

Star Trek: Pytheas The All Consuming Fire

By Brother Benny

Historian's Note: The main part of this story takes place from late April to early May 2378, five months after the USS Voyager returned to the Alpha Quadrant.

Prologue

Steamrunner-class USS Independence
In orbit of Ligon II
Stardate 55305.7 (April 22, 2378)

Sixteen years after the last official visit to this backwards world, a Federation starship was once again in orbit but this time they were not seeking medical aid for another beleaguered world. Admiral Alynna Nechayev was sure that someone high-up in the government food chain was smuggling weapons to a Federation border world in exchange for slaves. Captain Sintina Aurelia disliked being Nechayev's go-to girl but her morals and ideals took precedence over her dislike for the Admiral's shadowy dealings. Since Nechayev was very nearly the only Admiral that she had not yet managed to alienate, she decided that it was best to follow where she was led. While her expertise lay in tactics, her exec, one Lieutenant Commander Karim bin Nadal, had the necessary wherewithal to conduct covert operations without getting himself or his team killed. It was for this reason, and also for the fact that Nechayev had a soft spot for him, that Aurelia accepted the fact her ship was to be diverted from the first true exploratory mission her crew had been tasked with for almost a year. It made it almost palatable, almost.

'Captain, Commander bin Nadal is overdue by eleven minutes now,' Lieutenant Commander Jonin Faltyne stated, again.

Aurelia turned to face the tactical officer and security chief. 'Thank you, Commander. I'm well aware of the time.'

'Captain, we're receiving a signal from the surface,' Kimula interrupted from

the ops console. 'The shuttle is en route but they're under attack.'

Aurelia sighed in resignation. 'I didn't think the Ligonians had shuttles.'

'They don't,' Lieutenant Commander Ethan Windslow replied from the engineering station. 'It looks like pulse cannons are being fired from surface emplacements.'

Without missing a beat Aurelia turned to Faltyne. 'Take them out. Karim better have a good explanation for this.'

'Aye ma'am,' Faltyne replied, muttering, 'he always has a good explanation.'

Aurelia smirked as the tactical officer fired the ventral phasers with pinpoint precision, knocking out all three of the pulse cannons. Bin Nadal's damaged shuttle broke through the clouds and headed for the *Independence*, manoeuvring wildly.

'Get a tractor on them,' Aurelia ordered and headed for the turbolift.

'Captain, you have an incoming message from Starfleet Tactical, it's Admiral Ranar.'

Aurelia scowled. 'My ready room, you have the conn.'

The familiar Federation logo appeared on the screen, a line of text underneath indicating an open channel. Aurelia sat herself down and tugged at her uniform top to stop it riding any further. She entered a command and the logo vanished, replaced by the visage of Admiral Andrew Ranar.

'Captain, I'm sorry to pull you from your latest mission, but I've been given authorisation to redirect you.'

Aurelia wanted to say that the current mission was now over, but she held her tongue. She hadn't interacted with Ranar before and didn't want to alienate yet another Admiral. 'Not a problem, sir. What can we do to help?'

Ranar smiled and Aurelia couldn't help but notice its paternal quality. *'I'd like you to head for the Kursican system as fast as the ship can take you. We have a dangerous yet delicate situation developing there and I need your tactical prowess. You'll be fully briefed when you arrive by Captain Logan at Starbase 535 and Captain Astar of the Pytheas.'*

Aurelia frowned. 'Is there nothing more you can tell me, Admiral? I don't really like heading into this blind.'

Ranar shook his head slightly. *'I wish I could, Captain, but I don't want to give out any further information even on a secure channel. You'll know as much as I do once you have been briefed. All I can tell you is that you are the only person that Admiral Nechayev believes can handle this situation. She commented on your particular diplomatic skills as an asset to the mission.'*

Aurelia kept her poker face as she accepted the veiled compliment. 'We'll be on our way within the hour, Admiral.'

'Excellent, Godspeed, Ranar out.'

'Hmm,' she muttered and returned to the bridge. 'Report!'

'The shuttle's aboard and the away team are in sickbay. Zo'Kama is giving them a full workup,' Faltyne replied.

'Helm, set a course for the Kursican system, maximum warp. We'll give Admiral Nechayev her report en route. Kimula, I want to know everything there is to know about the Kursican system and the surrounding space. You have two hours.'

'Course and speed laid in,' Ensign Bradley Weston replied from the conn.

'Yes ma'am,' the counsellor replied. 'Are you going down to sickbay?'

'I am; I'd like to know just what the hell happened down there,' Aurelia answered and turned to the helm. 'Let's go, Weston.'

'I would assume that the mission was completed,' Kimula stated. 'They wouldn't have tried to shoot him down otherwise.'

Aurelia inclined her head. 'Perhaps, but Karim seems to be getting himself shot at a lot lately.'

Kimula smiled wryly. 'You're the one sending him on these away missions.'

'Thank you for your insight, Counsellor.'

'Anything I should know about our upcoming mission?'

'I was hoping you'd be able to tell me. Admiral Ranar was less than forthcoming.'

'What did you do this time?'

Scowling, the Latina Captain replied, 'I didn't say or do anything. I accepted his platitudes hoping to get more from him. But either he didn't know anything or he's even better at keeping secrets than Nechayev.'

'And your conclusion?'

Aurelia scowled. 'He's better at keeping secrets, and that scares me.'

'How so?'

'Secrets are hard to keep for long, and the longer they're kept the worse the situation when they're finally revealed. Added to that, I don't like being used as a puppet.'

'Our ETA to the Kursican system is a little over six days.'

'Commander Faltyne, you have the conn.'

'Yes ma'am,' the tactical officer replied but made no move to take the captain's chair.

Only bin Nadal did when he took command of the bridge, and that was only because of his friendship with the Captain.

Chapter One

USS *Pytheas*

Docked at Starbase 535

Stardate 55321.6 (April 28, 2378)

Captain Leza Astar and her enigmatic executive officer, Commander Aaron Wright, stood by the open launch door of the main shuttlebay awaiting the arrival of their temporary replacement. Captain Logan had been less than forthcoming about who was replacing them and the class of ship, which would be important. A ship capable of holding its own would be needed to fight the Cha'lav but Astar privately thought that they would be more likely to send a science vessel or something equally as toothless. She had said nothing regarding her thoughts to her exec, since she was still unsure whether to fully trust him. His recent behaviour was out of place somehow but she couldn't quite place her finger on it, and she trusted her temporally displaced security chief more than her first officer—what a bizarre crew she led.

'There!' Wright pointed to a pinprick of light as the new starship dropped to sublight speed. 'I can't tell what it is from this distance.'

Astar said nothing until it hove into view a few moments later. 'At least they didn't send us a science vessel.'

Wright nodded his agreement. 'The *Steamrunners* can certainly hold their own, but I'm not sure how well they'll hold up against a Cha'lav battle cruiser.'

'I've seen them in action. They're manoeuvrable and act like a mosquito on an elephant. If the pilot is good and handles her well, she'll most likely cause significant damage before being swatted out the fight.'

'*Captain, we're receiving a hail from the USS Independence. Captain Aurelia is requesting permission to speak with you in private,*' Lieutenant Commander Sheena Gonzales said from the tactical station on the bridge.

'Tell her to beam over, I'll meet her in transporter room one.'

'*Aye sir, Gonzales out.*'

'Do you need backup?' Wright asked with a grin.

'I'll be fine, get to the bridge and prepare to get us underway. Make sure

Rashal is settled into his quarters and have Captain Logan meet us in the conference lounge.'

'Will do, what about that Ynelavii officer?'

Astar sighed. 'I'd forgotten about her. She's a soldier isn't she?'

Wright nodded. 'She is one of the Militia Elite, one of their youngest, and has requested entrance to the Academy. Captain Logan sponsored her and assigned her as a field-commissioned cadet to us considering her prior experience.'

'Have her on the bridge with Gonzales. I want to see what her tactics are like. We'll see about an away mission later.'

Wright smiled. 'You'd better get to the transporter room.'

'Right.'

Astar made her way to the main transporter room and dismissed the operator, intending to speak with Captain Aurelia privately before reaching the conference lounge. The *Independence* signalled again and Astar sighed, engaging the transport sequence. The woman who appeared on the transport pad was diminutive but with a definite commanding presence, one no doubt borne of battles and dealing with the increasingly difficult admiralty.

'How long were you going to keep me waiting?' the Latina captain asked.

'Permission to come aboard granted,' Astar replied, scowling slightly.

'Captain Sintina Aurelia, USS *Independence*,' she said, holding out her hand.

'Leza Astar, Captain of the *Pytheas*,' they shook briefly.

'Mind telling me why I've been sent to the boondocks?'

'You'll get the full briefing with Captain Logan and Commander Madden in the conference lounge, but I did want to speak with you first about a couple of things, which will make more sense after the briefing. I have to return a guest to his homeworld and I expect to be gone for about a month, maybe more, maybe less. Along with the *Weisskopf*, you'll be showing the flag, conducting colony runs and doing the exploratory bit when you get the chance. It isn't the

most glamorous of jobs and I hope that is all you have to do, but there is an enemy making its presence known in these parts and it's my mission to send them packing.'

'I take it that they are more dangerous than the Dominion? That's the impression I got from Admiral Ranar.'

'Much more dangerous. From what we have been able to piece together from their database which we confiscated, the Cha'lav run a universe-spanning empire and they annex galaxies to increase their slave trade and thinning resources. Ours is the next on their list.'

Aurelia snorted in derision. 'Sounds like a conspiracy theory to me.'

'You'll have full access to all data on the Cha'lav after the briefing, including the database. Your senior officers should know what is going on, but anyone else only on a strict need-to-know basis.'

Aurelia nodded, still not convinced. 'I take it you have evidence of this?'

'I do, Starfleet Tactical has been trying to keep everything ultra-secret but I've been able, by pulling in more than a few markers, to get everything on the Cha'lav kept on the Starbase where only we can access it and provide access to our officers as and when it is needed.'

'There's a Starfleet Tactical liaison on board?' Aurelia asked, hoping that Section 31 didn't know about this, though she assumed that the nasty little organisation had already learned about this operation and were trying to sneak in.

'Commander Martin Madden is on assignment from Earth.'

'All right,' Aurelia didn't recognise the name. 'What sort of battle damage is my nice little ship going to be facing?'

'If you have a good pilot, very little,' Astar replied. 'But the Cha'lav do seem to learn quickly so you'll have to throw out the regulation manoeuvres and try your own stunts.'

'I see, I think I had better learn all about these creatures,' Aurelia replied, already considering Faltynne's likely tactical scenarios.

'And you will,' Astar replied as they reached the bridge.

Chapter Two

USS Independence

Docked at *Starbase 535*

Stardate 55322.0 (April 28, 2378)

The briefing now over, Aurelia, bin Nadal and Kimula were seated in the captain's ready room discussing the situation. Bin Nadal's injuries from the Ligon II attack were almost completely healed and he had given Admiral Nechayev her report. The Ligonian leader Hagon was smuggling weapons and dealing in more than slavery. His untimely death by his wife caused a power vacuum that bin Nadal's team were caught in the middle of. Bin Nadal was thinking while Kimula was still digesting the briefing that Aurelia had given her.

'Don't either of you have an opinion?' Aurelia asked.

Karim looked up from the padd. 'I can see why they want to keep a lid on it. If this got out, there would be a mass panic. The Dominion war is still fresh in a lot of minds.'

Kimula nodded her agreement. 'What exactly do Logan and Astar want us to do?'

Aurelia paused in mid-thought. 'Our "official" mission is to keep this sector ticking over, Colony runs, flying the flag and exploration. Unofficially we're supposed to keep an eye out for the Cha'lav and stop them from destroying another culture or destabilising the sector any further.'

Kimula's antennae drooped as she read something on her padd. 'Three hundred million dead? The Cha'lav commit genocide and there's nothing we can do?'

Karim cleared his throat. 'I've had enough of dancing around to the tune of other people's agendas. If we're here then we should be proactive and seek out the Cha'lav.'

'Ordinarily I would tend to agree, and maybe a few years ago I would have, but I am not so naïve anymore,' Aurelia replied. 'Captain Astar and her crew have dealt with them before, they know the Cha'lav's strengths and weaknesses and we have access to everything they've learned. Remember, we're only here until the *Pytheas* returns from Eeroth so we should try not to

embroil ourselves in a war. Starfleet can ill afford it at the moment.'

Karim acquiesced. 'So we "police the quadrant" as President Satie would say?'

'Unfortunately, yes. But this sector is largely unexplored so we should be able to get some exploration in as long as the Cha'lav don't show up.'

'What would our illustrious President say if she knew what was really going on here?'

'What makes you think she doesn't? As a former Starfleet officer herself, I think she would make use of all the contacts she gathered over the years,' Karim replied disdainfully. 'Besides, with a threat as large as this, she would have to ask Command for contingency plans.'

Aurelia frowned. 'I know you don't like her very much, Commander, but you could at least pretend to for decorum's sake.'

'It's not her I don't like, it's her policies. Ever since Commander Tucker placed the Enterprise NX-01 between the Vulcans and Andorians in the twenty-second century we have always made it our goal to keep the peace, with the power to back it up if need be. Her policies are reminiscent of twenty-first century Earth when the United States was being heavily criticised for interfering in everybody else's affairs.'

'Which is what we have done a few times ourselves,' Kimula interjected.

Karim inclined his head in acknowledgement. 'The Federation isn't perfect, but I can't agree with her policies of looking inward.'

'What about the rebuilding of Federation worlds instead of Cardassia and others?' the counsellor asked.

Aurelia cleared her throat. 'We're getting off track here. We're loading up supplies for New Tokyo and Xyriel City and then we'll explore the sector out past the latter, since it has only been visited by the *Weisskopf* just once and that was almost four months ago.'

'As long as we actually get to do some exploring,' Kimula muttered, glaring at Karim.

Bin Nadal glared right back.

'Karim, please see to the supplies,' Aurelia pressed.

He nodded and left the ready room.

'Well?' Aurelia asked.

'He's healing, he'll be fine.'

'I meant about the Cha'lav.'

'I think you're right, we should let Captain Astar deal with them as best they can and be there as backup if need be.'

Aurelia stood up. 'Finally, we get to do some exploring.'

'Captain, we're receiving a hail from the Pytheas,' bin Nadal said a moment later. *'It's Captain Astar.'*

'I'll take it here.'

'Sintina, we're about to get underway. Is there anything else you need?'

Aurelia smiled at the newfound familiarity. 'No, just keep the Cha'lav away from us if you can. I'd really like to do some exploring.'

'I'll do my best, but no promises, Astar out.'

'She's friendly,' Kimula commented dryly.

'Yes, she is,' Aurelia replied absently, already concentrating on the mission ahead. 'See to it that we've received the entire Cha'lav database and any other updates from Command and Tactical. Report to your station, Lieutenant.'

'Yes ma'am.'

Once Kimula had returned to the bridge, Aurelia was left with her thoughts and called up the basic data on the Cha'lav. They didn't really seem dangerous except for their mindset which was similar to a number of other species in the galaxy. She hoped that after all the problems her crew had worked through, and all the battles they'd been involved in, that they would finally get a break. But it wasn't to be as yet again a new threat hovered on the horizon. She

cleared the screen and brought up an image that always made her smile, the first holo she'd taken of Earth from orbit. It reminded her of what to fight for.

'*Captain to the bridge,*' bin Nadal called out but there was no urgency to his tone.

'Problem, Commander?' she asked, emerging on the bridge.

'No ma'am,' he grinned slightly. 'Just thought you'd like to know that all the supplies are aboard and we are ready to depart.'

Aurelia nodded. 'Signal the dockmaster.'

'We are cleared for departure,' Kimula replied.

'Ensign Weston, release all mooring clamps and engage at one quarter impulse until we're out of the system.'

'Mooring clamps released, one quarter impulse, aye.'

'Let's go, the colonies await our arrival.'

Chapter Three

USS Pytheas

En route to Eeroth

Stardate 55322.2 (April 28, 2378)

She woke up in a strange bed and succumbed to panic for a few seconds before she realised where she was. After a few weeks of discussions with her family, the Ynelavii Militia and Commander Dhrex, the Federation representative to Ynelav, she was finally given permission to go to *Starbase 535* for testing. It was not as hard as she had imagined and then she had an interview with the base's commanding officer, Captain Logan. It was an unusual interview, but worth it.

'Why do you want to join Starfleet, Ms Jenak?'

'I have been reading about what you do, what you have done for centuries, and I want to be a part of it. The Ynelavii Militia has always been about protecting what is ours, and it is the duty of every Ynelavii to join the Militia. I have always wanted something more, and with Starfleet I have found it.'

Logan had smiled. 'You need a command-level officer to sponsor you to the Academy. Commander Dhrex does not have that capability.'

'With all due respect, sir, you do. You have the rank of Captain and the billet of sector commander.'

'You've thought a lot about this, haven't you?'

'Yes sir, I have.'

'Well, your test scores are high enough, but you will need training before you can take the Academy entrance exams. I am placing you as an Acting Cadet on the *USS Pytheas*. Captain Astar will place you in various departments so you get used to the technology, and the rules and regulations,' he held out a hand. 'Welcome to Starfleet, Cadet.'

Now, Jenak was dressing herself in a very different uniform to the one she was used to wearing, no sidearm and very different colours, and would be going to the bridge. She would be standing beside the ship's tactical officer during the alpha shift and assisting her with any duties that would arise. Jenak knew that life aboard a starship was different to ground-based military,

she had already completed one tour of duty aboard a Militia patrol craft, but this would be more exciting. Looking at the chronometer to double check, she knew she was early for her shift. According to regulations, the crews of all Starfleet vessels ran to a twenty-four hour period, the same as the Terran homeworld, the principal founder of the Federation. The day was split into three or four shifts, depending on the commanding officer, but it was usually three. Captain Astar had informed her of this when she came aboard the day before. Having spent the time familiarising herself with the ship's systems, she now felt ready to face the day, and the challenges ahead.

The turbolift doors parted to the sounds of the CIC, the bridge she remembered they called it, and she stepped out. She walked down the steps to the central dais where the captain and executive officer sat. Only the captain was currently seated and Jenak stopped three steps from her.

'Acting Cadet Jenak, reporting for duty, sir.'

'You're early, Cadet,' Captain Astar replied, rising from her chair. 'Follow me.' Astar led her down from the command dais toward the engineering station and then up the right-hand-side stairs to the security and tactical station.

