair but I thought you should know the truth behind it.'

'We got through that, why bring it up now?'

'Some months later, the *Galaxy* was one of several ships dispatched to the Delta Quadrant to sort out the refugee ships which were coming into Federation and allied space. We were caught in a wormhole and the ship barely held together, but in a battle with some of the refugees and the Klingons we lost eighty percent of the crew, including Ben.'

'I thought you were torn apart in a black hole with a Klingon ship?'

'That was the official story because the mission was classified beyond top secret. It still is, but I don't care anymore. My latest mission is also classified but I was demoted to Commander because of some questionable decisions I made in ass end of the quadrant. I'm lucky to still be on the same ship as XO.'

Emmanuelle Walker stood up and walked to the drinks cabinet. She opened the door and pulled out what Astar thought was a bottle, but when she turned round she was holding a Starfleet-issue hand phaser.

'What is that for? Where did you get it?'

Walker smiled. 'I got it from Sofia when she came to talk to me before her mission for Section 31. I knew everything about the mission, but thank you for telling me about Task Force Vanguard, I wondered where so many of my operatives were and why they were out of contact.'

'What do you mean, your operatives?'

'Since you're not going to live long, we lost contact with the task force some time ago. Captain Cheer will probably be receiving that information from Admiral Sitak any time now. Unfortunately, the good Captain will have to find another executive officer.'

Astar stood up. 'I prefer to die on my feet.'

Walker pointed the phaser at her. 'Good, I really didn't want to have to clean up the mess.'

'Wait!' Astar held up her hand. 'How can I convince you not to kill me?'

'You can't,' Walker sneered. 'You know too much about the organisation.'

Astar thought frantically. 'Do you have any operatives aboard the *Pytheas*?'

'No, I wasn't able to get anyone on board before the ship left for the Kursican sector.'

'What if I agreed to work for you?'

'What can you offer the organisation?'

'Four lifetimes of experience in the unknown, and I suspect that our new orders will be to track down the Andorian woman from the future and then find the task force.'

'And you will accept the task of retrieving my operatives, regardless of the risk to your life and career?'

Astar nodded. 'I do.'

Walker put down the phaser. 'You're the only operative I have on that ship. Can I really trust you to do what is best for the Federation?'

'That's what a Starfleet officer does.'

Walker shook her head. 'No, I mean what is best for the Federation. The Federation must remain strong and united and the refugees bring with them a lot of emotional baggage and different ideas. Some of those ideas could be dangerous for some planets in the Federation. You have to stop them.'

Astar took three steps forward, so she was in Walker's face. 'No, we have to integrate them into our society or let them be themselves. If we act any differently then we're no better than the Klingons or the Romulans.'

'We have people taking care of them.'

Astar sighed. 'I'll do what I can, but which is more important, saving your operatives or stopping the horde of arriving refugee ships?'

'Starfleet is spread too thin with the refugee crisis in the Hinterlands of the Beta-Delta Quadrant border, and the Cha'lav are going to come in force unless

you stop that Andorian traitor. That is your top priority. Then rescue my operatives and stop the refugees from bringing dangerous ideas back with them.'

'In that order?'

'Yes, in that order.'

Astar nodded and extended her hand. 'Then we have a deal?'

Walker cautiously shook Astar's hand. 'We have a deal. You'd better leave before Cheer comes looking for you.'

'He's busy investigating the attempted destruction of the *Pytheas*. He doesn't have time to chase after a wayward executive officer.'

Walker smiled thinly. 'Lieutenant Commander Xeris will solve the current crisis for you. It will be your job to cover up his actions.'

'Does he know something about who is doing it?'

'He knows everything about who, and why, but it would be best for everyone if no one knew more than that.'

Astar nodded and left the house. She beamed back to the starbase where she was met in the transporter room by someone else she knew.

Captain Cheer looked at her, expecting a report. 'Well?'

'She is Section 31, one of their cell leaders. She has Taskforce Vanguard riddled with operatives and the only way I could get out of there was to agree to get them back for her.'

'I expect a full report.'

'I'm sorry, sir, but I cannot make a report as it will surely make its way back to her. For all intents and purposes, I am now an operative of Section 31.'

Cheer snorted. 'As you wish, Commander; I will inform Admiral Sitak.'

'Walker knows about Project Cobalt and Task Force Vanguard intimately. There is a mole somewhere.'

'I suspected as much, but when we meet up with Vanguard, what will you do?'

'Arrest them all,' she said.

Chapter Five

Gonzales Homestead

Perth, Australia

Stardate 55721.9 (September 21, 2378)

Sheena Gonzales and Xeris emerged from the shuttlepod, an early model in service for over two hundred years, and waited for it to power down. It was the Gonzales' family personal shuttle, and Sheena hadn't used it since she was a child. All of the old shuttlepods from Earth Starfleet had been sold to museums or to private owners and the Gonzales family had owned it since the end of the Earth-Romulan war, but there was no record of which ship it had come from. She and her parents had a disagreement when she told them she wanted to join Starfleet and she had left the family house shortly after that. This was the first time in more than fifteen years that she would be seeing her parents. They had graciously allowed her the use of the shuttle and sent a pilot to fly it for them, not that it was needed; she was an excellent pilot in her own right.

'Sheena,' her mother said from the doorway and ran into her arms, crying. 'I'm so sorry.'

'Mama?' Sheena pulled away from her mother. 'What's wrong?'

'Your father didn't want me to tell you when others were around,' her mother replied and then noticed Xeris. 'Who is this?'

'Mama, this is my boyfriend.'

'He is Vulcan?'

Xeris stepped forward, 'I am Romulan.'

Maressa Gonzales looked at her daughter. 'What are you doing, child?'

'I love him, Mama, and I know you will too. Now tell me what is wrong.'

'He is dying.'

Sheena stepped back, a scowl marring her face. 'I will not give him closure unless he truly wants to apologize.'

Maressa sighed. 'He has wanted to many times, but his pride has stopped him. Now he has nothing left but regret. For the last several months he has been contacting as many people as he can find to apologise and ask for forgiveness.'

'I'm the last one?'

'He has only a few days left, perhaps not even that long.'

Xeris put his hand on Sheena's shoulder. 'Perhaps you should hear him out. You may not get another chance.'

Maressa smiled, her black eyes glistening.

'Mama, don't read him.'

'His shields are too strong, Daughter. You have taught him well.'

The air was suddenly charged with an intense heat and the shockwave knocked them to the ground. It took several seconds for the heated air to pass by them. Xeris helped Maressa Gonzales to her feet while Sheena turned to look behind her. The shuttlepod was aflame, and the burned body of the pilot lay close to it.

'That was meant for us,' she said breathlessly to Xeris.

'Someone does not want us to live long enough to complete our mission,' the Romulan replied sourly. 'I think it is time that I spoke with a few friends of mine.'

Gonzales nodded, understanding the unspoken implications of those impending conversations with people unknown to her. 'I will speak with my father, and then I will see you back at Planitia.'

'Are you both all right?' Maressa asked, brushing herself down as she stood up.

Xeris grinned as he saw that she looked completely unharmed. Her psychic abilities were clearly far greater than she let on. 'I am fine.'

Sheena was already on her feet and looking angrily at the shuttlepod. 'Xeris, find the person responsible and make sure they receive their due.'

He nodded but said nothing at Maressa's glare. 'Revenge is not our way.'

'This is not revenge, Mama. This is justice. We'll speak more inside and you can tell me what is going on with Father. Then I will go over the shuttlepod with a tricorder and find out where the explosive came from.'

'Are you sure that is wise, Sheena. What if there is a second device?'

'The explosion would have fried or vaporised it. We're safe from that aspect, but I don't like being blown up. It is not a pleasant sensation.' She shook her head to clear the pilot's scream of agony as he died.

'Xeris to Perth Spaceport, one to beam in.'

As the Romulan vanished in a pillar of light, the Gonzales women entered the house unaware that someone was watching them from the shadows at the edge of the property.

Sheena walked into her father's room and saw how drawn and pallid he really was. She reached out with her mind and barely felt anything. 'Father.'

'Sheena? You are alone?'

'It is just me, Father. Mother is outside.'

'What was the bang?'

'The shuttlepod exploded,' she told him. 'Someone is trying to kill me and my friends.'

'Starfleet is dangerous. I warned you not to join them.'

'Father, I am not here to argue with you.'

The Hispanic man reached out for her arm and grasped it. 'I was wrong for abandoning you when you joined Starfleet. I never told you why I disliked them, did I?'

'No. When did you have dealings with Starfleet?'

'A long time ago,' her father replied. 'I allowed my rage to blind me to the fact

that not all Starfleet officers are the same.'

Sheena smiled. 'That is true of everyone, Father.'

'Yes, it is. Your mother has read all your letters to me,' he told her. 'I have come to realize that you do a good job out there, keeping us all safe, and I want to thank you for it.'

'It's my job, Father. I need no thanks.'

'Allow an old man his dying wish.'

Sheena squeezed his hand but he did not return the gesture. He was too weak. 'Find a Starfleet officer called Terrence Glover and tell him I forgive him.'

'I will, I promise. I love you, Father,' Sheena said with a tear in her eye.

She sat there and held his hand for a long time, aware that he had already passed from this world into the next. She promised herself she would find Terrence Glover and learn what had happened between him and her father. It was the least she could do.

Chapter Six

Starbase One

Utopia Planitia

Stardate 55722.0 (September 21, 2378)

Lieutenant Commander Xeris decided that Zaera would know who was trying to destroy the *Pytheas* and kill him and went to see her while Gonzales was saying goodbye to her father. Xeris knew that her genetic profile indicated that she came from a noble bloodline, descended from Shariel himself, and she was persona non grata on Romulus because of her defection which curiously occurred when the senator she worked for was killed in a shuttle accident. Only he, of all the people in the galaxy, knew the truth about Zaera, and she was someone he had hoped never to see or hear from again. It was dangerous for them to be anywhere near each other, as was clearly obvious.

'Xeris, it is good to see you after all these years,' she said as he entered her temporary quarters aboard the starbase.

'That's a lie and you know it,' he countered as he checked the room for bugs with a device far more sensitive than a Starfleet-issue tricorder. 'We're clear.'

'Why did you want to speak with me in private?'

'I have been hearing things about *Aehallh Terrh* I don't like, Zaera. You assured me that the organisation would flourish in my absence. That does not appear to have been the case.'

Zaera smiled thinly. 'You're no longer the Director, Xeris, I am.'

'I am still the most senior operative of the organisation that still lives, and that makes me the boss.'

'When the Dominion took out the Tal Shiar, we weren't able to get enough people inside what was left of it because of the more stringent security measures they employed. I had to do something to keep apprised of the intelligence coming in.'

'So you have the Hall of State bugged?'

'Among other places.'

Xeris nodded. 'Who knows about us?'

'Us or the organization?' Zaera asked with a smirk.

'The organization,' Xeris replied sourly.

'Why are you on a pathetic starship instead of inside the Palais de la Concorde?'

'I have people inside the Palais, and I have a network of people in place across the fleet. Who do you think has been providing the intelligence to the organization?'

Zaera frowned as the truth dawned on her. 'You never left.'

Xeris clapped his hands. 'Well done, Zaera. I see your years of tutelage under my wing has paid off.'

'I needed to find my own way to get intelligence.'

'I found the perfect way to infiltrate Starfleet.'

'How did you get past the background check.'

'I wrote my own background dossier and had it planted by my network in Starfleet Intelligence's files. No one suspects anything and they never have.'

'They will now, with us both serving on the same ship.'

'How? They don't even know about the organisation.'

Zaera sighed. 'I had to get out of my senatorial aide's role so I could bring you this information,' she said as she passed him a Cardassian data rod.

'What information?' he asked as he took it and inserted it into the Romulan scanning device.

'Read it.'

Xeris did so and glanced up at the former aide. 'These can be faked.'

'This one wasn't. Someone knows that you head the organisation and they

tried to kill you to take control.'

'So they don't know about you?'

'I was probably next on the list.'

'Unless you tried to kill me,' Xeris said.

'I wouldn't even dare for the simple fact that if by some miracle I did fail, it would be one of the last things I ever did.'

The engineer grimaced. 'It looks like I will have to get Starfleet Security to let me peruse the device that didn't explode again. I thought I recognised the signature.'

'Whose?'

'Someone who once worked for us and appeared to be dead. It would seem that his death was faked, but he is still as sloppy as he has ever been. I'll find him.'

'Do you think he was acting alone?'

Xeris sighed. 'I don't know, but I will find out if there is another attempt on my life. I doubt he'll try again. Not so soon at any rate. He's failed twice already.'

'Good plan. Do you want me to request a transfer?'

'No, that would look too suspicious, but we must every effort to appear to dislike each other. My relationship with Gonzales is a difficult one.'

'As difficult as your relationships with other women were?'

'Exactly like them. The people of the Federation still dislike Romulans which is understandable considering that we were the first ones to try and annihilate them as a species. I was able to convince them that we're not all devious killers.'

Zaera raised an eyebrow. 'Right. We're actually the second group to try and eliminate the human scourge. The Xindi were the first.'

'Very true. In any case, I need to get back to work if this vessel is going to be ready to fly any time soon.'

'Let me know if you need anything. I know your weapons were atomised by the transporter.'

'How do you know that?'

'I have my sources, Xeris.'

'I'll let you know if I need a weapon...or anything else.'

Zaera nodded. 'Thank you for coming to see me.'

'You're welcome,' Xeris said as he left the quarters and turned back to face her from the threshold. 'Just to remind you, we'll interact as duties distract, but other than that we hate each other.'

Xeris left the diplomatic officer's temporary quarters and returned to engineering, but he didn't acknowledge having noticed Gonzales watching him from the corner of a nearby corridor. He knew she would bring it up the next time they were alone together and he needed the time in between to conjure up a plausible reason for her being here, since warning him wouldn't cut it, not without her knowing about *Aehallh Terrh*.

Chapter Seven

Verteron Array

Mars

Stardate 55722.3 (September 21, 2378)

The verteron array had not been used in well over a century and was supposed to be powered down, but Lieutenant Commander Xeris had found evidence of Martian soil irradiated by verterons in the remains of the unexploded device from the repair structure. Only the area immediately surrounding the array was irradiated in such a way and it gave him a concrete location for the sloppy saboteur. Instead of the full frontal approach, he elected to walk the forty-three kilometres from the nearest colony to the verteron array with his backpack full of weapons. Externally, the array did appear powered down but appearances could be deceptive. There was a tell-tale hum emanating from the array's emitters, which indicated power flowing to them from array's control complex. Xeris looked around to see the security sensor nodes and found that they appeared far newer than the rest of the complex.

Sloppy, as usual.

He withdrew a jamming device from the backpack and set it against the nearest node. It would pulse for a few minutes, with the outages being longer each time, until the full jamming came into effect and all communications were blocked. With the communication problem taken care of, Xeris' next hurdle before confronting the saboteur was the verteron array's power system. Unfortunately, he could not disable the system easily because doing so would cause a feedback loop which would destroy the entire array, and that was not an acceptable loss. The array still served a purpose for near Mars objects which would not be deflected by Mars' still thin atmosphere.

He chose instead to cut the power to the emitters one by one using his engineering expertise, a job made easier by the old design of the verteron array, but it still took him over an hour to cut the power to the four emitters. Now that he knew the emitters could not fire, he was more willing to use an energy dampener. Starfleet had developed a countermeasure to the Breen energy dampening weapon thanks to a captured Breen vessel and once the war was over Research and Development had created their own version to be used by assault teams. Instead of destroying the vessels, it just drained the power and could be used slowly or quickly, depending on the team's needs. He had retrofitted his borrowed unit to emit dampening pulses in a similar

manner to the jamming device. This device he attached to the underside of the control complex on the opposite side to which he would enter.