'This is where you'll be posted for the next few weeks. You will assist Lieutenant Commander Gonzales in her duties and complete your studies in a timely manner. If you continue to do well, then you have a good chance of becoming an excellent officer. I will not, however, tolerate any slacking of duty. If you have any problems, report them to Commander Wright, my executive officer. He is responsible for the crew's wellbeing.'

'Yes sir,' Jenak replied, still standing at near-attention.

'Relax, Cadet, this is not a parade ground. You need not stand at attention unless at formal ceremonies or specifically asked to by a superior officer.'

Just then, Lieutenant Commander Sheena Gonzales emerged on the bridge and moved to her station. Jenak snapped to attention again and Astar smirked.

'Relax, Cadet,' Gonzales said. 'I'm not going to make you run around the bridge twenty times if you make a mistake. You're here to learn and you won't do that if you stand stiffly like that. There's a stool for you to sit on while you assist me. Now, can you tell me what these indicators mean?'

Jenak relaxed, slightly, and began pointing out the various indicators. She noticed Gonzales give a subtle nod to the Captain who moved away, returning to the command dais to take her seat as the rest of the alpha shift arrived. They all gave her a brief glance before assuming their stations. It was surprising that they thought nothing of having her on their bridge without any alert being raised. If a cadet or unauthorised person was in the CIC on Ynelavii ships at any time it would be locked down and security would be there in moments.

'You seem to have a steep learning curve, Cadet. How long have you been studying the schematics and layout of the ship?'

'Three days, sir,' she replied quickly.

'Impressive,' Gonzales replied. 'I have a little challenge for you. A member of this crew is going to try something unauthorised. I want you to stop them as best you can. Don't worry if you fail, this is only a test.'

Jenak looked down at the board as an irritating bleep was emitted. 'Someone is attempting to launch a shuttle.'

'Red alert,' Astar called out. 'Stop them.'

The bridge lighting dimmed from white to red and Jenak realised that they were all watching her. She attacked the console with a flurry of commands to seal the shuttlebay door. Jenak noted that the captain was waiting for something and realised that she should be providing some kind of commentary.

'My attempts to seal the shuttlebay door have failed. I'm now venting the atmosphere and trying to take remote control of the shuttle.'

Chapter Four

USS Pytheas

En route to Eeroth

Stardate 55322.3 (April 28, 2378)

The door was still opening and Jenak did not have control of the shuttle. She realised that she couldn't stop the shuttle from leaving, but the starship had a tractor beam and she could snag the shuttle as soon as it left. A thought then occurred to her, whoever was stealing the shuttle might have also thought of that idea and come up with a defence against it.

'Nothing is working, sir. My attempts to seal the shuttlebay and prevent the launch have been unsuccessful,' the new cadet stated for the benefit of the bridge officers.

'Tractor them,' Astar ordered.

'I don't believe that will work, sir. They probably have a defence put in place.'

'Shuttle is leaving the ship,' Gonzales noted.

'On screen,' Astar ordered. 'What do you suggest, Cadet?'

'Engaging repulsor beam,' Jenak replied and Astar watched the viewscreen as the pilot of the shuttle suddenly lost control.

Excellent work, now tractor them!'

'Now engaging tractor beam. I have them, sir.'

Astar smiled. 'Stand down red alert. Commander, you may return to the bridge. Good work, Cadet. What made you think of a repulsor beam?'

'I thought that whoever had stolen the shuttle would most likely think that a tractor beam would be the next logical step in apprehending them. The repulsor beam threw them off balance allowing me a moment before they collected themselves to engage the tractor beam.'

'I told you she was impressive,' Gonzales muttered with a slight grin.

'A natural tactical officer,' Astar agreed. 'As befits the Militia Elite, but

Starfleet officers are expected to be well rounded in multiple disciplines. You will be trying your hand at engineering, operations, flight control, science and command.'

'Yes sir,' Jenak replied eagerly.

None of those positions had entered her mind. She could feel at home here, and it was an unrivalled opportunity to learn about the galaxy outside of her little corner, and hopefully make a difference. The rest of the shift passed without incident and she looked forward to sleep that night. Before she could do that, however, she needed to eat and while the replicator had been programmed with a few dozen Ynelavii dishes, they didn't taste quite the same. She was looking forward to tasting some fresh food from other worlds and made her way to the mess hall where the rest of the alpha shift were getting their food. When she arrived, she found some kind of disturbance and pushed through the crowd for a better look.

Two officers were standing beside each other, at different plasma stoves, adding ingredients to a dish. They were being cheered on by almost everyone present. A blue man, a Bolian, stood back from them both and held some kind of time piece in his hands. He suddenly began counting down from ten and when he reached zero the two officers stepped back.

'All right, ladies and gentlemen, who wants to be the first to try the cook-off chilli?'

Jenak looked behind her and saw that everyone present had taken steps back, leaving her at the front. She steeled herself. 'I will.'

'A brave beginning for our newest recruit,' the Bolian said and leaned in to whisper. 'Don't be ashamed if you can't handle it. Not everyone can.'

She smiled as she stepped forward and accepted a spoon from one of the officers, which she dipped into the first pot of chilli. Her nose wrinkled from the very heat of the dish and she could smell how potent it was going to be. As she tasted it, she felt her neck redden and realised that this was just like the competitions her family had with their neighbours.

'That's potent,' Jenak told the man, 'but my grandmother makes it hotter.'

The crowd took another step back as the officer narrowed his eyes at her. She took a spoon from the second man and dipped it into his chilli. It burned her

mouth even before the spoon reached it because it was so hot and her eyes watered.

'This one's hotter,' she croaked.

The crowd roared forward to taste them and she moved back against the wall to get her breath back.

'I didn't think you'd handle it,' the Bolian told her.

'We had competitions like that at home for a long time, until my grandfather passed away. It just wasn't the same without him. Can I try one next time?'

'Sure, I'll let you know when we do the next one. What were you going to have for eat?'

'I don't know, I was going to try something the chef made. Something from Earth maybe.'

'You've come to just the right place. My name is Frel; I'm in charge of the galley on the *Pytheas*. Let me get you some tomato and habanero soup, with some fresh bread. It's not as hot as the chilli, but you'll like it.'

Jenak smiled. 'Thank you. Would you mind showing me a dish from a different world every day, if you have the ingredients?'

The Bolian grinned. 'For you, I'll do my best, on one condition.'

'Name it.'

'You teach me how to cook Ynelavii dishes.'

'Deal,' she said and held out her hand for him to shake. 'As it happens, I bought some Navalo peppers with me, and they can be hotter than what's in those chillies I think.'

'I look forward to tasting them.'

'Not on their own, even we never do that,' she winked. 'At least not more than once.'

His eyes bulged. 'Wow, I've got to taste one.'

'Better make sure you're close to sickbay then.'

Frel smiled and gestured for her to take a seat. 'You wait here and I'll get some of that soup. You definitely won't find it too hot.'

While she was eating, he peppered her with questions, which she answered between mouthfuls. 'This is good. My first day wasn't too bad, but I hope we don't run into too much trouble. I'd like to have some time to adjust to a live in space, and explore this ship a little.'

Chapter Five

Central Archives

Ynelav IV

Stardate 55324.5 (April 29, 2378)

The sunlight barely penetrated the darkened windows of the cavernous archives and this made Lieutenant Commander Kareni Renn more than a little anxious as her native homeworld was blazing with two suns for more than nine tenths of the year. Her eyes adjusted to the darkness easily enough, a side effect of spending most of her adult life aboard starbases and starships, and she strolled slowly down the rows of preserved scrolls looking for the markings that denoted the war archives. The tricorder and padd she carried had both been programmed with a limited translation matrix of the five thousand most common words in the dominant historical language of the Ynelavii, Lanti. According to the scholars, more than ninety-five percent of the scrolls were written in Lanti with the remaining five percent written in the ancient language of the Seer and other geographical dialects.

As the new tactical officer of the *Weisskopf*, Captain Dhrex had tasked her with reading the war history of the planet to determine their strategies and whether they had actually evolved beyond the border wars that most worlds had during their industrial, technological and early space ages. Renn had already perused the digital history of the planet's wars, the ones written by the victors, and found them to be substantially biased. The scrolls would hopefully tell her a different story and lead her to a better conclusion, though the recent actions of the rebel movement against the mainstream religious government made her think another war was brewing. The Ynelavii had already developed nuclear fusion and discarded it as a power resource, preferring more natural ones instead. However, with their advanced technology and the lack of an outside enemy to fight with the near extinction of the Resoto Hegemony, the old disputes had flared back up again and threatened to devastate the planet.

If the rebels were able to get their hands on a warship, the fight would be over. The tricorder chirruped, bringing her out of her daydream, and she noted the display. She had reached the immense war archive, a collection of almost a million scrolls, most of which were written by soldiers during times of war. It was these scrolls that would give her the best picture of the history of violence that the Ynelavii had been through, though it seemed to her that lessons had not been learned. Renn set the tricorder and padd down on a nearby table and selected a handful of scrolls at random, placing them next to

her equipment. She began to translate the texts and read the accounts of war. One soldier, from approximately a hundred years ago, described his first experience of combat that was familiar to her from her own experiences during the Dominion war.

"The shelling began at dawn, killing the medics and the wounded straight away. They were the lucky ones as the bombardment continued unabated from the skies until dawn of the next day. I had no time for fear or grief as the troops landed to finish us off. Colonel Herak ordered us to fight to the death but General Tedas saw the futility and ordered a retreat. The two men fought against themselves as we fought the enemy and we did drive them back, but not before losing three quarters of the battalion. When we did retreat we left Herak's body where it lay, a message to the enemy that we were the barbarians they believed us to be. It was my first and only taste of combat as the ceasefire was declared the following..."

Renn stopped reading as dust floated down from the ceiling. The ceiling began to crumble and she dived out of the way with her padd and tricorder as a section smashed the table she'd been sitting at. The broken windows rained glass around her and she glimpsed fliers around the Archives through the bright sky.

'Renn to *Weisskopf*,' she slapped her combadge hoping that they could actually hear her.

'Go ahead, Commander,' Dhrex replied.

'The Archives and surrounding buildings are being destroyed by some kind of fighter planes; I need an emergency transport.'

'Stand by, Commander.'

Renn dematerialised a moment later, rematerialising on the bridge.

'Captain, the scrolls will be destroyed, we have to beam them aboard,' she cried out in frustration.

'Where do you propose we keep them, space isn't exactly plentiful around here?'

'We have to do something. Their history will be lost'

Dhrex considered the options. 'Unfortunately, Commander, we have to stay out of it.' He turned to his exec, Commander Andrew Banks. 'Get Regent Dolan on the line. I want to know what the hell is happening down there.'

'We're being jammed from the surface.'

Dhrex muttered a mild Denobulan curse. 'Can you localise the jamming?'

Banks frowned as he worked the tactical console alongside Renn. 'It's clearing; we're being hailed from the Science Ministry.'

'On screen.'

'This is Furan, leader of the Ynelavii Rebellion. For two long the Nelanii have been the dominant religion on this world, suppressing the Truth of the Seer. That time is over. Regent Dolan has been deposed and I now control the government. We will give you all the truth about the Seer, what He represented in the past and what He represents now. The Seer is among us and He will reveal Himself soon. We must all be ready to accept Him and we shall be. To the Federation vessel in orbit, you are no longer wanted on this world.'

'He's insane.'

'Quite possibly,' Dhrex replied, 'but we are obliged to follow the dictates of the ruling leader. And since we are no longer wanted, we should depart.'

'What about their archives?'

'They'll have to muddle through. Clearly they have not learned from the history written on those scrolls and are doomed to repeat the mistakes of times past.'

'Aye sir,' Renn replied, looking down at the padd and thinking that what she held might be all there was left.

Chapter Six

USS *Pytheas*

En route to Eeroth

Stardate 55325.6 (April 29, 2378)

Seated at the Operations console, Lieutenant Shanitalen ch'Maras watched his displays of the ship's current power usage, noting that both holodecks were currently in use and the chef was preparing what appeared to be a large meal since the galley was using almost three times what it usually did. He was responsible for the life support systems, communication and basic sensor analysis and since Commander Wright had come aboard he'd taken to this responsibilities with renewed vigour, hoping to catch the murderous executive officer in the act of doing something illegal. The ship was currently travelling at warp six toward the area of space known locally as the Badlands, and on Federation charts at the Kursican Badlands, since numerous other regions contained "badlands" where there was dangerous plasma eddies, no law and a perfect site for illegal trades. The Kursican Badlands, according to both Jenak and Rashal, were home to a creature that could devour entire ships in moments and then vanish without a trace. Commander Wright had likened it to a region of ocean on Earth called the Bermuda Triangle, and from his research he found it apt, asking the Captain if they could name it on their own charts as the Kursican Triangle, instead of the familiar term used by the locals. She had agreed.

Talen had no such illusions about the region they were approaching. It was similar to the Cardassian Badlands in that there were severe plasma storms which were capable of destroying ships and leaving little trace, and a smattering of L- and M-class asteroids and planets. According to Rashal, his homeworld lay on the other side of the three-parsec wide expanse. Captain Astar, prior to receiving the go-ahead from Starfleet Tactical, had ordered extensive emergency drills to prepare the crew for any eventuality. Some things, he knew, could not be planned for. He looked around the bridge and noticed the Ynelavii cadet being given another lecture by Gonzales on protocols; Astar and Wright were discussing something and at the helm, Larson looked lost in thought. Talen turned toward the turbolift doors as they opened and Rashal stepped onto the bridge. The Andorian hadn't had much interaction with the Eerothian since he was given quarters but he knew a few things about the man. He noted that Astar had also glanced at the turbolift and saw Rashal but she made no move to intercept him.

Rashal approached him and leaned in close. 'I know your heart, Andorian.

Your journey to fulfilment will be long, and you will be welcomed with open arms into the afterlife.'

Talen blinked in shock and then asked, 'What do you know of my heart?'

'I can sense it. Do not let fear guide you, my alien friend. Allow your friends to help you on your path.'

'Are you a preacher?' he asked.

Rashal smiled and waved his tentacles in what Talen assumed was a shrug. 'Not exactly.'

'Rashal, could I speak with you in my ready room please?' Astar asked and the alien walked toward her.

'That's it folks,' Wright suddenly announced as the doors to both turbolifts opened depositing the beta shift personnel. 'Enjoy the rest of your day.'

Talen signed off and handed over his station, providing a quick rundown of the events that occurred during his shift, which were mercifully few. After leaving the bridge he quickly reached his quarters, almost ignoring the large number of officers and crewmembers changing shift. He lowered the temperature from Andor normal, thirty-three degrees below zero in Earth terms to minus forty-nine degrees, the minimum sustainable temperature for Andorians and Aenar to remain conscious, and only for a short time. Divesting himself of his clothes, he sat cross-legged on the floor and tried to quiet his mind. Being part-Aenar, he had learned a number of meditation techniques from Vulcans, Betazoids and Cairn, but his mind refused to be quietened.

'Lieutenant ch'Maras, you have an incoming message from Andor,' the computer intoned.

He sighed. 'Put it though.'

Quickly slipping on a robe and raising the temperature, he sat at his desk as the Federation logo was replaced by Demesrulan zh'Sawel. The look on her face told him plenty.

'You're a fool, Shanitalen. You should not have returned to Starfleet so early.'

He took a deep breath. 'I have already completed the bonding, our Sheltreth

was disbanded.'

His former bondmate sighed. *'There was a problem. I wasn't able to conceive.'*

'Do you wish me to return?'

'There is no time. Another bondmate has been chosen through the ch'Thane Genome Project. I'm sorry, I would have liked to be with you.'

Shanitalen was aghast. 'By the time I return from my mission it is likely that I will be too late to find another Sheltreth.'

'I will look for you, just make sure you return,' she replied and cut the transmission.

He slipped off his robe and lowered the temperature. Not only had he lost the people he cared most about, his bondmates, but he would no longer be able to help conceive a child unless he did so outside of a bond with an Aenar or Andorian.

'Computer, play something by zh'Lumas.'

'Specify period.'

'The early years,' he replied and used the soft melody of the music to try and aid his mediation.

After several hours he was feeling cold and was no closer to peace.

'Computer, raise the temperature to Andor normal, discontinue music.'

There was clearly nothing he could do, meditation-wise, to calm his mind and needed another method. It was something of a cultural taboo to involve others in one's affairs but there were several high-profile examples of the taboo being broken, so he decided to speak with a counsellor about his situation. The Angosians were known to eschew violence and a handful had joined Starfleet since the *Enterprise-D* visited their world almost fifteen years before. The daughter of one of the Angosians present during the *Enterprise's* mission was one who had joined Starfleet. Mana Zayner, daughter of Prime Minister Nayrok's aide, now held the rank of Lieutenant and opted for a counsellor's position once she graduated the Academy. The woman was

talented and graduated in the top fifth of her class, and he just hoped that she would understand his situation enough to help him.

Chapter Seven

Norkova-class freighter *Gilgamesh*
Ramajuan Salvage Yards, Kursican sector
Stardate 55326.2 (April 30, 2378)

There was a single inhabited starship in the salvage yards and the eighteen-deck vessel served as the meeting place and haven for the salvagers and others who frequented the area. Since it was in unclaimed space, it was the perfect meeting place for people who didn't want to be seen. Lieutenant Commander Miles Murdoch and Lieutenant Paul Marshall had been diverted from their assignment for Dreno'L, the Deputy Commissioner for Xyril City's Space Ministry, to meet with a representative from Admiral Nechayev. It had been decided after their last assignment that it would be best to go undercover in this sector and act as a freighter crew to undertake their hunt for the Section 31 operative operating in this sector. Murdoch entered what would have been a private dining room and sat in booth at the back, sipping an unusual-tasting ale while waiting for his handler.

'I hope I haven't kept you waiting,' the dark-skinned man said as he slipped into a seat beside the two men.

'It wouldn't have mattered,' the Murdoch muttered. 'We would still have to wait for you.'

'Yes you would,' the spy agreed with a wry smile.

'What do you have for us?' Marshall asked; eager not to be seen there and not to be there for too long.

'According to my sources, Captain Astar is taking the Eeroth back to his people, leaving the *Weisskopf* and the *Independence* to hold the sector. There has been no sign of the operative around here for two weeks but I don't expect it to last. Complete your mission for the Deputy Minister and then return to Starbase 535. I want you to keep your eyes and ears open and report back as soon as you hear anything.'

'I thought we were supposed to be undercover? We're known by too many people there.'

'You'll be fine, gentlemen. Logan won't give you any trouble. He's too busy working on the Kursicans and trying to spy on Madden.'

'Do you think the operative got himself onto the starbase?'

'Probably, but you need to find who and how,' the man replied. 'Question everyone, quietly.'