By now, the communications should be completely out and whoever was inside would be frustrated or ready to leave if they believed it was not a natural phenomenon. The operative sent to kill him was sloppy and Xeris was sure that the operative did not have enough brains to leave. Xeris approached the secondary entrance, opened the hatch beside the door and deactivated the mechanisms which would alert anyone in the control centre. He was inside in seconds but found complete darkness. He frowned, the power dampener shouldn't have cut power completely this soon.

'Did you think I didn't notice you out there, cutting power and communications?' asked a voice through the internal comm. system.

Xeris silently cursed. 'I figured you had come back from the dead. Permit me to assist in your return.'

'I think not, Xeris of Romulus. You see, my intention was not to kill you but to lure you here. It is time we had that rematch.'

Xeris smiled thinly. 'I bested you last time in a fair fight. This time I suspect you'll play dirty.'

'Of course, it would be no fun otherwise,' the operative said and Xeris heard the environmental controls adjust themselves.

He immediately detected the smell of a potent neurotoxin and realized that operative was not playing this time. Unless he could escape from the control complex, he was going to die.

His years as a master spy took hold and he took a deep breath of clean air from the floor. He would be dead in four minutes unless he found a way out of the embarkation area, which was as long as he had been able to hold his breath in the past. The gas became thicker but he could still see where the door was but it was probably sealed, as the hatch was no doubt. He was too large to fit through the air ducts and he would never make it through in four minutes anyway, but the Jeffries tubes were a viable option.

Xeris ripped the cover off the Jeffries tube and found his way clear. He climbed in and pulled the cover back into place. The difference was immediate and the smell quickly dissipated. The Jeffries tube was sealed with its own air and he let out his breath as he began to crawl toward his next

challenge.

'Where are you, traitor?' the operative asked. 'I know you're not dead because I can still read your lifesigns. The question is where are you hiding?'

Xeris grinned. The operative was a bad spy, and had not studied his own location. Romulan vessels and starbases did not have Jeffries tubes, but service decks and corridors instead which ran parallel to the occupied areas. It was why their ships were so large. He didn't want to give away his location so he said nothing, but he guessed that the central control room was where the operative was holed up, and the room was probably booby-trapped.

'Come out, come out, wherever you are,' the operative taunted as Xeris made his way to the end of the Jeffries tube.

He pushed the hatch out of the way and found himself in a junction. He looked at the markings and consulted his eidetic memory for the route he needed to reach the central control room. The fastest way was to exit the junction and cross the corridor to the next junction where he would have a straight route to the control room. He opened the door of the junction and found himself up against a forcefield.

'There you are,' the operative spoke again. *'Time to say goodbye.'*

A shaped charge, ready to blow up in his face, suddenly materialised on the deck in front of him and he cursed. He dived back into the junction just the device detonated, sending heat and shrapnel right into him.

Chapter Eight

Starbase One

Earth orbit

Stardate 55725.9 (September 22, 2378)

Captain Cheer, Commander Astar and Lieutenant Commander Gonzales met in one of the many conference rooms aboard the starbase, and the room was sealed since their conversation was intended to be completely secret. Admiral Sitak had provided the three of them with the means to make the room impervious to all types of listening devices, but they were still hesitant to speak.

'Where is Xeris?' Cheer asked.

'I don't know, he was supposed to be here, I told him where and when we were meeting,' Gonzales answered.

Astar swallowed. 'I asked him to run an errand for me, but he should have been here by now.'

Cheer waved a hoof. 'Well, no matter, we'll just have to begin without him.'

'Why are we here?' Gonzales asked.

'As you well know, someone is trying to kill some of you and tried to destroy the *Pytheas*. Admiral Sitak and I believe it is the work of the Cha'lav, in revenge for the blow dealt to them by you all, but we have no proof. Starfleet Security has been over every inch of the ship and repair structure and believes that there is no further danger to us or the remainder of the crew. As such, the repairs can now be completed, preferably in a timely fashion. As soon as the repairs are complete, we will undergo a shakedown cruise and then head into the Delta Quadrant to find Andraprani zh'Malashan. If we're successful, we will then rendezvous with the Taskforce Vanguard fleet.'

'Is there a problem?' Astar asked, knowing full well there was thanks to Emmanuelle Walker.

'Starfleet Command lost contact with them some time ago. Even using the Arcturus Array, there is no sign of them and it is unlikely that they have travelled so far as to be out of range already.'

'The Arcturus Array can detect anything moving anywhere in the galaxy,' Gonzales said. 'How can it not find them?'

'That is what we will be finding out, provided that we are able to find the Andorian.'

'Do we have any idea where she is?'

'Unfortunately, yes,' Cheer answered. 'The Array has detected a number of Cha'lav vessels close to where the USS *Voyager* came into contact with the Borg. That's where we're headed.'

'It will take years to reach that point.'

'We'll only need to go to where the warp sleds were detached,' Cheer countered. 'We'll go the rest of the way at near transwarp speeds.'

Astar nodded. 'The warp sleds are only 500 light years away. It should take about six months to reach them, provided there are no distractions.'

Cheer looked at her. 'That's right; you were part of the original taskforce. You have my condolences for your losses.'

Gonzales looked her way as well. 'Am I missing something?'

'I don't want to talk about it,' Astar replied. 'In Xeris' absence, would you oversee the repairs until he returns?'

'Of course,' Gonzales answered. 'How much longer are they expected to take?'

'Another three weeks if all goes well.'

'Why so long? It has already been months.'

'Most of what it left to do is cosmetic and retrofits for the new crewmembers' quarters.'

'So what do we do in the meantime?'

'Gonzales, please return to the *Pytheas* and make sure the engineers aren't messing anything up. Commander, find that wayward engineer and find out where he has been. I expect him before me by the end of the day.'

'Aye sir,' they replied in near unison.

'I will be in conference with Admiral Sitak for the remainder of the day working out the most direct route to the sleds and finding a suitable enough prison for the Andorian when we find her.'

'I don't think Parker will let her live that long,' Gonzales said. 'They are blood sisters and she was betrayed.'

'She's a Starfleet officer and will do as she is ordered,' Cheer told them sternly. 'There's very little we can do now except gather intelligence and wait for the final repairs to be completed. I will meet you both, in addition to the rest of the senior staff, in the briefing room tomorrow morning at zero eight hundred so you can meet the new diplomatic officer.'

'Captain, I was informed by Command just prior to this meeting that they will also be assigning a counsellor to the *Pytheas* since we will be away from the core worlds for some time.'

'Why do we need a counsellor?' Cheer asked.

Astar smiled. 'You can either have a counsellor or let the crew have their families aboard.'

Cheer glared at her. 'I would rather let the crew have families roaming my ship than any of that nonsense. I suppose I should send a message to the crew to ask them if their families would be able to join them.'

'I think we'll still need a counsellor aboard,' Gonzales said. 'I would if my family were aboard.'

Cheer snorted. 'Commander, please send messages to all crew members inviting them to have their families aboard, within reason, and arrange any changes of quarters which are requested.'

'Aye sir.'

'I will speak to Admiral Sitak about the counsellor she intends to foist upon me.'

'Sir, you might want to phrase that a little less argumentatively when you

Speak with her. A logical argument will carry far more weight with her. She is a Vulcan,' Gonzales suggested.

Cheer snorted again. 'I suppose you are correct.'

'I should get going if I am to find Xeris before the end of the day. I need to track his movements.'

'Start at the Perth Spaceport. That is where he beamed to after the shuttlepod exploded.'

Astar nodded. 'Captain?'

'Go,' Cheer answered. 'I think this meeting is now concluded. You are both dismissed.'

'Yes sir,' Astar said and entered a command into the door which then buzzed and unsealed.

Chapter Nine

Studio 47

Federation News Network

Stardate 55726.1 (September 23, 2378)

Lieutenant Talen watched several people move around, dragging tripods and holocams with them, or passing food and drink out to others, but he stood alone among them. This was his first interview with the media since his return from Andor after his joint discovery of the Andorian temples. He was eager to tell the galaxy about the genetic discoveries Andorian scientists had made since that event, but the sample questions he had seen had more to do with the discovery of the temples themselves. It seemed that God, to use an Earth term, was of more importance to the news network than the end of the Andorian genetic crisis.

A representative from Parliament Andoria's Department of Public Affairs, Colonetra th'Welem, stood beside him, talking incessantly about what he should say and what he shouldn't, but Talen wasn't listening. He concentrated on sensing something that didn't feel quite right. There was something in the studio that didn't belong. An electrical field that didn't match any of the people present and he had no idea what it was; only that it didn't belong.

'Are you even listening to me, Lieutenant ch'Maras?'

Talen smirked. 'No, I tuned you out some time ago. Something here doesn't feel right.'

'You need to pay attention, Lieutenant. Public Affairs don't want you to say something that we want to be kept private.'

Talen turned to him. 'Do you have experience doing interviews?'

'Yes, of course. I have participated in many.'

'And you know everything about my discovery?'

Th'Welem nodded vigorously. 'Of course, everybody does.'

Talen grasped his shoulder. 'Good, you can do the interview for me. I have something I need to take care of.'

‘But...but...they specifically requested you.’

‘I’m a Starfleet officer,’ Talen said with a grin. ‘I was called away. I’m sure you can make something up.’

Th’Welem watched in horror as Talen walked away. Talen looked around, his antennae whirling around like crazy trying to detect where the electrical field was coming from. As he walked around the studio, the electrical field became stronger, as if it was reacting to his presence. He stopped by one of the inactive holocams and felt the electrical field as if it were a physical phenomenon. He didn’t want to alarm anyone and he didn’t have a tricorder on him in order to confirm his hypothesis but he felt caution was the better part of valour so he slowly stepped away.

‘We’re ready for you, Lieutenant,’ one of the producers said.

Talen grabbed her arm. ‘This isn’t one of your holocams is it?’

She looked at it and then shook her head.

‘It is a bomb and reacts to my specific presence. I want you to evacuate the studio and get Starfleet Security in here.’

A voice suddenly came over the intercom system, one that he believed had been taken care of a few weeks earlier. *‘If you attempt to evacuate the building the bomb will go off. If you attempt to disarm the bomb, it will go off. You get the picture, Lieutenant.’*

‘She is supposed to be dead,’ Talen said as the public relations officer hurried over to them.

‘Who is she?’

‘Former Starfleet Commander Granapirto zh’Share, a Way of the One terrorist I watched commit suicide.’

‘Clearly she did no such thing,’ th’Welem replied sardonically.

‘Regardless, we must deal with this,’ Talen said. ‘She is a dangerous woman.’

‘What do you suggest we do, Lieutenant? You heard what she said.’

'I assume she's watching us?'

'There are security feeds she could have hacked into,' the producer said.

'Do you know the frequency the feeds are on?' Talen asked as he walked away from the bomb with th'Welem and the producer in tow.

'Yes, but how can that help us?'

'I want you to hack into the feeds and record what she is seeing. We'll record for as long as possible and then switch to the recorded loop while we get everyone out.'

'That will work for the studio, but what about the rest of the building?'

'Can we get the people out of the studio without them showing up anywhere in the building?' Talen asked.

'No,' the producer shook her head. 'The terrorist would be able to see them.'

'Hacking all the feeds would be a little difficult,' Talen mused aloud, 'but there must be something we can do.'

'What do you suggest?'

Talen clicked his fingers, 'I have it.'

'What?'

He pulled out his combadge from his pocket and tapped it. There was nothing but a beep indicating inactivity. 'Perhaps not. There is a communications blackout in effect. I doubt any signal is getting out. FNN Earth has been disabled.'

'Meaning what?'

'Communications are out and there's probably a transporter inhibitor in place as well. I'll need some time to figure out what to do next.'

'*Shanitalen*,' zh'Share taunted. '*You're not thinking of escaping are you?*'

'Come down here and I'll show you what I'm planning, Grana,' Talen

countered. 'This time I will kill you. The Way of the One won't protect you now.'

'Just as Uzaveh cannot protect you,' the terrorist replied.

Talen grinned. 'How little you know, zh'Share.'

'What is that supposed to mean?'

'Tell me the tale of the Breaking,' Talen taunted her.

'What does the Breaking have to do with anything?'

'Thirishar, I think Commander zh'Share needs a lesson in history.'

'Thirishar is dead,' zh'Share said. *'I vaporized him.'*

Where there had been nothing a moment before, stood former Starfleet officer Thirishar ch'Thane dressed in a simple clerical robe and Talen knew that zh'Share could see him too. 'Not quite dead, Granapirto,' Thirishar said and waved a hand toward the bomb which disintegrated.

'What the hell?' th'Welem said and knelt before Thirishar.

'Stand up, Colonetra th'Welem. I am not Uzaveh, you don't need to kneel before me.'

Th'Welem looked up. 'You are Thirishar reborn, as the scrolls prophesied.'

Thirishar smiled. 'I am here simply to protect my people,' he said and zh'Share suddenly appeared in front of him. 'Shanitalen tried to spare your life, Granapirto, and in return you tried to take his. He convinced the Chancellor to offer the Way of the One amnesty and they accepted. You, however, chose to continue the war when our people needed peace. For this you will be judged.'

Talen stepped forward, between the Andorian saviour and the terrorist. 'The people will judge her.'

Thirishar looked at him. 'I will not judge her, I will leave that to Uzaveh the Mighty.'

Zh'Share knelt before him. 'Thirishar the Whole, please, I implore you not to judge me too harshly.'

Thirishar looked down at her. 'Stand up.'

When she did not, Thirishar sighed and the two of them vanished.

'What happened?' th'Welem asked. 'How did he survive?'

Talen turned to the public relations officer. 'Thirishar ch'Thane is Uzaveh's Prophet. He will guide our people back to the light and he has made us all whole again. We don't need the Sheltreth anymore.'

Chapter Ten

Control Complex

Verteron Array, Mars

Stardate 55726.3 (September 23, 2378)

Xeris woke up and struggled against the binds which had him strapped to the chair. Again, it was to no avail. He was bound tight. The operative stepped into the pool of light in which the chair was bolted to the floor and pressed a button on the small device he held. A jolt of pain swept through Xeris' entire body and he twitched spasmodically.

'You will tell me what I need to know.'

'I will die before you learn a thing.'

'That I will most definitely look forward to,' the operative said and pressed the button again.

Xeris bit his lip to keep from crying out and tasted blood. He could only see out of one eye and his face was badly bruised from the torture he had been subjected to over the last twenty four hours. The operative had tried to glean three specific pieces of information from him, and had thus far been completely unsuccessful, though that could all change in the next few minutes.

Whoever had sent the operative, and Xeris was sure that it was Chairman Koval—the head of both the Continuing Committee and what was left of the Tal Shiar, wanted to know who and where the other *Aehallh Terrh* operatives operating in Federation, Romulan and Klingon territory were, who else knew about the existence of the ultra-secretive agency, and the location of the *Aehallh Terrh* weapons cache.

The operative was setting up a Klingon mind-sifter in the hope that it would be able to retrieve the information from Xeris' brain. Xeris knew he could withstand anything up to level 7, he had not been tested against the highest setting, level 8. It was an oversight that he intended to correct, as the operative would no doubt quickly ascend to that level in order to get the information from him. The only problem was that since Xeris had left Romulus behind, his only knowledge of secret organization was his own personal network spread across the galaxy.

He had no idea where Zaera had placed operatives. As for who knew about the organization, he was certain that his Federation counterparts, namely Section 31, were aware of its existence but he doubted they knew much more than that. What troubled him most of all was the weapons cache. Yes, it was held in a secret location known to every member of the organization, but there were ancient artefacts there which were dangerous in the wrong hands.