Murdoch knew what to do and didn't need this guy telling him how to do his job, but he said nothing. Nechayev knew what she was doing. 'We'll do our best, but I don't know how long I'm likely to be working for Dreno'L. I have to search for a specific part in this salvage yard and get it to him as soon as possible.'

The spy agent nodded. 'I'm well aware of your mission, Mister Murdoch, and I have every confidence that you will succeed. You've done exceedingly well thus far and I see no reason why that can't continue. I will be returning to *Starbase 535* shortly, but I'll probably be on my way back to Earth before you return, so it might be a while before I contact you again. If you have any information, transmit it on the usual channel and it will be received.'

'Let's go,' Marshall said. 'This place is getting a little too crowded for my liking.'

'Have a good day, gentlemen,' the spy said and sidled out of the booth.

Murdoch and Marshall waited until he'd left the room before returning to their ship. They didn't need any supplies; he just needed to find a particular wreck which had been sitting out there for about ten years. Thanks to the deputy minister he had a specific metallic signature to look for, and Nechayev's people had tweaked his sensors and a few other systems before she let them have the freighter. Instead of overhauling the freighter he'd appropriated, she had sent an old *Norkova*-class ship for them to use, and they'd been awarded the contract to Xyril City. Murdoch had spent the first few days making new contacts in the salvage yards. The inhabited starship, called *Gashoqap* by the owner, and focus point for all the business in the area, was frequented by every cargo hauler in the sector. He decided that he would need those contacts in the future.

The *Gilgamesh* detached itself from the drydock which surrounded the *Gashoqap* and turned awkwardly before heading deeper into the salvage yards. The vessel he was looking for belonged to a civilisation whose star had gone nova about fifteen hundred years ago, the ship was one of the few remnants of that culture but the native races to the Kursican sector cared

little about xenoarchaeology and more about what they could take for themselves. The cargo haulers, when not running cargo, spent much of their time rooting through the hulks and wrecks looking the next big score. More often than not they found little of interest. Dreno'L believed that he had found something which would make him rich and had dedicated an enormous amount of money to finding it. Murdoch was his instrument and while it rankled the Starfleet officer, he knew that once he found the part and delivered it, he could return to the Starbase and listen out for more important information.

'This thing must be really important for him to hire us,' Marshall said.

Murdoch nodded. 'I know, it doesn't sound trustworthy, especially when he's never dealt with us before, but it could be that he is giving us a chance to ingratiate ourselves to get more business.'

'I didn't think of that.'

'We'll find what he wants and then go and catch ourselves a crook.'

'Did he tell you what to look for?'

'He gave me a specific alloy to scan for and told me that we're looking for a stasis pod.'

'We're looking for someone not something?' Marshall asked.

'I guess so. It's not ideal, but this isn't Federation space, and the Xyrillians are not Federation members. We can't stop them from doing anything that we would consider illegal, no matter how abhorrent we find it.'

'You suspect him of people smuggling don't you?'

'No comment,' Murdoch replied and concentrated on flying the ship.

Chapter Eight

USS Pytheas

Approaching the Kursican Triangle

Stardate 55327.9 (April 30, 2378)

Commander Aaron Wright looked at the main viewscreen in awe as the rest of the bridge crew followed suit. Like the Cardassian Badlands, the Kursican Triangle was a region of dense plasma storms which were a navigational hazard, although according to the readings that were being sent to the science station, the plasma storms here were almost five times powerful than those of the Cardassian Badlands. Few ships ever ventured into the region and fewer still returned, but the Intrepid-class ships were the most suitable for traversing such regions, which was why the USS *Voyager* was the vessel selected for tracking a Maquis ship a decade ago. With the new astrometrics array, the *Pytheas* should be able to navigate through the Triangle with relative ease, and on the other side lay unexplored space. According to Rashal, who now stood at the rail behind the command chairs, only a few Eeroth had ever left their homeworld to venture into the Triangle and none had returned. Wright personally believed that if they had made it they wouldn't have wanted to go back.

'Commander, what can you tell me about the myth?' Captain Astar asked, tearing her eyes from the beautiful sight on the viewscreen.

'Very little, Captain,' Wright replied. 'According to the Ynelavii database, they look to the Triangle very much like the region on Trill as the Ganses Sink.'

'Where sea-going ships disappear never to be seen again,' Astar muttered. 'I've never believed those stories. Go on,' she added.

'I've spoken with both Jenak and Rashal and they have both told me similar stories. In both cultures there is a myth regarding a continent-sized slug-like creature which appears from nowhere and consumes vessels before vanishing again.'

'Have there been any investigations into the losses of the vessels?' Mahtani asked, turning away from the science station.

Astar turned to the railing where Rashal stood. 'Well?'

Rashal's features changed hue. 'Not as such. My government, primarily ruled

by the Dahreki, frequently use ships crewed by criminals to explore the Triangle. If they return they are given partial pardons and sent to live in a minimum-security penal colony.'

Astar's brow creased and her spots darkened; a sure sign of anger. 'That is barbaric behaviour.'

'How many vessels returned?' Mahtani asked.

'Three, out of approximately fifty,' the Eerothian answered.

'A waste of life,' Astar said.

'I was thinking it was a novel way of utilising those people which have damaged society in some way, the danger aside,' Wright interjected, earning himself a glare from Astar. 'It may be barbaric to you, Captain, but instead of prisoners taking space up, they can be put to good use. On Earth, after World War Three, prisoners were experimented on to test cures for various diseases. Many died but the scientific knowledge which was gained...'

Astar held up a hand to silence him, knowing that her people also practiced such things in the past. 'Such arguments are irrelevant to this discussion. What about your people, Jenak? Did they make any investigations into the losses?'

'Yes sir, the Ministry of the Judiciary has a dedicated taskforce for the Triangle.'

'And why is that?'

'Numerous criminals have used the Triangle to escape justice, but the Militia daren't get too close to the centre in case the Manxome catches them.'

'Can you describe the rough layout of the Triangle for us?' Mahtani asked.

'It is three parsecs long and one parsec wide at the longest points,' Jenak answered. 'The plasma storms are about a thousand AUs in distance and there is nothing in the centre that we know of. All the probes which my people have sent in there have detected nothing, before being destroyed.'

'Destroyed by what?' the chief science officer asked, clearly enjoying this expedition into the unknown.

Jenak shrugged. 'We don't know.'

'How do you know so much?' Gonzales asked.

The young cadet smiled. 'I studied science at university in the hopes that it would increase my tactical knowledge. As one of our philosophers once said, "Science is war by other means."'

Mahtani smiled. 'I think you'll do well as a scientist, you have the right mindset.' He turned to Astar. 'Captain, did we get the probes' telemetry when we got their stellar database?'

'Honestly, I'm not sure, Lieutenant. Why don't you get your team on that? I want you down in astrometrics so you can assist us in getting through the plasma storms. The sooner we get through, the sooner we'll be able to return Rashal to his people.'

'Aye sir, I'll have Lieutenant Malling working on the Ynelavii database.'

Astar nodded and turned toward the viewscreen where the roiling purple-tinged plasma created swirling vortexes of devastating power. 'Are we ready?' she asked Wright.

'Yes sir, we are,' her exec answered. 'Inertial dampers are at maximum, the structural integrity field has been reinforced and shields are at full.'

She toggled the intraship comm system. 'This is the captain. We are about to enter the Kursican Triangle, a region of intense plasma storms and gravimetric shears. I know you will all do your best to keep this ship in one piece so man your stations and prepare for a bumpy ride.'

'All departments report ready, Captain,' Gonzales said from the tactical station.

'Mister Larson, take us in, slow and steady at one quarter impulse.'

'I can handle it at half impulse, Captain,' Larson replied with a teenager's boast to his voice.

'I don't doubt that, Ensign, but I want to play it safe and give us enough time to react if something goes wrong. It will be easier to do that at one quarter.'

'Aye sir,' he replied.

The *Pytheas* effortlessly entered the Triangle and Larson turned to the ship on its port side to avoid a plasma vortex almost immediately. He slowed the ship to one fifth impulse to give him a greater heads-up and then settled into the routine of dodging.

'How long until we get through the plasma storms?' Astar asked.

'At least two days at this speed,' Larson replied as the ship veered to starboard.

Chapter Nine

Operations Centre

Starbase 535

Stardate 55328.3 (April 30, 2378)

Captain Lionel Logan stared in mute disbelief at the main viewscreen in the Operations centre. The *Qang*-class (or *Chancellor*-class) starships of the Klingon Empire were huge, holding 1500 crew and 1500 warriors. They were the most advanced starships that the Klingons had ever built, with a similar capability to Starfleet's *Sovereign*-class. This particular one, the IKS *Ditagh*, had served Chancellor Martok's new conquering program with great success. He could see that something had hit this ship badly, since oxygen was being vented from numerous hull breaches, and the port nacelle was dark.

'Have an engineering detail coordinate with the *Ditagh*'s chief engineer. I'd like to see Captain Vikagh as soon as it is convenient for him,' Logan said to Commander Madden.

'Aye sir, already have a team on it.'

'Is Subcommander Sokal back aboard?'

'Yes sir, the Gilded Talon docked almost an hour ago,' Madden replied sourly.

'Excellent, I want an update of whatever the engineers find.'

'Captain, we're receiving an encrypted message from the *Independence*, it's a little faint.'

Logan turned back to the screen. 'Put it up...What can I do for you, Captain?'

'I'm looking at a debris field comprised of Resoto merchant vessels and Klingon hull fragments, Captain. What the hell is Vikagh up to?'

'How many ships?'

'About six, from what we can tell. Has he been advised that the Resoto are all but extinct?'

Logan tried not to smirk. 'Captain, the Resoto pirates don't think that and they just learned not to attack Klingons.'

Aurelia narrowed her eyes. *'They didn't learn anything, there were no survivors.'*

Logan was not particularly bothered by this, since he knew quite well what Klingon battle tactics were. 'The Resoto will learn or they will die, Captain. The Klingons also know what it is like to fight the Resoto now. I don't think they'll be any more problems.'

Aurelia scowled. *'I won't be picking up the pieces, Independence out.'*

'That went well,' Madden muttered. 'Do you think the Klingons heard that?'

'Of course they did,' Logan replied. 'Aurelia deliberately used a channel that the Klingons have decrypted. She's a hothead and it's gotten her into trouble before. She has grown up a lot in the last few years, but having your ship destroyed while you're unconscious will do that.'

Madden shivered. 'I heard about that, Command said it was a design flaw.'

'I read the same report, Commander, but I didn't believe it then and I don't now. Let me know when Vikagh wants to talk.'

'How about right now, Captain,' the Klingon captain said as he strode into Ops flanked by two young Starfleet security officers.

'That will do fine, Captain. Follow me.'

Logan led Vikagh into his office and sat down behind the desk. 'Before you say anything, I know that you heard the conversation I just had with Captain Aurelia, and I'm sure you will say that the Resoto fired first. Let me be blunt with you, Captain, I don't care who fired first. Your ship was heavily damaged and a few hundred more Resoto are dead. There are less than fifty thousand Resoto left alive, many of them miners and pirates, doing what they can to survive. I don't need you blasting their ships to pieces.'

Vikagh maintained his silence during the speech but as soon as Logan paused for more than two seconds, he spoke, his voice almost quivering with repressed anger. 'I did not attack the Resoto vessels, Commander. I was on the way to the Belothi homeworld to conquer them for the honour of the Empire when I came across one vessel firing on the last of the six Resoto ships. Against my better judgement I intervened and look where it got me. I

will gladly hand over all the sensor data I have for you to take a look at.'

'I would appreciate that, Captain. These are trying times for us.'

'Hmph. You'll have the data in an hour. If you'll excuse me, I need to send a hundred and seventy-three warriors to Sto'Vo'Kor.'

'Not at all,' Logan replied as the Klingon exited. He tapped his combadge. 'Subcommander Sokal, could I speak with you for a moment in my office.'

'*I'm on my way,*' the Rihannsu replied with a lilt to her voice that he hadn't heard before.

While he was waiting, he called up the sensor logs that Vikagh had just sent across and recognised the alien vessel immediately. 'Logan to Madden, report to my office at once.'

'*On my way,*' the Operation Cobalt liaison replied.

Both of them arrived at the same time and he invited them in, recalling Vikagh as well. Once they were all seated, he activated the seldom-used holo-com and Admiral Andrew Ranar appeared.

'*Captains, Subcommander,*' Ranar began. '*I'll be brief because I'm rather busy. As the person responsible for watching over the Kursican sector because of the Cha'lav involvement out there, it has come to my attention that the Cha'lav were responsible for the destruction of the Resoto merchants. Captains, Subcommander, Captain Logan will brief you on the Cha'lav situation. Logan, I want you to retask Independence to shadow any Resoto vessels they come across. If the Cha'lav do attack I want to deal them a crippling blow. I would to ask that since you both have cloaking devices aboard your ships,*' Ranar looked directly at Sokal and Vikagh, '*you attack if the Cha'lav appear anywhere in the sector. I'm fully cognisant of the danger they pose to the Federation and the rest of the galaxy and I intend to see that their plans are crippled permanently.*'

'I'll inform Captain Aurelia immediately,' Logan said.

'I will assist you,' Sokal added. 'ch'Rihan is just as threatened.'

'Once my ship has been repaired I will show them the true strength of the Klingon Empire.'

'Admiral, this could well start the war we're trying to avoid,' Madden said calmly, though inwardly he was cursing Ranar for discussing Operation Cobalt's existence on a secure channel.

'Commander, as far as I'm concerned, they've already declared war by kidnapping Federation citizens and attacking worlds under our protection. Captain, will the Klingons come to our aid if we press the offensive?'

Chapter Ten

Operations Centre

Starbase 535

Stardate 55328.4 (April 30, 2378)

Vikagh looked affronted and answered without hesitation. 'Of course.'

'What of Praetor Tal'Aura?'

'She and I disagree on much, Admiral, but the protection of ch'Rihan must be a priority.'

Ranar nodded. *'Inform Captain Dhrex that the Cha'lav may be trying to finish the job they started with the Resoto. I will expect a full report at the end of each day. Ranar out.'*

Logan sighed. 'Commander, if you wouldn't mind explaining the situation.'

'Aye sir,' Madden replied.

'Who are the Cha'lav?' Vikagh asked.

Madden sighed. 'Ten years ago a woman from the thirtieth century appeared and told us that the Federation would lose a war with the Cha'lav in her time. At the time only one person in Starfleet had ever heard of them, the Commander-in-Chief, though he didn't believe what she was saying. Starfleet's Department of Temporal Investigations debriefed her for months and she was able to provide detailed information about the Dominion threat but they decided not to tell the Federation—or the rest of the galaxy—because history had already recorded those events. Most of what she told us did happen, with a few unforeseen changes that her history was a bit vague on.'

'The Dominion threat could have been neutralised!' Sokal said angrily, 'and saved billions of lives.'

'But the future would have been altered,' Logan replied. 'We have a Temporal Prime Directive that forbids us with interfering with time and while it has been broken a few times, it is there to protect our very future.'

'You have not answered my question,' the Klingon said, rising from his chair.

'The Cha'lav want nothing more than to dominate the galaxy like they have dozens of others. They have a universe-spanning empire and we're the next galaxy on the list. According to the woman from the future, they started their attack the same way the Dominion did, by trying to destabilise the major galactic powers. This time, however, they have taken a different approach by starting a civil war on one world and committing genocide on another. We narrowly stopped them committing genocide on several worlds in this sector.'

'We will erase them from existence, a taste of their own medicine,' Vikagh replied.

'No!' Logan said. 'We will not stoop to their level. Our aim is to stop each wave of attack as it happens and prevent them from getting a foothold in this galaxy, like the Dominion did.'

'And then?'

'I'm not at liberty to discuss the next stage in the plan. All I ask is that you keep this information from Praetor Tal'Aura and Chancellor Martok for the time being, at least until President Satie has told them herself.'

'I have no love for the Praetor and she has already denounced me as a rogue, so you have no fear on that score, Captain.'

'I don't need to contact the Chancellor for every decision to be made,' Vikagh replied. 'Besides, if honour is to be served, I can call on plenty of other Klingons.'

'Captain, Ambassador Aulyffke wishes to speak with you, he says it is urgent,' his second officer called over the comm.

'If you'll excuse me,' Logan said to the others.

They left the room with their padds and barely a glance at him and the former leader of Kursica entered, his robes trailing behind him. 'I thought you were going to deal with the rebels?'

'Ambassador, I have repeatedly told you that we cannot interfere with your internal squabbles and providing weapons to either side would also be in violation of the Prime Directive.'

'We're on the verge of civil war, Captain.'

'I'm here to assist you in gaining entry into the Federation, but you seem to be getting further away from that. Is Regent Juhstraffe willing to open a dialogue with the rebels to talk about their grievances and misgivings?'

'No, Captain. He is refusing to talk to them and already making preparations to remove them from their strongholds by force.'

'Contact him immediately and make sure he knows that if he ignores me, I will make my final report to the Federation Council this afternoon.'

'Thank you, Captain. I'll relay your message immediately.'

Logan turned to his office to see Vikagh, Sokal and Madden all leave and go their separate ways, clutching padds containing all current and low-level classified information on the Cha'lav. 'On second thoughts, I'll speak to him now.'

Aulyffke nodded and retreated toward the turbolift.

'Ambassador, I want you here as well. You're supposed to be my liaison to your government.'

Aulyffke hung his head. 'As you wish, Captain.'

Less than two minutes later, they were seated in his office and waiting for Juhstraffe to talk to them. It was only after the fifth time that Logan paged the Regent, that he agreed to speak to them.

'What can I do for you, Captain?'

'Regent, forgive my intrusion but I understand that you are planning to destroy the rebel strongholds.'

'I am, Captain. I have tried to talk to the rebel leader but his minions tell me he is unavailable and does not wish to speak with me. After extensive investigation my security people have discovered his identity and are preparing to take him into custody as we speak.'

Logan saw Aulyffke glance outside at the Operations centre and watched

three guards in Kursican Imperial Security uniforms walk toward his office.
'The Ambassador is the rebel leader?'

'Very good, Captain. He has been undermining my authority since he was removed from office.'

'Ambassador?'

'I should not have been exiled!' the former regent replied. 'What I am doing is for the good of our people. Your colonies have come and put strange ideas into the heads of the Kursicans, making them want to join this Federation so they can die in your wars.'

Logan opened the doors for the guards to enter. 'He's all yours.'

'You can't do this to me!' he wailed.