‘Are you ready to tell me the truth or do I have to use this barbaric device?’

‘Where did you get a Klingon mind-sifter from?’ Xeris was curious. The Klingons were usually notorious about guarding the devices, especially from the Romulans.

‘I salvaged it from a destroyed Klingon bird of prey,’ the operative answered. ‘Are you sure you won’t change your mind?’

‘I don’t have the answers you want.’

‘Oh, I think you do,’ he replied and moved the mind sifter into place.

Xeris felt the heavy helmet fit over his head. ‘This doesn’t look like any mind sifter I have seen.’

‘I have made a few modifications. I trust you have no objections to being used as a guinea pig? My patron is most interested in how this works.’

‘I’ll just bet he is.’

‘Tell me what I want to know.’

‘Never!’ Xeris spat and winced as the operative back slapped him across his face.

‘Then I guess we’ll find out just how well you can resist this little baby.’

Xeris silently cursed his bad luck and wondered how he was going to get out of this predicament. No one knew where he was, and even if someone was looking for him it was unlikely that they would ever find him. He had covered his tracks well and no one would miss him until the *Pytheas* was ready for its shakedown cruise, except Sheena, but they often went days without seeing each other. He felt the first tendrils of pain from the mind sifter and cleared his mind of distractions.

'Tell me who knows about *Aehallh Terrh*'s existence,' the operative asked.

Xeris closed his eyes and tried to enter a meditative trance, a trick learned from the Vulcans, but the operative increased the setting when he didn't answer.

'Let's see if level three loosens your tongue.'

Xeris clenched his teeth together until his body stopped twitching. 'Koval,' he said through his clenched teeth and wondered if that would be enough.

'Who else?' the operative asked as he increased the setting to level four.

Xeris' body twitched and convulsed as the synapses in his brain began to degrade. 'You know,' he managed to get out in defiance.

The operative cursed and cranked the mind sifter to level five. Xeris knew that if he wasn't careful he would reveal Zaera's existence and he did not want to be responsible for that. If he died, he wanted to know that someone would avenge him. No one knew where he was and needed to stay strong, at least until the operative gave up for the day.

'Koval sent me, you fool. Of course he knows. Where are your operatives? I want names and ships.'

'Erebus is waiting for you.'

'Aargh,' the operative cursed and cranked up the setting to level six. 'Tell me where the weapons cache is?'

Xeris felt like his brain was melting, but there was something at the edge of his consciousness that he couldn't identify. It was like a reserve of strength he didn't know he had. He channelled it and felt something else. His brain began to heal even as the mind sifter continued to kill him, but he no longer felt the mind sifter. He had entered the healing trance and could no longer even hear the operative's continual cursing.

Deep within the recesses of his own mind, Xeris remembered his relationship with Zaera over sixty years earlier. He remembered his time with the Tal Shiar and his distaste with how they operated where everyone could see them. In his mind's eye he saw the bitter rivalry between the Tal Shiar and the

Tal Arcani unfold with the people of the Empire caught in the middle. He remembered that was the time when he was approached by the nameless agency and became *Aehallh Terrh*. Xeris remembered what the group stood for, to protect the Empire from internal corruption and make the Empire strong against its enemies.

Chapter Eleven

Control Complex

Verteron Array, Mars

Stardate 55726.4 (September 23, 2378)

Commander Astar stood outside the doorway to the control complex and tried to listen to the conversation between the two Romulans.

'What do you want?' Xeris asked and she peeked in to see the other Romulan looking directly into Xeris eyes.

She saw the other Romulan raise a disruptor to Xeris' face and step back. 'I see that I am not going to learn anything from you.'

Before he could fire, she fired and he collapsed in a heap on the floor. She saw Xeris strapped to a chair with a bizarre device attached to his head.

'Commander?'

'Xeris, what happened to you?'

'Can't tell you,' he replied hoarsely.

'If anyone asks where you were, tell them I sent you on an errand. Let's get you cleaned up.'

'I'm sorry, sir, but I'm not going back to the *Pytheas*.'

'Excuse me, Commander?'

'I can't tell you why, but you'll have to trust me. It is in both of our interests for me to return home.'

'Aren't you going to be shot on sight?'

Xeris smiled as Astar released him and he struggled to his feet. 'No one on Romulus knows who I am. But that is about to change.'

'What are you talking about?'

Xeris looked at her and decided to play his hand. 'It has been said that the Tal

Shiar is the Romulan counterpart of Section 31.'

Astar's eyes widened at the mention of that shadowy group. 'How do you know about them?'

'I would ask you the same question, but I know about Petrov, Merias III and the Scarab Nebula incident. Ask yourself this, how is the Tal Shiar, who operate in the open, the same as Section 31, who operate in the shadows?'

Astar didn't answer.

'Since you now work for Emmanuelle Walker, I see no problem in telling you what I am about to.'

'How do you know all this?'

'She told you where I was. She is the only one who knew.'

Astar frowned. 'Who exactly are you?'

'The Tal Shiar call us the Ghosts in the Night, the *Aehallh Terrh*, a name we have adopted to suit our purposes. Only a handful of people in the Empire know we even exist, and the Tal Shiar do their best not to antagonize us, but sometimes we must show our hands.'

'And now is one of those times?' Astar asked, not really surprised that *Aehallh Terrh* existed. After all, even the Trill had the Watchers.

'A weapon we had in our possession was stolen during the Dominion War and we believe that the Remans now have it in their possession. It is too dangerous to be in their hands and we need to retrieve it before they figure out how to make it work. I cannot do that if I am still undercover as a Starfleet officer.'

'Aren't you going to get in trouble with your boss, telling me all this?'

Xeris raised an eyebrow. 'I run the organization.'

'From the *Pytheas*?'

Xeris sighed. 'Zaera ran the group in my absence but she had information to give me, specifically about the weapon being stolen.'

'Why did it take you so long to discover it?'

'We have only just now been able to send one of our ships out to the planet in question. As soon as she discovered it missing, she sought me out.'

'And now you're both going back to Romulus to retrieve the weapon from the Remans?'

'Among other things.'

'What are you going to tell Sheena?'

Xeris frowned. 'I don't intend to tell her anything. Zaera and I will quietly disappear and she will not be any wiser.'

'I could tell her?'

'But you won't,' Xeris countered. 'You won't say anything to anyone about this conversation. Section 31 will never find out, and neither will anyone else in Starfleet. Only four will know the truth. You, me, Zaera and the symbiont.'

Astar reflexively touched her abdomen.

'I won't kill the symbiont,' Xeris said. 'I kill only when necessary.'

'What about him?' she pointed to the other Romulan.

'I will take him back to Romulus and use him as a message to his patron.'

'How am I supposed to explain your disappearances?'

'I'll take care of that, all I want you to do is make sure that Sheena doesn't get it into her head to avenge my "death." That would be difficult for all involved.'

'I can't promise that.'

'I'm sure you'll find a way, Commander.'

Astar looked at her former chief engineer. 'Goodbye, Xeris.'

'Goodbye, Commander.'

Astar took another look at the engineer's face, turned and headed out of the control complex. She hoped to be back aboard the *Pytheas* by the time Xeris and Zaera disappeared, so it would appear as though she had nothing to do with it. Cheer would have her look for another chief engineer and diplomatic officer and she wondered if Hu'fret was qualified enough to take over the engine room. If the captain found out about Xeris he would have an apoplectic fit, and Astar suspected that Section 31 knew the truth anyway but it was in their best interests not to let anyone else know. After all, anything that kept the Romulan Empire squabbling amongst themselves kept them from attacking the Federation.

As Astar climbed into the Martian buggy which would take her back to the Utopia Planitia ground base, she stole a glance back at the control complex and saw Xeris emerge with the assassin on his back. Xeris dumped the body in the dirt, pulled a device from the assassin's pocket, and then touched a control on it. A shuttle of unknown origin appeared before her eyes and Xeris hauled the assassin into it. As soon as they were both aboard, the shuttle cloaked and Astar was sure it took off, but it was almost silent if it did. She set the buggy on course and didn't look back. This was going to be hard enough as it was.