'Thank you, Captain. Perhaps now we can open a dialogue with each other in the hopes of joining the Federation. I would like you to come and meet with me.'

'I'll be glad to, whenever is convenient for you.'

Chapter Eleven

USS *Weisskopf*

In orbit of Ynelav VIII

Stardate 55328.9 (May 1, 2378)

Captain Dhrex scratched his chin as he stared at the massive Jovian-sized bulk on the viewscreen. He hadn't wished to leave the system completely after being banished by Minister Furan. The man had taken the government by force, and since it was Starfleet policy not to interfere with the internal squabbles of planets, even those petitioning for Federation membership, Dhrex had little to do but sit back and wait to see what happened. He couldn't stay for much longer, since the last message from *Starbase 535* had been of an urgent nature regarding the Cha'lav, but he could not just let these people get swept under the galactic rug. He turned to Andrew Banks, who was equally bored of the view.

'Commander, fancy a trip down to the surface?'

Banks looked nonplussed for a second before he realised which surface. 'May I remind you, sir, it is against regulations to interfere in the internal politics of any civilisation.'

'I wasn't planning to interfere. I want to know more about the Seer but I can't very well do that from up here, can I?'

Banks sighed, knowing his commanding officer had a plan that skirted the rules. Most of them did but were kept in check by the late Captain Drummond. 'What did you have in mind, sir?'

'I want a three person team, with all of them surgically altered to look like Ynelavii. They need to get into the shrine, read the scrolls and find out who the Seer is likely to be.'

'A duck blind mission?'

Dhrex smiled and it stretched across his face. 'Exactly.'

'We have to get permission from Command to perform a duck blind mission, sir.'

Dhrex turned to his new tactical officer. 'Karen, what was the problem you

spoke to me earlier about? Our subspace antennae need to be replaced and the industrial replicators are malfunctioning?'

Lieutenant Commander Kareni Renn grinned slightly. 'Yes sir, could take hours to fix and repair both systems.'

'Then we might as well do something while we wait.'

Banks knew he was fighting a lost cause but felt the need to do things by the book, his biggest failing according to Dhrex. 'I want it officially noted that I object to this operation.'

'So noted,' the Denobulan replied with a wave of his hand. 'Select three officers who most closely resemble Ynelavii civilians in height, weight and physical characteristics – but no bridge officers unless there is no other choice. I want to give the junior officers a chance to shine.'

'Even on such a dangerous mission?'

'Especially on such a dangerous mission.'

'Yes sir, I'll have a shortlist on your desk within the hour.'

'Take care of it, Commander. You want to sit in this chair some day, you'll have to be able to make the tough decisions.'

Banks sighed. Without Drummond to keep him on the straight and narrow, and Banks was now the only one who had a chance to keep it from going too far—not that he was doing a good job of it so far. 'Aye sir, I'll get right on it.'

It took almost two hours to actually get three crewmen willing to be surgically altered to pass as Ynelavii and another three to get the surgeries completed. Since giving the order, Dhrex had retired to his ready room and left Banks in charge, which wasn't too much of a chore since it was a small crew, but it was making the former tactical officer wonder if the Denobulan cut out for command. While the two officers and one crewman headed for the transporter room, Banks returned to the bridge to speak with his new captain.

'They're ready to beam down, sir.'

'Who have you chosen?'

'Ensign T'Larr, the exobiologist; Master Chief Petty Officer Elizabeth Banks, our transporter chief—and my wife—and Crewman James Chan, a warp specialist from the engineering team.'

'And they all fit the general parameters of Ynelavii people?'

'Closer than anyone else on board, sir.'

Dhrex nodded, the humour he had shown earlier had gone. 'Go and give your wife a hug before she leaves.'

'Sir, is there anything wrong?'

'You've noticed?'

Banks neglected to mention that all of the bridge crew had seen the change in his behaviour from when he ordered the entire Ynelavii archives returned to the office of the usurper and asking for this mission to go ahead to now. 'Yes sir.'

'While I was speaking with you I received a text to the console beside my chair, in a Denobulan encryption code which hasn't been used in over two hundred years. It was from my son and bypassed all the ship's communications and security protocols.'

Banks made a note to tighten them but kept his face neutral. 'What was it about, sir?'

'One of my wives, my first wife actually, Geesel, was aboard a civilian transport vessel heading for Deneb IV when it was destroyed by an unknown ship. My son sent me the sensor logs of the alien vessel hoping that I could tell him who killed his mother.'

'And?'

'The vessel is similar to that of Cha'lav battle cruisers, albeit smaller, possibly a scout of some kind.'

'So the Cha'lav are attacking elsewhere, have you informed Captain Logan?'

'I have, and they are sending the Corps of Engineers' ship *T'Pora* to

investigate.'

Banks opened his mouth to ask another question, why a Corps of Engineers' ship was being sent instead of a ship of the line, but realised that it was probably the closest ship and would do a more than adequate job of discovering the truth. Captain Scott had made sure that all the Corps of Engineers ships were fully staffed with very capable people.

'Aye sir, I'm sorry for your loss,' he replied, making a mental note to look at Denobulan wake customs.

'Go and give your wife a hug before she throws you out.'

Yes sir,' Banks said and left the ready room.

He didn't like sending his wife into danger on a mission he thought was foolhardy but it was the nature of the job.

Chapter Twelve

USS Pytheas

Kursican Triangle

Stardate 55333.4 (May 2, 2378)

Astar clutched the arms of her chair, making her knuckles white, as Larson manoeuvred the ship around another plasma eddy. According to the sensors, when they worked in this soup, the *Pytheas* was approaching the edge of the plasma storms and would soon enter the Triangle proper. The plasma storms were supposed to be thinning out, not getting worse. Two days of continuous piloting for the flight controllers was taking its toll and the fact that they had stayed at full alert status was not helping. She glanced to her left to see Commander Wright effortlessly maintaining his position and cursed him. He was a complete enigma to her and his service jacket was just as strange. It seemed that a little over eight years ago he inexplicably changed. Since then, a number of his former commanding officers had been killed and he had been the prime suspect in each one, but nothing could be proven and so he had been let go, but the question hung over his head like the proverbial Sword of Damocles.

'Captain, we're approaching the centre now,' Larson called as the plasma storms thinned from excessive to negligible in mere seconds.

Wright was looking at the console between them. 'Interesting. This region is far larger than the Triangle appear to be from outside the plasma storms. According to the sensors, the region contained within the plasma storms is almost eighteen cubic light years.'

'How is that possible?'

'I'm not sure,' Mahtani said, 'but my people are working on it.'

'Look at the subspace topography,' Larson turned away from the helm as the ship entered clear space. 'It's a mess. Overlapping areas of subspace have warped normal space.'

Astar stared at her helmsman. 'Planning on a switch to subspace science?'

He smiled. 'No sir, my father thought it best not only to learn how to pilot a starship, but also what allows one to fly at warp speeds.'

'Smart man,' she replied and turned to Mahtani. 'Well?'

'The six dimensions of subspace are so convoluted here, Captain, that I'm not even sure our warp drive will work. I'd like to run some tests before we go to warp.'

'Granted, get on it. I want astrometrics to give me a full picture of the Triangle as soon as possible. Commander,' she said turning her exec, 'I want this ship ready for anything. Gonzales, be on the lookout for anything, no matter how unusual.'

'Captain, I'm detecting a debris field two hundred billion kilometres ahead,' Gonzales frowned, 'also picking up metals and biological matter.'

'Larson, set a course, half impulse. Full sensors, send out the SPRA probes and go to yellow alert. Stand by on shields and weapons.'

'Aye sir,' Larson and Gonzales replied as one.

As the *Pytheas* effortlessly forged ahead deeper into the Triangle, Mahtani focused on the readouts in front of him. Astar noticed him watching her and held in a smile. She had broken the cardinal rule of workplace romances before, when she was a department head several years ago, and it had backfired badly. Her lover had been promoted over her and then dumped her, and she had transferred off the ship to continue up the ladder. Even though that wouldn't happen here, she was still weary of getting involved with anyone, at least until she had sorted out the numerous problems that her crew was stuck with.

'Lieutenant Talen, please make sure all damage control teams are on standby,' she said to him.

'Aye sir, damage control teams were put on standby when we went to yellow alert.'

'Good, I'd like you to coordinate them.'

'Aye sir,' he replied.

Astar walked across the bridge to talk to him, seeing his antennae drooping against his skull. 'Are you all right, Lieutenant? You have seemed a little down lately.'

'Our Sheltreth was unsuccessful, sir,' he muttered in a whisper. 'I am too far away so another has taken my place.'

She placed a hand on his shoulder. 'I'm sorry, Lieutenant. What will you do?'

'I don't know, sir. But it will have to wait until we return to the core worlds. I will have to take leave on Andor to determine my future.'

'Captain, we're approaching the debris field,' Larson said thankfully distracting her from the melancholy operations officer.

'Slow to one quarter impulse. What are the sensors telling us?' she asked as she retook her seat.

'What you are looking at, Captain,' Gonzales said as the viewscreen tightened on some of the debris, 'is at least three Cha'lav warships and their multispecies crews.'

Astar stared at the viewscreen and sighed. 'Are there any lifesigns?'

'None, sir.'

'Does it matter?' Wright asked. 'It isn't as if they would rescue us, except maybe for interrogation.'

'Commander, my ready room, now. Gonzales, you have the bridge. Begin a full investigation. I want to know where those ships came from and what happened to them. If their ship's databases are still intact I want them downloaded into a secure section of the computer core.'

'Aye sir,' Gonzales said and didn't wish to be the recipient of Astar's wrath at that moment.

'Captain, I am only voicing my opinion on the matter of their behaviour toward us.'

Astar narrowed her eyes. 'If you want to have this discussion out here, that's fine with me, Commander, although I suspect you'd much prefer to have it in private?'

'Yes sir,' Wright replied sourly.

'Good, then follow me.'

'Danny, can you get us in a little closer to that engineering hull fragment, it looks like there might be some atmosphere still contained over there,' Astar heard Gonzales say as she entered her ready room, closely followed by Wright, who looked like he was about to kill another commanding officer.

'What the hell are you thinking?' she asked him once the door closed.

'They sure as hell wouldn't help us, so why should we help them?'

'Because we're Starfleet. That's what we do. If you can no longer act like an officer in that uniform then I'll relieve you of duty right now,' she shot back.

'I was only voicing my opinion, Captain.'

'If I want your opinion, I'll ask for it.'

'Aye sir.'

Chapter Thirteen

Freighter *Gilgamesh*

Ramajuan Salvage Yards

Stardate 55336.1 (May 3, 2378)

Miles Murdoch was trapped.

An ion storm had caused a power surge in some of the derelicts and essentially magnetised their hulls, creating a barrier around his ship. He had no way to send a distress call through the ionised mess and even if he did it wasn't likely to be answered by anyone with any morality. Not in this part of space. He sighed and began scanning for the ship that his client wanted, if he was lucky it would be close by and he could get the parts he needed before anything else went wrong. The ship was of an unknown design, even to the Federation database, and the language was like nothing he had ever seen. His client had given him whatever information he had on the ship—or whatever he thought Murdoch should know—and told him to find a number of items on said ship that would allow him to increase his chances of winning a local election.

An insistent alert tone from the sensor display console gave Murdoch hope. One of the ionised ships was actually the one he was looking for. Murdoch had one cargo transporter on his freighter and one two-man personnel transporter and they were both top notch thanks to the upgrades Admiral Nechayev had authorised.

'Paul, you ready for a look-see on this ship?' he called out below.

'Let me get dressed. Be with you in two minutes.'

Grabbing a tricorder and phaser from a secured locker under the pilot's console, Murdoch headed for the transporter and by the time he got there, Marshall was ready. They materialised on the alien vessel and Murdoch noted that the language on the hull was exactly the same as that given to him by Dreno'L and he linked his tricorder to the *Gilgamesh's* hidden database provided him courtesy of Starfleet Intelligence.

According to the database, the language was one of the first encountered by the starship *Voyager* when it was hurled into the Delta Quadrant seven years before. It took a few minutes before the hidden database came back with an answer. The language belonged to the Ocampu, a telepathic species.

He looked at Marshall. 'Do you think he wants an Ocampo for the election?'

'Is there anyone even alive on this ship?'

He heard an echo in his mind and whirled round to face an empty corridor. Using the tricorder, he was able to determine that what he needed was in the engine room of this ship and proceeded carefully. Something on this ship wasn't as dead as it seemed to be and it was spooking him.

'Help me, Miles,' a voice called out in a whisper.

'Who's there?' he asked, his voice echoing along the empty corridor. Marshall gave him a strange look. 'I heard something.'

'Miles. Help me,' wailed the voice.

'Hello, is anyone there?' His shouts echoed down the corridor.

'Miles!'

'Who are you? What do you want from me?' he asked as he continued toward engineering.

'Why won't you help me, Miles?' a ghostly apparition appeared ahead of him.

'Who is that?' Marshall asked.

'My brother,' Murdoch replied and slumped to the floor.

He'd said goodbye to his brother years ago but his death still hurt. After some time, he pulled himself up and reached the engine room. The specific metallic signature they were looking for was essentially a small part of the ship's impulse engine and detached easily. With that in hand, Marshall went looking for the next part while Murdoch hunted for what he was sure was an Ocampo on board the ship. Marshall found the second item in the storage bay. With his treasure hunt two thirds completed, he headed to the bridge to download the ship's database while Murdoch continued to hunt for the person. Murdoch joined Marshall on the bridge and when the download was complete the bridge doors suddenly slid shut, trapping them.

The bridge suddenly came alive and appeared to be fully manned by

humanoids both male and female with Vulcan-like ears wearing military-style uniforms.

'Who are you?' a male asked, presumably the captain.

'You're not real, none of you are,' Murdoch answered. 'Show yourself.'

The figures disappeared and the bridge became as lifeless as it had been. A small figure emerged from an equally small hiding place. Murdoch squatted down to the young girl's height.

'Hi, my name's Miles. What's yours?'

'Linnis,' the girl muttered. 'Are you going to hurt me?'

Murdoch's features clouded for a moment. 'No,' he said, smiling. 'I'm going to help you.'

The girl smiled back and Murdoch held out his hand.

'Was it you making those people appear?'

She nodded. 'I was protecting myself from the bad men who killed my mummy and daddy.'

'I'll take you away from the bad men, I promise,' he said. 'Do you want to get anything to take with you?'

Linnis nodded, dashed behind the console and returned with a small crystal. 'I'm ready to go now.'

Murdoch to *Gilgamesh*, three to beam up.'

As soon as they were back aboard, Marshall checked the engines and pronounced them ready. 'You going to send a signal to Dreno'L?'

'I am, and I plan to take her with us when we deliver his parts. I think she is what he was really after.'

'I don't want to see the bad men,' she said, sniffing.

Murdoch picked her up and set her in a chair. 'If I am going to help you, I need

to know what the bad men want to do. Then I can stop them. I promise you won't get hurt.'

'Can I stay with you?'

The two men looked at each other and Marshall shrugged. 'For now, or course. But I will have to ask for my superior's permission to make it permanent.'

'All right,' she replied and smiled a little.

Murdoch piloted the ship away from the Ocampo vessel. 'Paul, see what you can dig up on the Ocampo. I think we might need to learn a lot about them.'

'Sure, was planning on that anyway.'

Chapter Fourteen

USS Pytheas

Kursican Triangle

Stardate 55338.9 (May 4, 2378)

Once again seated to the left of the captain, Lieutenant Commander Sheena Gonzales thought Commander Wright looked somewhat crestfallen. There was a fire in his eyes but he had stayed quiet the last day or so. She had no idea what had been said during their conversation in the ready room almost two days ago but Wright had barely interacted with the bridge crew since then. She, on the other hand, had been interacting with a great many of the crew. As the ship's second officer, she had been coordinating the different departments during their investigation of the Cha'lav wreckage. They had taken all the scans they could but the captain had forbidden them from beaming anything aboard. It was time for the next stage in the investigation but they had to prevent their latest findings first, and that meant bothering the captain.

'Are you ready?' Gonzales asked Mahtani who felt equally as apprehensive.

'She won't bite you,' Wright muttered as they passed. 'Her golden crew,' he added.

They ignored him and chimed the ready room.

'Enter.'

'Captain,' both said as they entered the ready room and stood before the desk.

'Do you have anything further since your last report?' Astar asked, looking up from her screen.

Their last report had been reporting no progress and she had dismissed them quickly.

'Yes sir,' Mahtani answered. 'Some of the energy signatures on the hull fragments have now been identified.'

'Well?'

Gonzales took over; it was her area of expertise. 'Initially, we believed the

scorching to be the result of weapons fire, but closer analysis of the burn patterns indicates something more akin to a bite.'

The captain suddenly focused on them with clear eyes. She looked from one to the other. 'Are you telling me that some creature bit the ships to pieces?'

Mahtani shook his head. 'No sir, we think that the creature exhibits similar behaviour to that of a Terran shark. It tests what it does not understand with its teeth since it has no nose to speak of. The Cha'lav probably fought back and the shark attacked them ferociously.'

'Surely someone would have seen something.'

'Not if it came out of subspace,' Mahtani replied.

'Would you mind explaining that?'

'Many people see space like an ocean and subspace like the hidden depths. This creature, let's call it a subspace shark, emerges from subspace to feed and saw the Cha'lav as food. The Cha'lav fight back, as live prey is wont to do, and the creature tries to devour it.'

Astar sighed. 'Do you have any evidence to back up this theory?'

'Only anecdotal, sir,' Gonzales answered.

'Explain.'

'Cadet Jenak mentioned the Manxome, and Rashal also mentioned a creature like this. It appears to be a common myth among the local space-faring races.'

Astar nodded, not entirely convinced. 'What do you want to do now?'

'We'd like to take the *Onizuka* to the debris field and beam a section of scorched hull on board,' Gonzales said. 'You did say you didn't want it aboard the *Pytheas*.'

Astar leaned back and folded her arms. 'Alright, you can take the Flyer. But I don't want you taking any unnecessary risks. Have Larson pilot the ship. Before you leave, however, I want to convene the senior staff and listen to our guests' anecdotes about this creature.'

'Aye sir.'

'Dismissed.'

Less than ten minutes later they were all convened in the situation lounge to the rear of the bridge. Rashal and Cadet Jenak stood behind the captain's chair and seemed content to wait for their turn, and although Rashal looked calm, Gonzales knew that he was not.

'Now that you have all heard the best theory the science team has come up with, I want you to hear the...mythological side of the argument and decide for yourselves whether they match up to the facts or not. Rashal, Jenak, please tell us what you know.'