Chapter Twelve

USS *Pytheas*

Utopia Planitia

Stardate 55733.9 (September 25, 2378)

Commander Astar and Lieutenant Commander Sheena Gonzales stood outside the captain's ready room. At Astar's insistence, Gonzales had chosen to find out the important news in the ready room and she steeled herself for what might happen inside. She pressed the chime and heard a gruff "*Enter!*"

'You wanted to see me, Captain?' she asked and Astar took a seat by the window.

'Commander, I think you should do this,' Cheer said in an uncharacteristic tone of voice, completely devoid of bluster.

Astar nodded and stood up, approached Gonzales and laid a hand on her shoulder. 'Xeris is dead, Commander.'

Gonzales stood in shock, as though she hadn't heard what had been said. After a moment she blinked and then shook her head as if in denial. 'What happened?'

'Xeris and Zaera had been in a meeting with Admiral Sitak and they were on their way back here in a shuttle. There was a malfunction with the impulse engines, and the shuttle exploded. We've been searching the wreckage for the better part of eight hours and have yet to find anything more than genetic residue. I'm sorry.'

Gonzales blinked back tears and looked at the two of them. 'What aren't you telling me?'

Cheer slid the padd across his desk. 'You're welcome to take a look at the report.'

Gonzales shook her head. 'I don't believe it.'

'Sheena, look at the report. See for yourself.'

'Reports can be faked. I want to see the wreckage.'

'You can borrow a shuttle. I'll authorize it.'

'Thank you, sir,' Gonzales said. 'If I may be dismissed?'

'Dismissed, Commander.'

Once the tactical officer left the ready room, Cheer slumped in his chair and turned to Astar. 'That went about as well as could be expected.'

'Yes sir.'

'On to the business at hand. Is Hu'fret ready for division head?'

'I don't think she is. She doesn't have enough time in an engine room.'

'Then you need to find someone quickly. What about our diplomatic officer?'

'Command is definite in its decision that we need one.'

'And a counsellor?' Cheer asked, still annoyed that he was forced to have one on board.

'I have a theory about that,' Astar said.

'I'm listening.'

'The diplomatic officer can do double duty as counsellor.'

'We'll need to pick the right person for that job.'

'They will need to very strong emotionally,' Astar agreed. 'I have found a few people who might be suitable but I wanted to run it by you first.'

Cheer held up a hoof and shook his head. 'Oh no, this is all yours, Commander.'

Astar smirked. 'Yes sir.'

'How are we doing with the families?'

'Of the hundred and forty-two crew members, sixty-one have requested families.'

Cheer's eyes widened. 'I don't think we can handle that.'

'The ship can comfortably accommodate 200 people for an extended period of time. However, even taking that into account, I have had to limit the request for families to officers and senior non-coms.'

Cheer grimaced. 'If we have families aboard, we'll likely have children aboard. They will need a classroom and teacher, perhaps more than one.'

'I've taken care of that, sir. At least three officer's spouses or partners are teachers and have teaching experience. They have agreed to teach if we require it.'

'And the classroom?'

'The captain's mess can be split into two rooms.'

'An acceptable compromise. I prefer eating in my quarters at any rate.'

'Thank you, sir.'

'Is there anything else we need to discuss?'

'No, sir.'

'Dismissed, Commander. You have a lot of work to do.'

Astar left Lieutenant Talen on the bridge and went to her quarters where she could work in peace. She figured that finding a chief engineer would be the slightly easier task and elected to find that person first. Once she was seated at the computer terminal in her quarters, she downloaded the list of available officers onto her padd. With the list in hand, she sat on the couch in her quarters and began to read. There were a number of potential candidates in the fleet, but she wasn't sure if they were suitable for a long-term mission outside of Federation space. She found two possible candidates and decided to contact their commanding officers to see if there was something which was not in their official file.

Before she did that, she wanted to see if any officer in the fleet had the potential to be the *Pytheas'* new diplomatic officer and counsellor. After perusing the list twice, only one stood out. She was the assistant counsellor

on the *Manticore*, and Astar was on friendly terms with the captain so she decided to contact him first. She waited as the computer worked to establish a link to the vessel which was supposedly operating in the Bolian sector.

The Federation logo was swiftly replaced by the stern face of Captain Donald Lydecker.

'It is good to see you again, Donald.'

Lydecker smiled. '*You threw your career away by accepting the demotion,*' he replied.

'There are things going on that you don't know about, Don. I have a plan.'

'I hope you know what you're doing.'

'Always,' she said with a smile. 'Don, this isn't a social call. I'm looking for a diplomatic officer and counsellor and I think someone you have might be suitable.'

'Don't you already have a diplomatic officer, a civilian Romulan?'

Astar looked down and sighed. 'She was killed in a shuttle accident several hours ago. Our chief engineer was killed as well.'

Lydecker frowned. '*I'm sorry to hear that, Leza. You have my sympathies. Unfortunately, I can't spare Commander Gooch right now.*'

'I was thinking of Evara actually.'

Lydecker consulted a padd. '*She isn't on the transfer list.*'

Astar held up her padd. 'She's on the promotions list. You recommended her for a promotion following the Tranamii first contact.'

Lydecker laughed. '*So I did. You should have seen her arguing with the Tranamii Prime Minister on the ethics of genetics. It was like a Tellarite grudge match.*'

'I take it that's a good thing?'

'The Tranamii are very much like Tellarites, but their form of entertainment is a

no holds barred debate. If you have no argument on any subject you're considered to be of the lowest caste. Evara matched the Prime Minister subject for subject and even bested her on several. It is thanks to her that there are interested in becoming members. I wasn't thinking of a transfer though, she'll be missed here. Where are you headed?

'Delta Quadrant, open-ended exploration mission,' Astar answered, giving her old friend a partial truth.

'She has a boyfriend who is a civilian on board. I'd hate to break them up.'

'What does he do?'

'He's an archaeologist, assists the science team sometimes.'

Astar chuckled. 'About a third of the scientists on the *Pytheas* are civilians. He'll fit right in.'

'You're taking families?'

'Some, for the officers and senior non-coms. An open-ended mission is a long time to be without family, but with family come issues, hence the need for a counsellor. Command was going to assign us a counsellor anyway, so the captain and I decided we might as well have a use for them.'

Lydecker nodded. *'I'll send her your way. When are you scheduled to depart?'*

'Our launch date is sometime during the first week of October, but that could change.'

'They'll be on their way by the end of the day.'

'You can give them a couple of days to say their goodbyes. We can wait.'

'Thanks, Leza,' Lydecker said as the red alert klaxon sounded. *'Got to go, talk soon.'*

Astar leaned back and then looked over the list of possible engineers again.

Chapter Thirteen

Mount Seleya

Vulcan

Stardate 55741.3 (September 28, 2378)

The mountain loomed before the lone Vulcan woman dressed in the simple robes of a Kolinahr initiate. She had travelled this path many times since leaving Starfleet and the horrors that forced her to re-evaluate her life. Though she had continued on for as long as possible, her colleagues began to notice the changes in her behaviour, and the captain had even noticed her emotional state. She suggested that she seek out professional help, specifically from the Adeptes on Mount Seleya, and agreed to sign off on her request for extended leave. That had been seven months ago and she knew that she was no closer to Kolinahr than when she started. Her emotional control continued to slip at times and she could tell that the Adeptes were beginning to question her reasons for being there. It was for that reason that she had left the mountain on a meditative stroll and she had reluctantly come to a conclusion.

Kolinahr was not for her.

Upon her return to Mount Seleya she was greeted by T’Kran, the mentor for all Kolinahr initiates. ‘You have made your decision?’

She briefly inclined her head slightly in response. ‘I have, Master T’Kran. I believe my answers lie elsewhere.’

He nodded, expecting that answer. ‘Where will you go?’

‘I may join the T’Karath Monastery,’ she answered. ‘Perhaps my answers lie there.’

‘Perhaps, and perhaps not,’ the Vulcan Kolinahr master replied cryptically. ‘You have a visitor.’

The woman raised an eyebrow in obvious surprise. ‘Who else knows I am here but my Captain?’

‘I leave that to you to answer. She is waiting in the visitors’ area.’

The young woman and strode purposely toward the visitors’ area of the

extensive complex. As she turned a corner, she noticed the only non-Vulcan in the room. A Trill woman in a Starfleet Commander's uniform. Schooling her features to be impassive, she walked up to the woman.

'I was told you wished to see me.'

The Trill smiled. 'Are you T'Shanir, former chief engineer of the *Cuffe* and the *Soval*?'

'I am currently on extended leave from the *Soval*,' T'Shanir replied.

The Trill nodded. 'I am Commander Astar, executive officer on the *Pytheas*. I have come to speak with you regarding an open position for chief engineer.'

T'Shanir raised an eyebrow. 'May I ask what happened to the previous occupant of the position?'

Astar looked down for a moment. 'He was killed in a shuttle accident with our new diplomatic officer. We have replaced her, and I still need a chief engineer.'

T'Shanir considered the answer. 'Where is the *Pytheas* assigned?'

'An exploration mission of the Delta Quadrant. There is more, but I could only provide that information if your security clearance was increased.'

T'Shanir was intrigued. 'I have level fourteen security clearance.'

Astar smirked. 'The information is classified Cobalt-One.'

The Vulcan struggled not to look shocked. The Cobalt-One classification was a rumour among cadets at the Academy, many considered it a myth because there was no active information classified as such, or hadn't been, she corrected herself.

'I am interested, however I must contact the *Soval*.'

'Captain T'Prea has given her approval for your transfer should you accept the position, which also carries a promotion to the rank of Lieutenant Commander.'

'I accept the position, Commander.'

'Excellent, how soon before you are ready to leave?'

'I will be ready in eleven minutes,' the Vulcan replied.

Astar look puzzled, but nodded, and T'Shanir strode away. She headed directly for her modest quarters and proceeded to change into her Starfleet uniform before folding up the robes and leaving them on the bed. She packed the few belongings she had bought with her and returned to the visitors' area. Ten minutes had elapsed.

'Are you out of breath, Lieutenant?' Astar asked as they began the long walk towards Shi'Kahr.

'I detect no change in my standard breathing,' T'Shanir answered.

'You sound as though you have been running a marathon. We'll have Doctor Maxx look over you when we get to the ship.'

'When is the vessel due to depart?'

'Next Thursday, and we'll be undertaking a shakedown cruise. The *Pytheas* was badly damaged a few months ago.'

'I presume I will not like the information contained in the reports?'

Astar shook her head. 'Definitely not. The aliens responsible are more deadly than anything the Federation has faced in the past.'

'This will a most intriguing assignment.'

'That is an understatement, Lieutenant. We're in for a bumpy ride.'

T'Shanir raised an eyebrow. 'I will endeavour to keep the ship steady, Commander.'

Astar turned to face her as they emerged from the shadow of the mountain. 'Was that a joke?'

'Was it amusing?'

'A little,' Astar admitted.

'Then it was a joke,' the Vulcan added.

Astar shook her head in what T'Shanir interpreted as exasperation. Neither one said a word until they entered the city and headed toward the Vulcan Starfleet complex.

'Commander, may I ask why you walked to Mount Seleya and did not use a ground vehicle?'

'I needed the time to think. I have been through an emotional wringer in recent months and I wanted to clear my head.

'There have been studies that show the Vulcan atmosphere to be damaging to the symbionts over a long period of time.'

'I've been here a few hours, Lieutenant. The Astar symbiont is quite hardy,' Astar replied and then stopped in her tracks. 'How did you know I was joined?'

'The look in your eyes. Your eyes say they have seen much, far more than an unjoined Trill.'

'Yeah, Astar's seen a lot. I have, too, and I wish that no one else had to go through it.'

The Vulcan said nothing further, but she retreated into her mind, maintaining only a peripheral awareness of her surroundings. She considered what she had been through in her short life and deemed it horrific by even human standards. The Crimson Shadow believed themselves to be freedom fighters but they were nothing more than terrorists, much like the Maquis—and to a greater extent, the neo-Maquis—were.

Chapter Fourteen

Shuttlecraft *Resnik*

Utopia Planitia

Stardate 55741.6 (September 28, 2378)

Lieutenant Bradley Weston tried to resist the impulse to turn his head and look at the two women he was taking to the ship. Both were gorgeous and exotic and wholly alien. The Vulcan was young and wore her hair in a ponytail which accentuated her tapered ears and the other one he had no clue about. She looked almost human but there were no spots so she wasn't a Trill or Kriosian. Her eyes weren't black which ruled out Betazoid and he wasn't sure about her being an El-Aurian since he didn't know if any were Starfleet officers, but he thought there might have been one or two. He concentrated on piloting the new type-11 shuttle which replaced the *Jarvis* and kept an ear open to the conversation the two women were having.

'The Tranamii are even more argumentative than the Tellarites, I'm amazed they managed to evolve technologically to the point of developing warp drive,' Lieutenant Evara said, explaining to the Vulcan engineer her recent assignment on board the *Manticore*.

'Are they going to become Federation members?' newly promoted Lieutenant Commander T'Shanir asked as she changed position to become more comfortable.

'Not for a long time,' Evara answered. 'They still have a caste system and their world is not completely united. They have a world government but there are still about a dozen countries which remain independent republics, though they are represented by ambassadors.'

'How does that work?'

'The ambassadors don't have full voting rights for bills that represent the countries of the world government, but they have voting rights for anything that is relevant to the world as a whole like the environment, public safety, and so on.'

'You seem to have enjoyed visiting the planet.'

'The people are amazing and their artwork is incredible. I have some which I'll be putting up in my quarters if you'd like to see it.'

'I would, I appreciate art for its aesthetic qualities.'

Evara nodded as she warmed to her subject. 'The Tranamii evolved from marsupials and have three genders, a male, a female, and a neuter which is solely responsible for carrying a child to term. I'm not sure how or why they transfer the genetic material to the neuter but I know that the killing of a neuter is considered the most heinous crime and is punishable by death.'

'That is barbaric,' T'Shanir replied. 'Unless they change that, they will never become members.'

'From our point of view, it is, but you have to understand that without neuters the population would die out. For some reason, the women are unable to carry children to full term. I know the *Manticore's* CMO was covertly scanning all three genders and looking at the results, but he hadn't come to any conclusions before I was transferred.'

'Will you keep in contact with him to find out his conclusions? I find myself intrigued by this.'

Weston tried not to laugh at T'Shanir's obvious attempt to ask about the results while trying to be subtle about it.

'He agreed to contact me with the answer, if he finds one.'

'Do you doubt he will?'

'He doubts he will, since their scientists have been trying to figure it out for centuries.'

'Our medical expertise is far greater than theirs,' T'Shanir replied.

'We can learn just as much from them as they can from us,' Evara replied.

'Indeed.'

Weston now turned to face them and tried not to look like he was checking them out, but he was sure he failed miserably. 'We're approaching the *Pytheas*.'

He turned back and after a moment found both women standing behind him

to see the ship. Evara was wearing a subtle perfume which smelled vaguely like vanilla and some kind of flower but he found himself drawn more toward T'Shanir, for no reason he could readily identify. She was lithe, with a slim figure and the uniform seemed to accentuate her curves, such as they were. Evara was more curvy and as she craned her neck to get a better look at the ship she inadvertently brushed his shoulder. As a wave of extreme pleasure passed through him, Weston realized that it was not perfume that she wore but a pheromone of some kind, and wondered if she was part Orion.

'Beautiful,' Evara said as she saw the *Pytheas* nestled in the repair structure. 'The *Pytheas* is one of the second run, isn't it?'