At Rashal's urging, Jenak spoke first. 'My people have a story to scare trader children about a giant creature that emerges from under-space and eats them if they're naughty. A similar myth evolved from the traders themselves when they returned from the Triangle, citing incidents of a creature attacking their hulls, causing electromagnetic disturbances and then leaving them alone.'

'Did any of those traders return to the Triangle?' Mahtani asked, making notes.

'Not that I'm aware of. I believe they felt it to be too dangerous.'

'The electromagnetic disturbances do tally, Captain,' Mahtani replied.

'Rashal?'

'I do not believe there is much that I can add, Captain. The Eeroth believe the creature to be ship-killer, destroying any vessel that enters its territory. But we are a far more aggressive people than the Ynelavii and would assign proportionately more violent motives to the creature.'

'I would still like to take the *Onizuka*, Captain,' Gonzales said. 'Close scans may reveal a weakness in the hull alloys that we could exploit. It could give us a decided tactical advantage in our next confrontation.'

'Lieutenant Parker, what do you think?' Astar asked the security chief much to Gonzales' surprise.

'We need every advantage we can get and this could be an...unprecedented

opportunity—and one which we might not get again—to examine their technology close-up.'

'What about the ship we captured?' Gonzales asked.

'There is no telling what might happen to that vessel now that Starfleet Tactical has it. But we can learn something that could help us survive longer in a battle with them. They seem to adapt quickly to our manoeuvres and our shields don't hold up as long as they could.'

'I have a theory about that,' Xeris said and Astar turned to look at him.

'Well?'

'In the twenty-second century, Earth Starfleet had no shielding and relied upon polarising their hull plating. I believe that we could strengthen the hull by polarising our own hull plating and having this work in conjunction with the shields. If the shields fail and the creature attempts to bite us, we can reverse the polarity on the plating and shock the creature.'

Astar nodded. 'Prep the Flyer for launch and make any necessary modifications you need for the polarisation; Dismissed.'

Chapter Fifteen

Flyer *Onizuka*

Kursican Triangle

Stardate 55340.3 (May 5, 2378)

Lieutenant Commander Xeris had bullied and cajoled every last joule of energy from his engineering team to get the modifications made to the Flyer and had pronounced it ready twelve hours after the captain gave the order to do it. Larson had nominated Ensign Margaret Benson to take the helm of the modified shuttle since she came from a world which had somehow managed to survive the continual subspace battering from the nearby Hekaras system and had grown up piloting shuttles on subspace eddies. She was the best woman for the job. Lieutenant Mahtani and Lieutenant Commander Gonzales rounded out the team since it had been their idea. As the shuttle launched, Xeris beamed aboard against the captain's orders.

'What the hell are you doing?' Gonzales asked, shooting her off-and-on lover a scolding glare.

'If something goes wrong with the modifications you're going to need someone who can fix it on the fly and there is no one better qualified for that than me,' the chief engineer replied as he took the remaining seat in the cockpit, at the rear where he could observe all aspects of the shuttle's status.

'Fine, but don't get in the way,' Mahtani said from the starboard station as he entered a sequence of commands into the main computer.

Gonzales shushed his outburst with another of her glares and he turned away from her. 'We're approaching the densest part of the subspace topography.'

'I can feel it,' Benson replied as the *Onizuka* shuddered. 'This is nothing compared to back home. I don't know how the Cha'lav are able to navigate through this, I thought their hulls were weaker than ours.'

'Maybe these ships have a new alloy,' Mahtani suggested as they neared the closest wreck. 'I'm detecting the standard alloys you would expect from their technology, but there is something else. I'm really going to need a sample of this.'

'What have you got?' Gonzales asked.

'Some kind of liquid metal alloy that flows between two solid hull layers. I've only seen something like this once before.'

'Please, don't tell me you actually believe that story?' Gonzales muttered.

'It has been backed up through scientific analysis, Commander,' Xeris replied. 'Two hundred years ago, Commander Tucker—the chief engineer of the NX-class *Enterprise*—encountered a vessel with a similar hull alloy configuration, but it had come from the thirty-first century. Even Earth Starfleet Command disbelieved him until the Vulcans reluctantly confirmed the analysis. No one has seen anything like this since. Perhaps we're looking at another Temporal War brewing.'

'That's enough,' Gonzales said. 'Mahtani, beam a fragment of that stuff into the aft compartment behind a level ten forcefield. I don't want any surprises.'

'Aye sir, locking on to a fragment one point three metres squared.'

'Energise,' she ordered.

As soon as the fragment was aboard, both Mahtani and Xeris headed for the aft compartment leaving the two women in the cockpit.

'How do you put up with him, sir?'

Gonzales sighed. 'Is nothing a secret on that ship?'

'It is quite obvious.'

'I see. I put with him by virtue of telling him to shut up when he gets too involved in a subject.'

'*Commander, you'd better see this,*' Mahtani said over the com.

'I'm on my way,' she replied and gasped when she reached the aft compartment. 'Is that what I think it is?'

'No, sir.'

'Explain?'

'What you're looking at is a non-sentient liquid metal lifeform that resembles

a Changeling.'

'You're saying it isn't self-aware?'

'It's trying to escape, purely a defence mechanism.'

'And the Cha'lav harnessed this lifeform?'

'Domesticated it, like a horse,' Xeris added.

'Can it survive in space?'

'It goes into a dormant state,' Mahtani answered. 'But it doesn't help us figure anything out.'

'Commander, there's a subspace rift opening,' Benson screeched.

'Coming,' Gonzales replied.

The three bridge officers quickly reached their seats in the cockpit and began running scans.

'I can't hold the ship on course,' Benson said as the Flyer bucked wildly. The red alert klaxons sounded their tone and the lighting changed to reflect the ship's danger level. Visible ahead of them, a massive eruption started, spewing energy like a geyser from subspace. Whatever the Cha'lav had been doing, whatever they had been fighting, had weakened the space-subspace barrier to the point of non-existence.

'Get us out of here, Ensign,' Gonzales ordered.

'I'm trying, but the impulse engines are sluggish.'

'Xeris?'

'Working on it.'

'Work faster.'

'What the hell—?'

A plasma streamer, of the same type that existed at the edge of the Triangle,

suddenly appeared and spiralled toward the Flyer. 'It's heading right for us.'

'No, it's heading for the liquid metal. Beam it off the ship,' Xeris ordered.

'Too late,' Mahtani said as the plasma streamer hit them.

The Flyer careened out of control, spinning uncontrollably as the streamer faded and the rift closed. Benson, clutching her console like a lifeline, had been staring out of the front window and saw what looked like a giant snake rise out of subspace and then vanish again.

'Everybody alright?' Gonzales asked.

'Fine,' Xeris replied, 'but Mahtani is out cold,' the engineer added as he crouched by the prone scientist.

'Benson, what's our status?'

When the pilot didn't answer, Gonzales stumbled to the forward console and grabbed hold.

'I've never seen anything like it.'

Gonzales was about to ask when she saw the playback from the external visual sensors. 'Is that the Manxome?'

'It would appear that way, Commander.'

'How are we doing, Ensign?'

'Not good, sir. The warp and impulse engines are offline, shields are down and we have no weapons. Life support is on emergency power and I'm not sure if the distress beacon is working.'

'Don't worry about that, if Astar doesn't hear from us in the next ten minutes she'll bring the ship in closer to pick us up. Can you use the manoeuvring thrusters to get us clear of the debris field?'

'What debris field?' Benson replied. 'Whatever that subspace rift was, it totally obliterated the Cha'lav hulks.'

'Xeris, do we still have the hull fragment on board?'

'We do, why?'

'It's the only piece we have to work with. How's Jamal?'

'Slight concussion but he'll be fine.'

'Astar will be by to pick us up shortly, we're in no condition to do anything but sit around.'

'Care to help me with further analysis?'

'Gladly.'

Chapter Sixteen

USS Independence

New Resoto

Stardate 55343.2 (May 6, 2378)

Captain Sintina Aurelia ground her teeth as the foul-smelling canine aliens growled and barked at each other in the conference lounge aboard her ship. Since the genocide on their homeworld, the remaining Resoto had returned to ancient tradition and reformed their hunting packs. While Captain Logan, on the orders of Admiral Ranar, had tasked her with making sure that the rest of the Resoto weren't wiped out by the Cha'lav, she thought that this mission would be best served by getting them to work together. It wasn't as easy as it had seemed at first and Lieutenant Kimula was smirking in the corner. Bin Nadal was doing his duty as exec on the bridge—and complaining about sitting around—while she was trying to herd the packs into a mutually-beneficial treaty.

'Enough!' she bellowed and even Kimula's smirk vanished. 'What is wrong with all of you? Do you really think that the Cha'lav care if you hunt in packs or individually? Do you think they will save the stronger packs? They don't and they won't. Their only goal is to finish the job they started. If you don't work together they will kill you all and there will be no Resoto to continue your traditions. In a few centuries no one will even remember your race.'

'You would say that, Starfleet. You are no match for the Cha'lav in this puny vessel and you will be the first to be destroyed.'

Sintina smiled and Kimula recognised it as trouble. She pushed off from the corner to aid the Resoto leader against her own captain but Sintina held up her hand, motioning for the counsellor to stay where she was. 'I may be destroyed, but I will have died protecting you and fulfilling my mission in the eyes of my superiors. Whether you want to protect yourselves against such a threat is quite frankly immaterial to me, I will do my duty. I had hoped that you would recognise the fact that your very existence is in danger of being destroyed, but since you don't care you can all get off my ship and return to your packs.'

Two security guards who had stood by the doors stepped forward to escort the Resoto pack leaders back to the transporter room when the red alert klaxons sounded. '*Captain Aurelia to the bridge,*' bin Nadal called with urgency in his voice.

Aurelia left the security guards to do their jobs and almost sprinted for the bridge. She skidded to a stop when the doors parted and she saw the image on the viewscreen. 'Raise the shields as soon as the Resoto are off the ship. Send a message to *Starbase 535* and advise them that a spatial rift has opened at New Resoto.'

'Signal sent,' Lieutenant Jonin Faltyne, the tactical officer replied. 'Phasers and torpedoes are standing by.'

'Why the hell didn't we detect it with the sensor modifications?'

'Spatial rifts are notorious for playing havoc with sensors,' bin Nadal answered. 'All the Resoto are off the ship. They're moving away into a defensive position around the planet.'

'Leaving us as the first line of defence,' Aurelia muttered.

Bin Nadal glanced at the dedication plaque. 'We are the ones we've been waiting for,' he murmured.

Aurelia turned to face the plaque. 'I wish we could have kept our own dedication.'

'This will have to do,' bin Nadal and turned to face the viewscreen. His narrowed to slits and he turned to his commanding officer.

Aurelia nodded.

'Open a channel to the Cha'lav fleet.'

'Channel open.'

'This is Commander bin Nadal of the Federation starship *Independence*. This is sovereign territory of the Resoto. Leave now and you will be spared. There will be no further warning.'

Aurelia smiled. 'What happened to diplomacy?'

'This is gunboat diplomacy.'

'No response from the Cha'lav.'

'We're not going to be the first to open fire. We'll act in self defence only.'

'Incoming!' Faltyne yelled as the ship bucked. 'Shields are at ninety-six percent.'

Bin Nadal turned to Aurelia. 'Captain?'

'They were warned. Return fire, all weapons. Aim for their weapons and engines. Ensign Weston, get us in range to do significant damage.'

'Aye sir; engaging evasive manoeuvre Weston-six.'

'He comes highly recommended,' Aurelia told her exec when he looked up in surprise.

The *Independence* headed straight for the lead Cha'lav cruiser, spiralling wildly as it got close and then the phasers and torpedoes were loosed, impacting the enemy shields at a consistent barrage.'

'Their shields are weakening, and we're too close for their weapons to do any damage.'

'Receiving an incoming message, from the Resoto,' bin Nadal said in surprise.

'Let's hear it.'

'Captain, I thank you on behalf of the Resoto Council. We will protect our new homeworld.'

'With all due respect, Councillor, it is my mission to protect you lest the Cha'lav succeed in killing the rest of you.'

The Resoto leader laughed. 'I thank you for your concern but as you can see, we have some help.'

'Captain, I'm reading six Ynelavii vessels approaching at high warp,' Faltyne said with surprise. 'And eleven more vessels of various sizes, all unidentified.'

'Well I'll be,' Aurelia muttered as the Ynelav ships dropped out of warp. 'I guess the military aren't dealing with the coup directly. Back us off, but not too far. We should remain on station in case we're needed.'

'The Ynelavii seem to have things in hand,' bin Nadal said as two Cha'lav vessels—one of which they had severely dented the shields on—exploded. 'The Cha'lav have no idea what hit them.'

'The Cha'lav are learning about cooperation. I just hope that some are left alive to take the results back home.'

'It looks like you might be getting your wish, Captain,' Weston replied at the helm. 'The rift is closing and the remaining ships are retreating.'

'You got through to them,' Kimula said.

Aurelia looked at the counsellor. 'Maybe, but I think they realised that they had to band together to defeat a common enemy. When the Cha'lav have been defeated they may well go back to their old ways.'

'Perhaps, but for now it looks like the Ynelavii Cooperative just gained another member,' Kimula replied.

'Score one for Starfleet,' Weston said dryly.

Chapter Seventeen

Starfleet staging ground

Ynelav IV

Stardate 55343.8 (May 6, 2378)

Ensign T'Larr, one of only two Vulcans aboard the *Weisskopf*, had been chosen for this ill-conceived mission because of two reasons; she was the exobiologist on board the small starship and her physique was close to that of the general populace of Ynelav. She'd vocalised her objections to the mission and her objections had been noted and ignored, which was not unusual. Most humanoid species did not like being told when they were wrong or choosing the wrong path. Captain Dhrex wanted to learn more about the Ynelavii and since he had been ordered to stay off world during the civil war he could not, and as such had therefore resorted to subterfuge. This planet was totally unlike Vulcan in that it had excessive amounts of rainfall, especially in the area chosen for their primary base – on the slopes of the largest mountain range on the continent. In the last seven days they had ventured into the local village and learned that while the coup had been successful, loyalists were fighting back and the people were being slowly swayed by the loyalist propaganda machine. Starfleet might be officially back within the week, she privately mused.

T'Larr glanced at her companions as they moved closer to the cave mouth that was a secret entrance to the reliquary which held Ynelav's most sacred relics. Chief Banks and Crewman Chan were both dressed as she was in muted tunics the colour of dust which hid her true form. They had originally dressed as peasants but since T'Larr decided to enter the reliquary, they had acquired the robes of acolytes so that they might move freely among the tyros and priests. It was bad enough that they were on this world with minimal backup, but worst of all was the fact that they could not even bring their tricorders, only their communicators, so reading any scrolls written more than five or six thousand years ago would prove difficult at best. Lieutenant Renn provided with a full translation of everything she managed to create before the coup and T'Larr spent the night before the mission going over it line by line. She now believed herself fully conversant in the old language—up to six thousand years ago. Crewman James Chan was taking point and halted just inches from the cave mouth.

He held up his hand and T'Larr stopped immediately. Banks stopped a fraction of a second later, but not before bumping into the Vulcan. Chan's eyesight was far more suited to the dusty cavern, having spent much of his

life in the caves of Mars, and it was for this reason alone that T'Larr allowed him to take point. His reliance on old military hand signals was bizarre but they seemed to work, marginally better than the Starfleet ones—she would have to inform her superiors of this, since Starfleet seemed to be more and more involved in ground combat these past few years—even to the point of resurrecting the Starfleet Marine Corps of a century ago specifically for that purpose. Chan disappeared into the cave and then emerged a few moments later.

'We'll be safe inside, the Militia loyal to Furan have herded the priests and everyone else into a holding centre back in the village.'

'Is it likely they will escape and return to the reliquary?'

'Not unless they have help from the Loyalists, but from what I've seen the Loyalists are having enough trouble just holding on to their lives.'

T'Larr raised an eyebrow. 'The rebellion is winning?' she asked, surprised at how humans had the ability to capitalise words and bring that out in their annunciation of said word.

'For the moment.'

'The Seer is the only person on Ynelav who can prevent the rebellion from winning,' the Vulcan replied.

'How so?' Banks asked.

'According to Ynelavii legend, the Seer will unite all the people of Ynelav under a common banner. Perhaps our investigations in the reliquary will provide us with the answer we need to assist them.'

'What happened to "this is an ill-conceived mission"?''

'This is an ill-conceived mission but that does not mean that it cannot be a success.'

'That's the spirit, T'Larr!' Chan said in a whisper.

'We'd better get started if we want to be out of here before the priests get free, with or without the Loyalists' help,' Banks said.

'You think they might?' Chan asked, his expression suddenly crestfallen.

'The Bajorans did without any outside help.'

'Other than the Prophets.'

'Hmm,' T'Larr responded, thinking of an interesting paper she could write on that very subject. 'Let us proceed.'

Chan led the way into the cave system and she followed him with Banks taking up the rear through several passageways and caverns until they reached the main reliquary, where thousands of sacred artefacts were stored on shelves and in powered cases of some kind.

'Their level of technology is impressive,' T'Larr said, 'considering how they choose to display their technology.'

'This is not their technology,' Banks said and T'Larr turned to look.

There was a computer console in the corner of the room which was eminently familiar to them, but quite unfamiliar at the same time. Of the three, only T'Larr knew what she was looking at and made a mental note to contact the *Weisskopf* as soon as they left the cavern. A theory was developing that might explain the technological advancement in some areas and not in others, precisely the same areas as another race in the Alpha Quadrant. A closer inspection of the cases revealed that they too were constructed of the same alloy from which the console was.

'How long has all this been here?' Chan asked.

'I would rather ask the question, what is it doing here?' Banks muttered.

'Approximately three centuries,' T'Larr answered. 'I cannot answer your query as to what this technology is doing in this place, although it might explain why Subcommander Sokal has been enjoying the hospitality of *Starbase 535*.'

'Why do you say that?' Chan asked.

'What you see are the remains of a Romulan warbird, a quantum reading of - 230306, the Earth year 2092, prior to Earth's first encounter with them.'

Chapter Eighteen

Space Ministry

Xyril City

Stardate 55344.5 (May 6, 2378)

Deputy Commissioner Dreno'L smiled in smug satisfaction as the human freighter captain and his friend arrived with his cargo. The parts were going to be used to build a prototype space vehicle capable of taking a Xyrillian anywhere he or she wanted to go without the use of the engines that the species had used for the last two centuries. Their own warp propulsion was still primitive and the scientists on the homeworld were reluctant to upgrade it because it did work. The only problem was that it broke down far too often and the Xyrillian crew had to covertly or overtly hitch rides in order to get the engines working again. As his assistant ushered Miles Murdoch and Paul Marshall into the office, Dreno'L saw a young girl holding the Murdoch's hand. She looked to be about ten years old, although he knew that was subjective, since different species matured at different speeds.

'Mister Murdoch, I'm so glad you were able to procure my merchandise. The gold-pressed latinum is being transferred to your ship as we speak.'

'Your merchandise is being taken to the hangar as you requested,' Murdoch replied, eyeing the Xyrillian with suspicion.

'You didn't need to come here to tell me that.'

'Did you know that this little girl was on board still?'

'I thought all had perished, or so the last report stated. I will speak with the patrol captain.'

Murdoch smiled. 'There's no need for that, Commissioner. You and I both know what happened aboard that ship a few months ago.'

Dreno'L kept his face neutral as Murdoch told him a story, no doubt from the little girl's perspective, about a group of raiders attacking the ship and killing its crew when they refused to cooperate. He looked at the girl, such a slip of a thing, and realised that neither she nor Murdoch would be a problem if his plan made it to fruition. The girl tugged at Murdoch's tunic and he stopped telling the story, kneeling down for her to whisper into his ear.

'Linnis thinks that you're putting a bomb on board my ship. Are you?'

Dreno'L knew his face betrayed him and could do nothing about it when he saw the realisation on the human's face.

'She's the real reason you wanted me to get those parts isn't she? You knew there was a survivor and you knew that she wouldn't let any of your men near her. So you hired me to do your dirty work.'

'Very astute,' the Commissioner replied, abandoning his pretence. 'Since you know about the bomb I suppose you'll call the authorities. I must warn you, they will ignore you after a cursory examination reveals nothing.'

'Linnis has some very interesting gifts, Commissioner,' Murdoch replied. 'Somehow I doubt that I'll be having any trouble from you.'

'What can that little thing do?' he sneered.

'What were you planning to do with us?' a voice said behind him and he turned to face an adult female who looked like Linnis and wore a military uniform of some kind.

'Who are you? How did you get in here?'

'Did you want our ship? Our minds? What was it you heard about us?' another voice said, this one male, as he advanced on the commissioner.

'I wasn't going to do anything with you,' he answered, scrabbling backward. 'It was all the patrol captain's fault.'

'What was?' the woman asked as she walked toward him.

'Our engines are out of date, we needed something new. Your minds can help us!' he said, trying to regain his dignity as the two soldiers continued to advance from different directions. 'You would have been handsomely rewarded.'

'I think he's had enough, Linnis,' Murdoch said as Dreno'L sank to the floor and began moaning.

'He's a bad man,' the Ocampan replied.

'Yes, he is,' Murdoch agreed. 'But if you hurt him, you become just like him. Your parents wouldn't want that, would they?'

Linnis looked up at him and shook her head.

The apparitions vanished and Dreno'L looked up. 'What happened?'

'I told you she had some interesting gifts.'

'Then I will use her for the ship!' he said, regaining his equilibrium.

'How? What exactly can the Ocampa do?'

'Their minds are so powerful. They can guide me anywhere, and they can do it fast.'

'How do you know that?'

'One of my colleagues found a ship adrift and experimented on them,' the commissioner replied as he returned to his desk. 'I'm just continuing his work.'

'Not anymore you're not. I'll tell the police here everything you've just told me.'

'You won't get that far,' he said and pulled a Klingon disruptor pistol from his desk.

'Linnis, I think we should leave.'

'I can hurt the pistol,' she replied, looking up at Murdoch.

'How?'

'Like this.'

Nothing happened.

'Hah!' Dreno'L replied and pressed the firing stud.

Nothing happened.

'Goodbye, Commissioner,' Murdoch headed for the door.

'Security!' Dreno'L called. Two Xyrillians reached the doors as Murdoch did. 'Arrest them,' he added, waving the disruptor around.

The Xyrillians raised their own pistols and pointed them at the Commissioner.

'These people are unarmed, Commissioner. Were you going to shoot them?'

'It's not working, an antique, see,' he retorted and shot the guard in the chest.

As the first guard collapsed with a smouldering burn, the second fired at the commissioner.

Linnis buried her face in Murdoch's leg, crying.

'I can hear him dying,' she said of the guard.

'So can I,' Murdoch replied. 'Come on, I want you to meet some friends of mine who can help you.'

'Sir, please wait. We need to take statements from you both.'

'You can take a statement from me, not from her,' he replied gently. 'She's already traumatised from the loss of her parents.'

The guard nodded and pulled out a padd. 'Where are you based?'

'*Starbase 535*, and I shall be heading directly there once we are finished. You will find a number of parts from her parents' ship in the hangar where my ship is berthed, the *Gilgamesh*. I was hired to steal them by the Commissioner for use in what I gather was an illegal project.'

The guard said nothing as he took all the information down. 'Everything's going to be all right,' he said to the girl. 'You can leave now, Mister Murdoch. I'll deal with this. Thank you for your cooperation.'

Chapter Nineteen

USS *Pytheas*

Kursican Triangle

Stardate 55345.1 (May 6, 2378)

Captain Astar knew that the recovered hull fragment was important in some way, but she wasn't sure how. Even if she took the nonsense about the twenty-second century's temporal cold war at face value, there was no way she was going to believe that the Cha'lav had been pulling the strings. It was just as likely that wherever their homeworld was, in whatever galaxy it was in, had this alloy in abundant supply or was manufactured by their space industry. Though the Astar symbiont had lived several lifetimes, and had the collective memories of those lifetimes, Leza knew that there was much she didn't know. This compelled her to learn, and right now her entire complement of science personnel was working on one of two problems. The first was the hull fragment, but the second was the most important to her. The *Onizuka*'s sensors had picked up something but the resulting visuals were too distorted. It was these visuals that the science team and the engineers were working on, and had been for some time. The *Pytheas* was holding position at the edge of what had been the debris field until Astar was certain that whatever the shuttle's sensors picked up was not harmful to them in any way.

'Captain, you may cease hovering,' Mahtani said with an almost Vulcan tone. 'We've cleared up the distortions as best we can. Watch this.'

Astar's eyes widened as she saw the images on the screen. 'Is that what I think it is?'

'Yes sir, it is,' Mahtani replied, sitting at the science console on the bridge, forward of the Ops console. 'It is the same creature we believe destroyed the Cha'lav fleet. Our "subspace shark."'

'What of the data? Have you been able to reconstruct it?'

The science officer nodded. 'The creature which the *Onizuka* picked up is smaller than the one we detected, about a third of the size, but still almost a kilometre long.'

'A baby?'

'Probably, but we can't be a hundred percent sure without further analysis.'

'Does the creature pose a danger to the ship?'

'I don't believe so, but I recommend not exceeding warp four while in the Triangle. Any faster than that and the creature will be drawn to our subspace wake.'

'Very well,' she said and turned toward the helm. 'Larson, set a course for the far side of the Triangle, warp three point seven.'

'Aye sir, three point seven; course laid in.'

'Engage.'

'Captain, I believe there is a growing problem within the Triangle,' Gonzales said.

'Go on,' Astar replied.

'I've been getting updated readings of the subspace topography from Commander Wright in astrometrics and I believe I have found a reason why the Cha'lav chose this sector as their staging ground.'

'Well?'

'The Cha'lav vessels seem to be more at home in subspace and this allows them to travel between galaxies much faster than they could in normal space, due to the subspace eddies. The Kursican Triangle has a very weak barrier between normal space and subspace and this allowed the Cha'lav to break through easily. Because of the complicated topography, it also means that the Triangle's subspace regions are coiled like a DNA protein string, curving in and around itself, so that where tears or ripples occur, we're likely to get plasma storms.'

'Oh,' Mahtani added in response.

'Is that a problem?' Astar asked, not being of a scientific bent.

'Yes sir, it means that if the barrier weakens enough, we'll get a giant subspatial rift, something typical of a subspace weapon much like what caused the Tomed Incident, but on a much larger scale. This entire sector could be ripped asunder.'

'Is there any way to repair the barrier?'

'We could, but we'd be sacrificing the shark's species to death. It might live in subspace, but it needs to emerge in normal space every now and then, like a dolphin.'

'Alright, putting aside the fact that we might be sentencing a species to extinction, can you find a way of repairing the barrier in the Triangle? Once you've worked that out, perhaps you can work out a way to save the sharks as well.'

'It is possible that the plasma storms could do our jobs for us.'

'In what way?'

'We could deliberately open the weakest points and then, because the plasma needles are drawn to them, they would kind of suture the tear closed. It would stabilise the region and still leave enough weak points for the sharks to emerge. One possible reason for the major weak points could be the Cha'lav presence opening their rifts, both inside and outside of the Triangle.'

'I like it, set up a way of doing so and bring me a solution by the end of the day. The sooner we reach Eeroth, the better for all of us.'

'Aye sir,' Mahtani and Gonzales said.

'We'll need to coordinate with astrometrics to find the weakest points,' Mahtani added.

'Get on it,' Astar ordered. As her tactical and science officers entered the turbolift, Astar had a sudden thought and asked them to wait. 'How can we detect these weak points?'

'Tetryon particles only exist in subspace. They become erratic and unstable when in normal space. Since the *Enterprise-D* and *Voyager* had run-ins with several subspace phenomena, both shields and sensors were enhanced to detect and protect against them,' Gonzales answered. 'If we detect a large concentration of tetryon particles, we know we've found a weak spot.'

'Helm, find us some tetryons,' Astar ordered as the turbolift doors closed on her officers.

She stared at the viewscreen and wondered whether anything they did here would make a difference. Although they had been dealing the Cha'lav serious blows, it didn't seem to make any difference. They just kept coming. She was beginning to think that the only way to prevent this war from occurring was to either destroy every Cha'lav ship that appeared in the galaxy (which wasn't going to be easy if they appeared outside allied space) or to take the battle to them and enter their own territory—perhaps even convincing them that this galaxy didn't pose a threat, but she couldn't see that happening, not anymore.

Chapter Twenty

Observation Deck

Starbase 535

Stardate 55345.7 (May 7, 2378)

Miles Murdoch sat in one of the comfortable chairs placed in groups of two to four dotted across this section of the observation deck that ringed the top of the starbase. With her hands on the windows, Linnis stared out at the vista spread before and neither noticed Captain Logan until he sat down beside the Intelligence officer. Murdoch tore his gaze away from his new charge and glanced at the starbase's commander.

'They said no?'

'Actually, they said yes, with one proviso.'

'Which is?'

'That you let Admiral Janeway speak with her on Earth when you get back.'

'Why would she want to speak with her?'

'Janeway had an Ocampa on board *Voyager* for three years.'

'I thought I was the last of my kind,' Linnis said and climbed into Murdoch's lap.

'Hundreds of your people live across the other side of the galaxy,' Logan told her, 'but we don't know how to get you there.'

The young girl looked thoughtful for a moment and then shrugged. 'I don't need to go there. Miles will look after me.'

Murdoch smiled. 'Am I required back on Earth immediately?'

Logan shook his head. 'There was no time frame specified. I would like you here as my eyes and ears on the frontier. With the *Pytheas* off on a humanitarian mission and the *Weisskopf* watching the Ynelavii civil war, I have only the *Independence* watching for Cha'lav encroachment, along with the Romulans and Klingons. I need someone to tell me what the colonies are thinking, and since you'll be heading out that way tomorrow, I think you can

do that job for me.'

'What's happening with the Cha'lav?'

'They seem to be using this sector as a staging ground for a war against our galaxy. I don't know why this particular region of space, but I do know that we can't allow them to gain a foothold in the quadrant like the Dominion did. The Cha'lav are far worse and from the information we've been able to decrypt from their database, they have done this in several other galaxies and been entirely successful. I'd like to see them lose for once.'

Murdoch nodded, making a mental of everything for his employer. 'If word got out to their other subject worlds, it might foment rebellion. A concerted effort on so many fronts would weaken them to the point of impotency.'

'A good plan, I'll suggest it to Admiral Ranar.'

Murdoch looked down and saw that Linnis had fallen asleep.

'Maybe you should get her to bed,' Logan suggested.

Murdoch lifted the slight young girl from his lap. 'I think that's a good idea. Once she's in bed I'll oversee the loading of the *Gilgamesh*.'

'She might wonder where you are if she wakes up. If her telepathic abilities are as strong as you say, we might not want her broadcasting too loudly.'

'She seems to have a large measure of control.'

'You should know that she is not like other Ocampa. Admiral Janeway has had the opportunity to study her blood work with *Voyager*'s EMH who's now at the Federation Research Institute.'

'What did they find?'

'Standard Ocampa lifespans are eight to nine years, but according to hers, her expected lifespan is almost triple that.'

Linnis stirred slightly but settled against Murdoch's shoulder. 'Is there any reason for that?'

'None that they could detect in her genetic structure. Her people haven't been

genetically engineered, but their mental abilities might go some way to explaining that.'

'What am I taking to the colonies?' Murdoch asked, changing the subject to something more palatable.

'Weapons,' the commander replied and Logan sighed. 'If the Cha'lav land ground troops, I want the colonies ready to defend themselves. Every freighter that docks here will be loaded with weapons and emergency supplies.'

'So we're preparing for a war? I thought all that was behind us?'

'So did I, Mister Murdoch, so did I.'

'I just hope that Captain Astar can do what she set out to do, whatever that is.'

Logan glanced around but realised they were still mostly alone in this corner of the deck. 'Astar is returning an alien to his people and hoping that she can do so before the Cha'lav have a chance to destroy his homeworld as they did to the Resoto.'

'If she fails?'

'Then the Cha'lav have a foothold. She can't fail.'

'Where did she go?'

'Through the Kursican Triangle.'

'I've heard bad stories about that place.'

'So have I, but it is the only route to reach the alien's homeworld.'

'Let us hope that she's able to complete her mission and get back here before the Cha'lav decide to attack us.'

'I would think that that possibility is some time off. They don't have any allies in this part of space and the few ships that they have sent have been destroyed or crippled.'

'Score one for us. All they would have to do is open a large enough rift and

sent a big fleet through, unless there's a limit to the size.'

'I'll have my science team take a look at the database and see if they can figure that out.'

'Good idea, I'll get back to my job,' Murdoch replied and headed towards his quarters.

As he carried Linnis, who was fairly light considering her size, he thought about what his life would have been like had he not been chosen by Admiral Nechayev straight from the Academy for intelligence work. He graduated third in his class and would have had the pick of any assignment in the fleet. Knowing his proclivities he would have chosen a post on a remote world that may once have been home to another race, since archaeology was his first love. He decided on Starfleet as a career only because he wanted to know more about the universe, but he had found a home among people as like-minded as himself.

He entered his quarters and saw Paul asleep. Placing Linnis gingerly on the couch in their shared quarters, he stripped off and joined his lover in bed, thinking happy thoughts.

Chapter Twenty-One

Operation Cobalt Headquarters

Utopia Planitia

Stardate 55345.9 (May 7, 2378)

Admiral Andrew Ranar felt restrained as he waited for his shuttle to reach Berth 1864. He needed to pace to release the pent up energy that being an admiral caused. He sometimes thought that accepting the promotion was a mistake, but the losses to the Admiralty from the Breen attack were still keenly felt and he was a good tactician. He was asked to take over a particularly sensitive mission that Starfleet Command had named "Cobalt" for some obscure reason and he had read all the classified files on the Cha'lav. It wasn't much.

From a time-travelling lieutenant to an invasion from beyond the galaxy, it all sounded like a bad holonovel but the reports that kept flooding in from the Kursican sector assured him that this was not so. The Cha'lav were a dangerous enemy, to be sure, but if Command granted his wish then he was sure that Starfleet would be assured victory, unlike their future counterparts who were most likely all dead or knew nothing because of the changes in the timeline. He had a rudimentary knowledge of time travel and what he didn't know he had learned from those that did. Even the smallest changes in the past could lead to catastrophic results in the future but in this case, that was a good thing. The Federation of the future had all but collapsed because of a prolonged centuries-long war with the Cha'lav and in a last-ditch effort to stave off disaster, they had sent a woman back through time to prevent the enemy from gaining their foothold.

Unfortunately, someone else had also travelled back and while the Andorian was currently being hunted both covertly and overtly by Starfleet and the Federation, there was no way to know what damage she had already wrought. Ranar hoped that if Captain Astar could deal the Cha'lav a bad enough blow, it would give Lieutenant Parker time to concentrate her efforts on finding the Andorian and stopping her before the present became as bleak as the future.

The shuttle finally landed in the small bay at the rear of the rectangular berth and Ranar quickly strode toward the hangar at its centre. Sixteen hours ago, he had been on a shuttle heading for Vulcan for a conference with the head of the V'Shar when he was called back by Fleet Admiral Nechayev, the woman nominally in charge of this little endeavour. Ranar entered the hangar and

smiled at what he saw. About twenty Corps of Engineers personnel were busy poring over the alien vessel, hoping to learn everything they could about it before Starfleet decided what to do with it.

'It's a sight, isn't it?'

'It certainly is,' Ranar replied. 'I take it you didn't call me here to show me the ship I know so well?'

Nechayev shook her head. 'I called you back because the engineers have the Gateway working.'

'I thought it was destroyed?'

'It was, but using the knowledge from the Gateways crisis and the *Enterprise's* mission some years previous, they were able to reconstruct the chamber. The engines work and the consoles are being swapped out for Starfleet tech across the ship. It should be ready in about six months.'

'Why so long?'

'The Corps want to test everything before they let it go. There is still so much about them that we have no idea about. And getting the Starfleet and Cha'lav databases to work together is probably going to take the longest. They're having trouble getting main power to stay online for more than an hour at a time with both databases working.'

'Does that mean that Command have given us the go ahead?'

'Not yet, they're still debating the finer points with the security council and the President is weighing in as well.'

'You don't like her much do you?'

'No, I think her stances on almost everything are too black and white. Fel Pagro is well suited to her.'

'Oh yes, the special emissary. Who would you rather held the post?'

'To be honest, I don't know. I wasn't that keen on any of the candidates at the time, but hopefully we'll get someone new shortly. I don't think Satie is well liked enough to get re-elected.'

'When will we know whether we have the green light?'

'That's a good question. I'm hoping we get the nod before she's ready to go so she can be tested by the people that are going to command her.'

'I wanted to talk to you about that.'

'Oh?'

'I think that Astar's command crew should take the ship into Cha'lav territory.'

'Why?'

'Because they know the Cha'lav better than anyone.'

'Doesn't that make them too close? As long as Parker is along with whoever goes, I don't think it's an issue.'