'Officially, the *Pytheas* is listed as a *Voyager* variant because she is equipped with several modifications based on retrofits *Voyager* was forced to undergo. The ship also has a number of test bed technologies which aren't in any other ship.'

'Such as?' T'Shanir asked. 'I have not had time to familiarize myself with all of her systems.'

'Before the ship left for the Kursican sector, she was outfitted with the Sensor Probe Recon Array and it performed well, but during the refit it was retrofitted to act as an independent mobile weapons platform as well, in order to provide better offensive capabilities if we have lost our weapons.'

'Intriguing. What else has been modified?'

'The engineers improved the Astrometrics lab, upgraded the weapons and shields, gave us another shuttle, and because we will be out of range of standard subspace communications, we'll also be deploying a series of communication buoys which contain quantum singularities and tachyon amplifiers.'

'For what purpose?'

'The *Pytheas* can generate a tachyon beam toward the buoys and the tachyon amplifier will amplify it and send it to the next buoy via the quantum singularity and so on, creating a communications link with Project Cobalt.'

T'Shanir raised an eyebrow. 'That is quite ingenious, but it is experimental, is it not?'

Weston nodded. 'Yes sir, it is, but it is based on Project Pathfinder's communication system created with the MIDAS array.'

'I remember reading about that,' the engineer replied. 'Reginald Barclay is a most interesting officer.'

'Shuttlecraft *Resnik* to *Pytheas*, request permission to dock.'

'Permission granted, *Resnik*. Main shuttlebay doors are open.'

'Who was that?' Evara asked. 'I recognize the voice.'

'Ensign Jatarn, beta shift helm officer.'

Evara shook her head. 'I could have sworn it was someone I knew when I was younger.'

'Clearly it is not,' T'Shanir replied.

Three minutes later, the *Resnik* touched down on the shuttlebay deck and T'Shanir was the first off. Evara picked up her duffel and turned to Weston. 'You coming, Lieutenant?'

Weston turned his face, but not his body, and went red. 'I need to, uh, complete post-flight checks.'

Evara lowered her head. 'I'm so sorry, Lieutenant. I must have missed my last shot.'

'Sir?'

'I'm one quarter Orion. I need to take two shots a day or my pheromones get the better of me.'

'It's not a problem, sir.'

'Sweet of you to say, but I should have realized. Will you forgive me?'

Before he knew what he was saying, Weston agreed and smiled broadly. 'Sure, but only if you agree to dinner, minus the pheromones.'

Evara smiled. 'I don't know how to say this, but I'm afraid I don't go for, uh,

men.'

'Oh,' Weston's smiled dimmed. 'Never mind then.'

'I would enjoy dinner though.'

The helmsman wasn't sure how to answer. 'Sure, I can give you a tour as well, if you like.'

'Wonderful, I look forward to it.'

'Nineteen hundred hours?'

'See you then,' she replied and left the shuttle, leaving Weston wondering what the hell just happened.

Epilogue

USS *Pytheas*

Utopia Planitia

Stardate 55748.9 (October 1, 2378)

Captain Cheer was the last to arrive to the briefing room and he was gratified to see that all of his senior staff were present. Commander Astar sat to his right and he wished that he could tell what she was thinking. He knew there was something she was leaving out about the deaths of the two Romulans, especially in the light of her now nominally an operative of Section 31, but he had no proof and she seemed to have everything well in hand. She did pick very good choices for both the chief engineer and the combined diplomatic officer/counsellor positions, and they had integrated very quickly having just come aboard three days earlier.

'Let us begin this briefing,' he said and the others stopped talking amongst themselves and focussed their attention on him. 'I know you have all been introduced to our new chief engineer and diplomatic officer, and I would like to extend my official welcome to you both. I apologize for not being around much over the last three days, but the people at Project Cobalt have discovered a number of useful facts about the Cha'lav in this galaxy, including the fact that no reinforcements have come through any rifts from other galaxies.'

'What does that mean?' Gonzales asked.

'It means that they have ship building facilities somewhere in this galaxy,' Parker replied sourly. 'I wondered when this would happen.'

'Meaning?' Cheer asked.

'The voidspace rifts distort the space time continuum and in my time we found a way to help the continuum mend itself. The by-product of this is that no more rifts can be opened in that galaxy. This suggests that the Cha'lav have been in the galaxy far longer than we previously believed.'

'How long does it take for the continuum to heal by itself?' T'Shanir asked.

'Usually about two centuries,' Parker replied. 'And since the technology to shorten that period doesn't exist in this time, we have to assume that the Cha'lav have been here since at least the time of the Federation's founding.'

'That is disturbing,' Astar chimed in and turned to Cheer. 'We have to get the shakedown underway sooner rather than later.'

Cheer sighed. 'Unfortunately, that call is not mine to make. Admiral Sitak denied permission for the ship to depart and gave me no reason why. I have to assume that she is working on something and until that changes, we're stuck here.'

Gonzales muttered a curse. 'A lot of people have died already. Every minute we delay means more people are dying because of the Cha'lav. We should leave now, regardless of what Admiral Sitak says.'

'I'm sure she has her reasons,' Astar countered. 'But I would like to know what is more important than getting us underway.'

'As would I,' the captain added.

The briefing room doors opened and all the officers stood as they saw who it was. 'I believe you wanted to know my reasoning for delaying the shakedown cruise?'

'Yes, sir.'

Admiral Sitak nodded. 'Very well. I spoke with my superiors regarding the Cha'lav situation and argued for the release of classified technology to assist you in your mission of preventing the Cha'lav from gaining any more territory. I was successful and I believe that the necessary delay will mollify your eagerness to stop the Cha'lav.'

'What are we getting?' Astar asked, suspicious.

'A Federation-made cloaking device.'

There was silence in the room as the ramifications sank in.

Cheer was the first to speak up. 'How long have we been violating the Treaty of Algeron?'

Sitak raised an eyebrow. 'We are not violating the treaty. As a courtesy, both the Romulan and Klingon leaderships were informed of the Cha'lav threat and the Praetor agreed with President Satie that the cloaking device could be used

in the Delta Quadrant.'

'You informed them that we had violated the treaty by developing a cloaking device?' T'Shanir asked

'As I said a moment ago, Commander, the Federation has not developed a cloaking device since the Treaty of Algeron has been in effect.'

'But we did develop one or two beforehand,' Astar realized. 'And I suppose in the spirit of cooperation you provided them with the specifications for our one?'

'Incorrect specifications,' Sitak corrected. 'However, since they will not be building one, they will not discover this.'

'Vulcan logic,' Weston said. 'They will subject the specifications to computer simulations. That will show them that the specs are duds.'

'Any simulation they run will show them that our cloaking device is inferior to theirs and easy to spot, but it will work perfectly well against species that do not what to look for.'

'And in reality?' the new chief engineer

'The cloak is completely invisible to Romulan scanners and those of other belligerent races, including the Klingons. Commander T'Shanir, would you please return to engineering and begin construction of the device.'

The engineer nodded and silently left the room. 'Sure, why not.'

'You're all dismissed, this briefing is over,' Cheer said.

'Admiral, could I speak with you?' Astar asked

'Can I help you, Commander?'

Astar hedged her bets and chose to test the Vulcan. 'I'm thinking of a number.'

Sitak raised an eyebrow. 'What purpose does this serve?'

'Never mind, I just wanted to check something. I do want to say, however, that your reasoning for violating the treaty is nothing more than semantics. I just

hope the Romulans find out.'

'They will not, unless one of the senior staff on this vessel mentions anything.'

'They always seem to find out,' Astar countered and left the briefing room with the Captain.

Once they were on the bridge, Cheer pulled her aside. 'Did you think she was a member of Section 31?'

'I had to make sure, and the expression on her face was surprise at the question. She had no idea what I was talking about. I guess she just wanted to give us an edge out there.'

'Or it could be that someone put her up to it,' Cheer countered.

'Possibly, but I'm not sure we'll ever know.'

END

*The Pytheas will return in...***Shakedown**