'Sisko and his crew knew the Dominion better than anyone and they were successful in their mission behind enemy lines.'

Janeway considered that for a moment and nodded. 'I think we should suggest that on a united front to Edward.'

Ranar smiled. 'Edward? Are we on first name terms with the Commander-in-Chief now?'

'Fleet Admiral Jellico is one of the keenest minds in the Federation. He accepted the position after Satie was made President so that he could run interference. Well, that's what he said, anyway.'

'I see.'

'They're old friends and he still has Satie's ear, which makes him more likely to convince her than anyone else. The Security Council should make up their own minds but because so much of this operation is classified they'll go along with whatever Satie decides.'

'And she'll go along with the C-in-C?'

'Exactly.'

Ranar smiled.

His aim of taking the battle to the Cha'lav on their own turf was brave and had its share of risks, but if any of their subject races knew what was happening they might rise up as well and join in the fight. No empire can fight a war on several fronts and come out victorious, especially not one as vast as the Cha'lav empire.

Chapter Twenty-Two

USS Pytheas

Kursican Triangle

Stardate 55348.2 (May 8, 2378)

Over the last two days, while the starship had traversed the Triangle, the crew had worked tirelessly to find a way to dissipate the region's intense plasma storms and save the subspace shark. Ensign Daniel Larson kept one eye on the readouts as course correction information was fed to him by Commander Wright in astrometrics due to the subspace topography. He made another correction and the Pytheas veered to port seconds before a rift opened. A plasma needle pushed through before being cut off as the rift closed.

'That was too close, Ensign,' Astar said, emerging from her ready room.

'Yes sir, this particular region has the weakest barrier we've encountered so far. It would be a prime target to test our hypothesis.'

'Slow to impulse,' Astar ordered and Larson did so. 'Mahtani, you ready?'

'Yes sir,' the science officer answered from astrometrics. 'Engaging deflector dish now.'

Although they couldn't see the beam itself, Gonzales had overlaid a tactical plot on the main viewscreen of what the beam was doing. Inset at various places were smaller screens with information scrolling down regarding the weaknesses of local space and the strength of the beam.

'We have a rift forming,' Gonzales said. 'According to my scans the other side is in the plasma storms at the edge of the Triangle.'

'How long before the rift is open enough?' Wright asked in a bored tone as he returned to the bridge.

Ignoring Wright, Gonzales replied. 'We have to open the rift all the way, like cutting a leg open to remove a thorn before the suturing can begin.'

'How long?' Wright asked again, sounding impatient.

'Another three minutes.'

'Plasma needles are coming through,' Larson said.

'Hold position,' Astar ordered. 'Shields to maximum.'

'The beam is now penetrating the subspace interfold layer. We're almost there,' Mahtani added.

Plasma needles struck the *Pytheas* full on and the bridge shuddered, the lights flickering on and off as the structural integrity field tried to hold the ship in one piece.

'Hull breach on deck six, no injuries. Forcefields are holding and emergency teams are en route.'

'Mahtani?' Astar asked, sounding impatient herself.

'Disengaging deflector beam, recommend you pull us back to a safe distance.'

'You don't say,' Wright muttered but only Astar heard him.

'You heard him, Ensign, take us to one million kilometres from the rift.'

'Aye sir, reversing course.'

Plasma needles were now emerging fast and were indeed hugging the edge of the rift, as if they were trying to pull it back into subspace.

'Captain, I'm picking up something,' Gonzales said, entering commands at a feverish pace.

'What is it?'

'It looks like the creature again, with its young.'

'On screen.'

The viewscreen magnified to a point at the centre of the rift where the child was trying to ride a plasma needle and the mother was attempting to prevent it from doing so.

'What's happening?'

'It would appear that the child is trying to reach normal space and its mother won't allow it.'

'Why?'

'Perhaps the child cannot survive in normal space and the mother knows that the rift won't stay open for long.'

'How long before it collapses?'

'Another ten minutes at its current rate.'

'I'm picking up two more lifeforms,' Gonzales said. 'More young sharks.'

'Can she manage all three?' Larson asked.

'Probably not through a rift this size,' Talen chimed in.

Astar turned to him. 'Care to explain, Lieutenant?'

'The rifts we have previously seen were less than a tenth this size, large enough for a mother and its young to enter for a breather, so to speak. This one is too large for her to adequately protect her children. She may need our help.'

'It's not our place to interfere,' Wright said forcefully.

'It will be our fault if any of them die,' Talen shot back, his antennae pointing forward in agitation at the executive officer.

'I understand your argument, Lieutenant. But we're doing this to protect her species. If she loses one but the other two survive, those are acceptable odds.'

'I think we're about to lose those odds, Captain,' Gonzales interjected. 'I'm picking up six vessels approaching from subspace. Their energy signatures match the Cha'lav scouts we've encountered before.'

'Ready weapons.'

'They're not on course for us, Captain,' the Betazoid looked up, horrified. 'They are closing on the sharks.'

'Take us in, as close as you dare.'

'Aye sir,' Larson replied.

As the *Pytheas* moved closer to the shrinking rift, one of the shark pups emerged fully from subspace and swam around the plasma needles. The other two tried to follow but the mother kept them at bay. Five of the Cha'lav scouts began herding the sharks back into the interfold layer between subspace and normal space while the other one headed for the wayward youngster.

'Gonzales, watch that scout, the moment it does anything, fire.'

'My pleasure,' she replied with what Astar hoped was not malicious glee, though she couldn't much fault her tactical officer for it.

The scout did not fire on the helpless youngster but tried to snare it with a net that reminded Astar of the Tholian webs she had seen back at the Academy.

'Commander?'

'Firing a photon torpedo, we're too far out for phasers.'

'Get us closer, Ensign.'

'Yes sir.'

'Direct hit, Cha'lav vessel is still intent on the shark.'

Plasma needles buffeted the ship, though they were not as severe as those earlier since the rift was nearing the size of its predecessors.

'We're in range.'

'Fire phasers, continuous firing sequence. Aim for the weapons and engines.'

'Aye sir, firing.'

The Cha'lav vessel finally broke off its attack and sent a few volleys of plasma toward the *Pytheas* before joining its companions.

'Captain, the pup is too weak to rejoin its mother on its own and the rift will

close in less than two minutes. It will not open again,' Mahtani called from astrometrics. 'I've been taking continuous scans of the area.'

Astar made a split-second decision. 'Larson, take us in. Gonzales, snare the pup as gently as you can with a tractor beam. Ensign, have you ever flown in the interfold layer or subspace?'

'No sir, not even in simulations.'

'Now's your chance. Ready, Commander?'

'Yes sir, tractor beam standing by.'

'Let's go.'

Chapter Twenty-Three

USS Pytheas

Somewhere in subspace

Stardate 55348.3 (May 8, 2378)

Larson pushed the ship to up to three quarters impulse as Gonzales caught the pup in a low-intensity tractor beam. The *Pytheas* slipped through the rift just as it closed and they were caught in the interfold layer as one last plasma needle burrowed its way into subspace itself. The ship was suddenly hit from the ferocious subspace energies. The screen blanked out and the bridge was plunged into darkness as they hit something solid.

Talen was the first to regain his feet and reinitialised the viewscreen. Main power came back online as Astar and Wright reached their chairs and he saw Larson sprawled beside his, clearly unconscious. He saw Gonzales' hand grab her console as she hauled herself up to a standing position.

'What the hell did we hit?' Astar asked.

'We didn't hit anything, Captain. We were hit by a subspace shockwave caused by the sealing of the rift,' Talen answered.

'If the rift is sealed, how do we return to normal space?' Wright asked.

'There are other weak points in this vicinity, Commander. All we have to do is locate the weakest of them and punch through with the tetryon beam.'

'Then let's find one.'

'Not so fast, Commander,' Astar reined him in. 'Where are the Cha'lav and the sharks?'

'The shark we snared was released and has rejoined its mother and siblings,' Talen answered. 'The Cha'lav have released their net and are currently circling them but making no hostile moves.'

Astar felt Larson's pulse. 'Talen, grab a medkit and see what you can do with him. Commander, get down to astrometrics and find us a way out. Gonzales, I want a way to communicate with the Cha'lav and find out what they're doing to the sharks.'

'We should have no trouble communicating with the Cha'lav since we both use subspace communication.'

Astar smiled. 'Excellent, open a channel.'

'Channel open.'

'This is Captain Astar of the Federation starship *Pytheas* to the Cha'lav vessels. Leave those creatures alone and we will allow you to depart, unharmed.'

The face of a Cha'lav-Marsupial appeared on the viewscreen. 'We hunt these creatures for food. I know your laws, you cannot interfere.'

Astar could not believe what she was hearing. 'That's where you're wrong. If you do not return to your own territory immediately, we will destroy you for violating our space.'

The Cha'lav looked pensive, or so Talen thought, for just a moment. 'I don't believe you. You'd have to report your actions to your superiors and they wouldn't be pleased.'

'That may be so but I cannot stand by while you slaughter these creatures. They are sentient lifeforms.'

The Cha'lav commander smiled. 'They are prey, now leave before we destroy you!'

Astar turned to Gonzales as the communication was terminated. 'How will our weapons work in subspace?'

'I can't say for certain, Captain, but I would recommend against using our torpedoes. We have no way of knowing how our photon torpedoes would react to the energies present. Our quantum torpedoes utilise zero-point energy from artificial subspace regions, but they could be devastating if they erupted here.'

'We're too far away from them to use phasers, so torpedoes are our only option. You recommend the quantum torpedoes?'

Gravely, Gonzales nodded. 'Load one and set it to detonate at minimal yield as far from the sharks as possible.'

'Yes sir,' Gonzales replied.

'As soon as you're ready, fire.'

'Aye sir, firing.'

They watched as the torpedo impacted the shields of the Cha'lav vessel furthest from the creatures. A blinding flash rendered the viewscreen inoperable for a few seconds but when it cleared, they saw all of the Cha'lav vessels had been ripped apart by the blast, but the sharks appeared unharmed. There were also stars visible.

'Captain, there is a breach in the interfold later!' Larson yelled. 'Permission to depart?'

'Granted, get us out of here.'

'There is another rift opening, Captain,' Gonzales added. 'It appears as though more Cha'lav are coming through.'

'Ensign, full impulse.'

'We're already at full impulse, Captain.'

'Sir, we're in subspace, we could use a stable warp field to generate more speed,' ch'Maras suggested.

Astar looked at him and then at Wright. 'Will it work?'

'Only one way to try,' her exec replied.

'Initialising warp field,' Larson said. 'Now travelling at one hundred and seventeen percent of normal impulse speeds.'

'I'm not a scientist, Ensign. Care to explain what that means?' Astar murmured, approaching the helm.

Without turning in her direction, he answered. 'Maximum impulse speed is generally one third the speed of light, using a warp field in subspace has allowed us to increase our maximum impulse speed to forty percent of the speed of light.'

'How long till we reach our rift?'

'Three minutes.'

'The Cha'lav will be in firing range before then,' Gonzales called out.

'I can't push the impulse engines much more.'

'What about a microsecond burst from the warp engines?' Astar asked, thinking back to the Academy and an old tactical manoeuvre.

'Larson to Xeris, I need a two point six microsecond burst from the warp engines at warp three,' the helmsman replied.

'*Ready when you are,*' the chief engineer responded without hesitation.

Astar smiled at the experience of her crew. The inertial dampers whined for less than a second as the starship accelerated. As the ship dropped out of warp the rift was upon them and they were through.

'Well timed.'

'Not really,' Larson replied. 'I didn't take into account subspace itself. I could have torn us apart.'

'You didn't and you saved us in the process. How close are the Cha'lav?'

'One minute away.'

'How far are we from the far edge of the Triangle?'

'Another day perhaps, judging from our position, not much more.'

'Set a course and engage at warp four. Are the Cha'lav pursuing?'

'Yes sir,' Gonzales replied as the *Pytheas* jumped to warp. 'But they won't be able to catch us before we reach the edge of the Triangle.'

Chapter Twenty-Four

USS Weisskopf

In orbit of Ynelav VIII

Stardate 55349.6 (May 8, 2378)

Ensign T'Larr stood in front of Captain Dhrex's desk in his ready room as he perused her latest report. Her team had returned to the ship five days prior, after the discovery of the Romulan warbird's remains, and since then T'Larr had been working tirelessly to try to fathom the identity of the warbird. She was not getting anywhere and had now exhausted all but three methods of obtaining the information, all of which were in the report that the captain was taking his time to read. He looked up at her impassive face and gestured for her to take a seat, which she did.

'To recap, Ensign, you believe that almost three hundred years ago, a Romulan warbird crashed on Ynelav IV and the people reverse-engineered the technology for their own use. You have further stipulated that the Romulan survivors posed as false gods to the Ynelavii people and this caused a schism in their religious background which still exists today, and is in fact the basis for the civil war that is currently progressing on the surface?'

T'Larr nodded, 'Yes sir.'

'Do you have anything to back up this report?'

'Yes sir, I do,' the Vulcan replied. 'This region is far from Romulan space and yet there is a Romulan warbird within the sector which arrived prior to Starfleet and the Romulans did not stake a claim to the sector or make any moves, covert or otherwise, against Starfleet. It is logical to assume that Subcommander Sokal is searching for something and a Romulan warbird which disappeared three centuries ago, and may contain the remains of a relative, would be ample motive, especially since the Romulans have closed their borders to deal with the rising Reman problem.'

'Is that all?'

'No sir, Nelan is an old Romulan name that is no longer used. It does not appear in any other culture, except this one, and the Ynelavii have constructed a religion around it. From my studies in the reliquary, I discovered runic markings that bear no resemblance to the native writings, but significant resemblance to an old rural Romulan dialect. I believe that

Subcommander Sokal is searching for a relative. I also postulate that the Seer in native lore is in fact a descendant of one of the survivors, perhaps Nelan himself.'

Dhrex sighed. 'Do you have any idea what you are suggesting?'

'Yes sir, I do. I am also aware that according to regulations, you must report this to your direct superior.'

'Who happens to be in close proximity to the Subcommander quite frequently. I am aware of regulations. Dismissed, Ensign.'

T'Larr raised an eyebrow. 'Sir?'

'I have a private call to make, dismissed.'

With a nod, T'Larr turned on her heel and strode from the ready room. Since she had been working on this outside of her usual shift hours, and had presented her report just after her latest shift, she decided to return to her quarters for meditation but that thought was immediately quashed when Dhrex emerged onto the bridge.

'Wait a moment, Ensign. Are you sure about your report?'

'Yes sir,' she replied.

'Could you show the Ynelavii the evidence?'

'Captain, doing so would likely destroy their faith, as well as being in breach of the prime directive.'

Dhrex looked around at the officers, including his exec who raised an eyebrow as well as any Vulcan. 'Alright everyone, conference room. We'll discuss this. You too, Ensign. I want you to present your findings to them.'

'Yes sir,' T'Larr replied. Though she didn't let it show on her face, she was surprised that he would discuss what amounted to a breach of the most sacrosanct law in the Federation.

Moments later, once the bridge were seated around the conference table, T'Larr gave her report. Once she had concluded, there was silence until Lieutenant Commander Renn, the tactical officer, spoke up.

'I can accept that telling them the truth would violate the letter of the prime directive, but it does not violate it's spirit. We're not interfering in the natural course of their spirituality, we're helping to return it to its natural course.'

Commander Banks shook his head. 'I disagree, I think that by revealing to them that the last three centuries of their religious beliefs have been a lie, we would be causing a deeper schism than the one that already exists. It would be reckless and irresponsible to put this culture, hell any culture, through that.'

Dhrex glanced at his XO and sighed. 'You may be right, Commander, but I cannot leave without revealing it to them.'

'There is another way,' T'Larr said.

'We send the information to both parties through an intermediary and let them decide what to do with it.'

'Who would that third party be?'

'The Resoto,' Banks answered.

Dhrex scratched his chin. 'That is an interesting proposition. Alright, let's contact the nearest Resoto vessel and have them deliver our message.'

'There is something else,' T'Larr said and Dhrex turned to her.

'Well?'

'They may ask us to return, so we shouldn't be in the system. They could get suspicious.'

'Their ships have returned from their mission, wherever that was, so it will be difficult to leave without being detected.'

'That's easy,' lieutenant Johnson, the chief engineer, replied. 'We mask our signature to match the background radiation and just leave at one quarter impulse. They'll never find us.'

'I take it you've used that trick before?'

'On the Cardassians, and they were paranoid.'

'We have a plan, let's get to it, dismissed. T'Larr, wait a moment please.'

The others filed out to get on with their new tasks and Dhrex handed the Vulcan a small wooden box. 'I know you don't like a fuss, so I thought I would just present it to you simply. Your department head had already been informed.'

T'Larr opened the box and saw inside a small cotton cushion, upon which rested a hollow gold pip. 'Captain?'

'It has been a long time coming, Lieutenant. Live long and prosper.'

'Peace and long life,' T'Larr replied, cradling the box.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Rebel Headquarters

Ynelav IV

Stardate 55349.7 (May 8, 2378)

Minister Furan, after reading the information provided by a passing Resoto trader, had immediately called his cell leaders to a meeting to disseminate it. Most agreed to his course of action, and the remainder agreed to go along for the time being. Furan had Regent Dolan released and brought to him.

'You may bathe, eat and freshen yourself up. We have much to discuss.'

'Am I getting my planet back?'

'We'll discuss that once you've cleaned up. I have been given important information which I have decided to share with you.'

Dolan decided against baiting the rebel leader and just nodded. 'Thank you, what of my aide?'

Furan sighed. 'He is staying where he is for now. Perhaps he'll be released once our discussions have been concluded.'

Dolan nodded and entered the room. Through a doorway on his left was a bathing room, and to his right, clean robes and fresh food. He headed for the bathing room and discarded all his clothing before sinking into a tub filled with hot water. The former leader washed himself quickly, dried and put on the clean robes before helping himself to the food on display. The spicy Felos strips were his favourite and he ate his fill, washing it down with the citrus wine from the Navalo slopes. After about an hour, Dolan opened the door and saw the guard was no longer standing there. He strode toward the end of the plain corridor which was clearly built underground since it had no windows, no illumination save for the lights on the walls, and had a peculiar earthy smell. A door opened and he stopped in a heartbeat.

'Regent, please come in,' Furan said, gesturing the for the former leader to enter.

'Thank you, Minister,' Dolan replied as he entered a conference room.

There were only two chairs and a computer console at each one. 'Please sit

and read the information. There is a rather copious amount and we'll need to discuss it afterwards. Both in regards to what it means for the people and for the leadership,' Furan said and took a seat himself.

Dolan began reading the information and his eyes flicked to Furan's impassive face several times though the rebel leader didn't seem to notice. After some time, he came to the conclusion of the report and switched off the screen. 'It's true, isn't it?' he asked.

'I believe so, only the two of us know the specifics.'

'This came from a Resoto trader, but it is a Starfleet document.'

'They did the research before I kicked them out of orbit and they clearly thought that this information would end the civil war.'

'Will it?'

'I have already ordered a ceasefire and General Allak has accepted it. For now, both sides have stood down. What happens next is up to us.'

'I think you and I both need to visit this reliquary and see the technology for ourselves. Only then can we really decide what to do. If this technology truly is from another world, and one or more of them did survive and integrate into our society then we should try to find these individuals.'

'As you can see, the report does give a genetic profile of this species, Romulans, and even with our limited technology in that area, we should be able to test them.'

'Since Starfleet has expertise in this area, we should call them in.'

Furan smiled. 'So they can assist you in retaking the government by force? I don't think so.'

'They don't interfere in the internal politics of other cultures. Don't you think they would have intervened before if they were going to?'

Furan scowled. 'We cannot understand their motives. Why did they not bring us this information directly?'

'You asked them to leave. Had they returned against your wishes, their

captain would have been in trouble with his superiors,' Dolan replied. 'I have studied their rules and their history. They have fought these Romulans before and know how to deal with them if they should return. They know more about this technology than we are ever likely to. It would be a mistake not to invite them to assist us.'

Furan said nothing for a long moment. 'Let us visit this reliquary first, and then decide whether to invite them. Is that acceptable?'

Dolan nodded. 'When do we leave?'

'I have a skimmer standing by.' There was a knock at the door. 'Yes?'

'General, there is a vessel approaching orbit. It does not answer any hails. General Allak said it just appeared in front of him.'

'Has it made any overt moves of hostility?' Dolan asked.

The messenger looked at Furan. 'No, but why else would it be here?'

'Perhaps we should get to the Ministry where we can greet the visitors properly?'

Furan nodded and turned to the messenger. 'Ready the skimmer.'

'Yes, General.'

Dolan realised, once they emerged from the underground fortress, that they were actually in Navalo itself, and not too far from the vineyards or the reliquary. The skimmer would only take about twenty minutes to reach the Ministry of Science. It actually took almost half that time and both Dolan and Furan reached the office at the same time, only to find that it wasn't empty. A tall woman with a stern regal bearing sat in Dolan's chair. She had greenish skin, pointed ears, and wore an unusual uniform. It consisted of black trousers and heavy black boots with a chequerboard jacket and belt-sash combo with various insignia.

'Who are you?' Furan asked.

'I am Subcommander Sokal of the Imperial Rihannsu Warbird *Gilded Talon*. I am here for my warbird and any personnel that are still alive. You may keep the dead.'

'We have only just discovered your technology, Subcommander,' Dolan replied. 'We are not yet aware of any of your personnel. It has been almost three centuries, will there be any alive?'

'We will take the half breeds with us.'

Dolan looked at Furan. 'We should negotiate this.'

Furan took a firmer stand. 'We will not negotiate. You can take your warbird but the people will remain here.'

Sokal withdrew a disruptor from her belt and fired. Furan's dead body dropped to the floor. 'Will you negotiate?'

'That is what I offered to do. The warbird is of course yours, as to the people, she should locate them first.'

'I can help with that. My vessel can detect people with Rihannsu blood.'

'Then we should begin negotiations in earnest.'

Chapter Twenty-Six

USS Pytheas

Kursican Triangle

Stardate 55350.3 (May 8, 2378)

'We're approaching the edge of the Triangle, Captain,' Ensign Daniel Larson said with a touch of relief to his voice. 'We should reach the plasma fields in the next two hours.'

'Get some rest, Ensign. I need you at your best.'

'Yes sir,' the helmsman replied, rising from his station and heading for the turbolift.

'Gonzales, how far behind us are the Cha'lav?'

'About an hour, but they'll close that gap quickly once we enter the plasma fields.'

'Can you detect anything from them at this distance?'

'There is a lot of subspace chatter going on between them, but their weapons are powered down and I'm not detecting any hostile manoeuvres.'

'I don't trust them. They could have disappeared back into subspace, why didn't they?'

'Ask Jamal, he's been doing some research on their behaviour.'

'Has he now?' Astar asked. 'Bridge to astrometrics. Mahtani, what have you learned about the Cha'lav with regards to their subspace technology?'

'The Cha'lav's subspace technology is not as good as they would have us believe, Captain. They cannot open rifts just anywhere, and in the Triangle they cannot open rifts to the galactic void. Their primary method of travel is what we might call hyperspace. It is like the quantum slipstream technology being developed by the Corps of Engineers but it works in subspace and is much faster. They can reach any of our satellite galaxies in approximately nine days. I would think that they would need some other method of travel if they were to reach other major galaxies quickly.'

'How do the plasma fields look? Are we likely to have a rough ride?'

'Not this time, sir. I think we might have thinned out the plasma fields when we sealed that major rift.'

'How so?'

'It looks like the plasma needles, the naturally-occurring rifts and the subspace topography exist in symbiosis with each other. When we forced the super-rift closed, we used up some of the needles. I think it is possible to completely obliterate the Triangle if we use up all the needles.'

'And how do you propose we do that?' Astar asked somewhat tetchily.

'All the rifts open into the plasma fields, which means that there is some kind of subspace fault line. If we can set it off, then the plasma needles will seal it shut and in doing so the Triangle will lose much of the danger to passing vessels.'

'What of the sharks?'

Mahtani was quiet for a few seconds. *'The naturally occurring rifts shouldn't be affected, Captain.'*

'Run simulations and get back to me in one hour. We'll be entering the plasma fields in a little over ninety minutes.'

'Yes sir, Mahtani out.'

'Prepare the deflector for another shot,' Astar said to her tactical officer. 'We could make it a lot harder for the Cha'lav to attack this sector if we can limit the number of places they can open their rifts.'

Gonzales nodded. 'Anything we can do to send those creatures back to the rock from which they came is a good thing. We defeated the Borg, the Dominion, and now we'll show the Cha'lav the same treatment!'

Astar stifled a grin. 'Get on it, Commander.'

'Yes sir.'

'Captain, could I have a word?' Wright asked, having been almost silent on the bridge for the last several shifts.

'Of course, my ready room. Gonzales, you have the bridge.'

Wright entered the ready room and Astar followed. 'Permission to speak freely?' her exec asked.

Finally, Astar thought. 'Permission granted.'

Wright looked her square in the eye. 'I don't think you have any business being in that chair. Your decisions are reckless, you try to communicate with them when they are clearly not interested, and "crippling blows" you believe you are dealing to them will likely stop nothing. I've been in worse battles than your jacket credits you with and I believe that I am better suited to command this mission.'

Astar sighed and drew herself up to her full height, which wasn't enough to match his, but her steel did the rest. 'Starfleet's mission is one of peace and exploration and it is better to turn an enemy into a friend. If you can't follow those ideals then you don't belong in that uniform. You're on report, Commander. The next time you decide to disobey an order or question me in front of the crew, I'll have you relieved of duty and stripped of rank. Do you understand me?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Dismissed.'

Wright stalked out of the ready and Astar collapsed against her desk. It was time to have a closer look at his jacket. She sat in her chair and activated the monitor which rose from the desk. Calling up his record, she looked at his wartime accomplishments and noted an impressive array of tactics, albeit ones that were just plain ruthless. Perusing his career, she noticed that the reports from his superiors changed about eight years prior, just days after his promotion to commander.

'*Captain Astar to the bridge,*' Wright called and she knew that something was up.

'What do we have?' she asked as she emerged from her ready room.

'A rift has opened ahead of us and we're detecting a large build up,' Gonzales answered.

'How many ships?'

'At least thirty.'

'What about the ships behind us?'

'They have adjusted course to enter the rift. I do not believe that either group will attack.'

'Why not?'

'They're not ready yet. This is a fleet build up, Captain. I believe they are preparing to attack the starbase.'

'Let's see what happens.'

Astar took her seat and watched as Gonzales' prophecy was fulfilled. Over the next thirty minutes the ships behind them entered the rift, joining the thirty plus ships already gathered and the rift sealed itself.

'God help us all if they attack soon. We've got nowhere near enough ships.'

'Do we go back?' Gonzales asked.

'No, perhaps sealing the Triangle will push their timetable back a bit. That's our best hope.'

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Cha'lav Homeworld

Chalavraton galaxy (NGC-4321)

52.5 million light-years away

Stardate 55351.1 (May 9, 2378)

The full tri-level council was in full session for the first time in more than a millennium. The Lower Council, comprising the aquatic and semi-aquatic species, took up the immense man-made lake in groups of three separated by species. The Central Council, comprised of the land-walker species, sat around the central column of the council chamber, intent on their own discussions while the High Council, comprising the two remaining avian species, sat atop the column itself looking down on the others like prey. This council had never been content but the strict hierarchy had served them well for eons, and as such they were the oldest species in the galaxy. A klaxon rang out that silenced everyone present.

'I have called this emergency session to discuss the Milcha-Wae situation,' High Council leader Lord Fetar said gravely, flapping his wings in emphasis. 'The advanced fleet has been severely crippled and the Gateway technology stolen from that galaxy several millennia ago has proven ineffective against the populace of the staging ground. Just in the last cycle, the largest political entity, the Federation, has destroyed a region of space that we specifically created for our purpose. Lord Linta has asked that we send more ships to aid in his fight against them.'

'I vote against this,' Lower Council leader Aqati slapped her fins to the water in anger. 'Lord Linta was warned about attacking so soon. We should have concentrated on the bioweapons first to weaken them.'

'The bioweapons were rendered useless a third of a solar cycle ago when the Federation discovered what we were up to and put a stop to it,' Fetar responded coolly. 'Do you not read all of the reports?'

'I have been trying to quell a dozen uprisings in my galaxy,' the Cha'lav-Aquatic gurgled angrily. 'News of the Federation fighting back has already reached our outlying galaxies.'

'We need a decisive victory against the Federation and we need it soon,' Central Council leader Cala said, slamming her fist against the column. 'You have been so quick to belittle Lord Linta for his failures in this instance, but

how many successful campaigns has he won for you? The H'Iranthians in the Dromdae galaxy were no match for his fighting force. You tied his flippers with this engagement by making him use local technology against them.'

'Yes, but the H'Iranthians fought back, with Federation help. That's when you decided to attack at their heart, but instead you have chosen a region of space that they would not have been so interested in if you had not begun kidnapping people.'

'Enough!' Lord Fetar squawked. The column reverberated with his anger. 'We need to determine a new course of action, now.'

'We should let Lord Linta continue his advance with the ships he still has at his disposal. Thirty-six vessels is more than enough to destroy a world and the base orbiting it,' Aqati said, her strong voice carrying through the water.

'And what if the Federation amass more vessels?'

'They will not be able to match our might. They have recently emerged from a war that exacted a terrible toll on much of the galaxy. They should be easy pickings.'

'I have learned not to underestimate our prey. I recommend that we use our feared foot soldiers on their homeworld.'

'We would never get close. Their core worlds are too well protected since the end of the war. To do significant damage would mean pulling ships from other fronts and this galaxy is not that much of a threat yet.'

'Lord Linta is our most revered strategist. If he loses his life, it will be a blow to us all.'

'What is the situation in the Pechazhizh galaxy?'

'It is nominally under our aegis, we control the majority of worlds represented in the Galactic Council. It is only a matter of time before they vote on one of our puppets as leader.'

Lord Fetar nodded. 'So, do I tell Lord Linta to use another approach in dealing with the Federation?'

'Yes!' echoed across the council chamber from the senior leaders.

'Very well then, the motion has carried. You may return to your vessels and galaxies. I hope not to see you for at least another century or two, perhaps longer.'

Multiple fissures, rifts and gateways opened allowing the councillors to return to their respective ships and lands, but Lord Fetar remained with his second in command.

'You think I was wrong to call the full council?' he asked.

'Yes, Lord,' his second replied. 'One or more may be the rebel leader. Someone from the council has been feeding information to the rebel cells across much of our territory. The tides are shifting against us, that much we know.'

'But the Council does not, and they will not while they each control their own galaxy. For now, they are too busy to talk to each other about allying against us.'

'Our position is tenuous, Lord, but we remain in control because we do not show our wing. I believe that calling the full council showed too much of our wing at the wrong time.'

'Perhaps, but we shall see. Right now, I must inform Lord Linta of our decision,' he said and moments later was alone.

Lord Linta appeared on a large screen almost immediately after the signal had been sent. *'You asked to see me, Great Lord Fetar?'*

'I did. I understand you are having trouble gaining a foothold in the Milcha-Wae galaxy.'

'Yes, my Lord. The Federation are far more resourceful than our advance intelligence reports suggested. We may need to gather more vessels and be far more aggressive with them.'

Fetar shook his head. 'In time, perhaps the ships we have in the Pechazhizh galaxy can brought to your aid. In the meantime, however, the Council has decided to authorise the use of selective genocide. Do you have any Planet Killers remaining in your arsenal?'

'Yes, my Lord. We have kept their fluidic prisons low on nutrients to keep them

pliant. They will be more than ready to attack for a little food.'

'Excellent, how long before you attack the orbital station?'

'The Rift-space has been rendered inoperative by the Federation ship, my Lord. It will be a few weeks before we are able to attack.'

'Contact me when the attack is complete. There may yet be a seat for you in this august council. Fetar out.'

Epilogue

Conference room 323

Starbase 535

Stardate 55351.2 (May 9, 2378)

Captain Logan sat at the head of the table with Commander Madden seated to his left. Also around the table were Captains Dhrex, Aurelia and Vikagh and Admiral Ranar on the screen on the bulkhead. This conference was designed solely to disseminate information, and not to make plans for anything else. Vikagh was finishing his exaggerated tale of hunting a lone Cha'lav vessel which he subsequently destroyed before it could destroy a Resoto merchant vessel or call for assistance.

'I would enjoy picking off every last one of the filthy PetaQ,' he concluded.

'That may be so, but we have just received word from the *Pytheas*. They have crossed the Triangle, and destroyed it in the process. Their speculation is that it was created by the Cha'lav to facilitate their invasion of this galaxy. The Cha'lav also seem to be massing an invasion force but the destruction of the Triangle's subspace rifts have set their timetable back, we just don't know how long for,' Logan replied, hoping to keep the conference on track.

'The Ynelavii have ended their civil war but the Romulans have moved in and according to my last report from Regent Dolan, Subcommander Sokal is refusing to leave that world until something from her family's past is presented to her,' Dhrex said and saw Logan wince ever so slightly.

'*That is a minor matter,*' Ranar interrupted. '*Captain Aurelia, what of the Resoto?*'

'The remaining Resoto have banded together on a number of worlds which remain hidden from us just in case the Cha'lav intend to finish the job.'

'So all we have to do is prepare for an invasion. That we have experience in,' Logan said mournfully.

'Before you all disappear, I would like to extend my thanks to Captain Logan for his hard work here over the last two years. As you know, one of the reasons we're out here is to assist the Kursicans in joining the Federation and from the reports that the Federation Council are getting, it looks like they are going to be ready far sooner than expected. Please continue your good work.'

'Thank you, Admiral.'

'Captain Logan, Commander Madden, please wait a moment. The rest of you are dismissed.'

Once the others were out of the room, Logan looked at the admiral. 'Sir, what is all this about?'

'Starfleet has approved Operation Cobalt's plan.'

'What plan?' Logan asked.

'Commander, would you mind?'

Madden turned to his immediate superior. 'A crew will take the captured Cha'lav vessel into their territory to negotiate a peaceful solution or gather allies for the coming war.'

'Which crew?'

'At the moment it looks like it will be Captain Astar, since she has had more dealings with them at this stage. However, the ship will not be ready to go for at least six months and I do not want to send them into such a dangerous place while zh'Malashan is still on the loose.'

'It could take years to find her.'

'If it takes more than a year then we'll re-evaluate the situation. At this juncture, I think it prudent to wait and see what happens before making more concrete plans.'

* * *

USS Pytheas

En route to Eeroth

Stardate 55351.3 (May 9, 2378)

Captain Astar sat in her chair and watched the viewscreen as the last vestiges of the diabolical Triangle faded, leaving behind the stars and nebulae that made space so beautiful to look at. Around her, the rest of the bridge crew were as rapt as she was, except one. Wright left her some unfortunate

business to attend to, but if she could, she would leave it until her return from Eeroth. Deciding that time was now of the essence, she pulled her gaze from the screen and turned toward Rashal, who had spent much of the journey in his quarters.

'How far are we from your homeworld?'

'Three days at warp six,' the Eerothian replied sourly. 'But much time has passed already, I am not sure there will be anything to go back to.'

'Perhaps your people will have united against a common enemy,' Larson suggested.

'That is unlikely.'

'All things are possible,' Talen added quietly.

Rashal turned to him. 'My people have been fighting since the dawn of time, Lieutenant. I doubt very much that a single force could unseat their hatred of one another.'

'My people thought that way once as well, Rashal. Now we have been close friends and allies with the Vulcans for over two centuries.'

'There is still animosity among both your kinds.'

'It will always be there, tempered by reason and by mutual cooperation. It is the only way we can survive.'

'Then one day you will all perish. Such a weak bond cannot hold you together forever.'

'It doesn't need to,' Astar interjected, noticing that Wright was wholeheartedly agreeing with the alien. 'They both have us, and others who stand by them all. Together we are stronger than we are individually. Before the Federation was formed, we fought a terrible war at a terrible price, but it brought us together. Our homeworlds and colonies fought against a common enemy and a union was formed. Now, two centuries later, that enemy is a reluctant ally, and we stand by them, willing and able to make things better. Our highest ideals focus on helping others, regardless of the cost to ourselves. We are returning you to your homeworld because we can, we will stand beside you and fight a common enemy because together we are stronger.'

'Your ideals are noble, Captain,' Rashal responded wanly. 'But in your territories, it is paradise. In ours, it is a constant fight for survival.'

'As it once was in ours,' Wright said, standing up. 'But as the Captain has said, we stood together on the threshold of war, and walked through the doorway of peace, where we still stand today.'

Astar held her tongue, for she could see in Wright's eyes that he did not truly believe that. 'It's time we actually found out what is going on. Ensign Larson, set a course for Eeroth, warp six.'

'Aye sir,' Larson replied as the Pytheas' nacelles rose up into formation.

As the starship jumped to warp, Astar wondered whether she would find a ruined world or a paradise being fought for.

End