

# Star Trek: Pytheas

## The Art of War

By Brother Benny

***Historian's Note:*** This story takes place from early to mid June 2378; beginning one day after the events of Fragments of Control.

### Prologue

**Transport vessel *Beowulf***  
**Kolari VII**  
**Stardate 55431.1 (June 7, 2378)**

The wind whipped his long hair and he tried vainly to keep it clear of his face while he watched the last of the cargo crates being loaded onto his ship. In the distance, the ruins of the ancient Kolari civilisation could still just about be seen but the coming storm would soon shield them from view. Though he hated plundering these dusty sites for rich patrons, he knew that one day he might find some technology and that kept him going, just. The deck hands saluted him in their bizarre way and then hurried back to the Federation archaeology site which had been temporarily abandoned due to some supposed threat.

'Gene, are you there?' a female voice squawked over the comm.

'I'm here,' the freighter's grizzled captain replied. 'The last of the crates are loaded and secured. Let's get the hell off this rock.'

'That might be a problem. I'm picking up unusual energy signatures in orbit.'

'Do they match anything in the pathetic database we have?'

'That's the problem, they match the alien energy signatures we were told to be on the lookout for by the Starbase a few days ago.'

'Can we send a message out?'

*'Not at the moment, the storm has ionised the atmosphere. We'll have to be in low orbit before we can send any kind of signal out.'*

'Start the pre-launch sequence, I'll be there in a minute.'

*'I'm on it, Kelly out.'*

Gene joined his co-pilot in the cockpit a moment later and took his seat in the centre of the cramped area. He glanced quickly at the readouts on the circular console surrounding three quarters of the chair and grunted. The storm was the largest he'd ever seen on a planetary scale, covering approximately a third of the total surface area.

'We need to get out of here, now. If that front gets any closer, we'll never clear the planet.'

'We're ready.'

'Punch it, straight up.'

'You sure the cargo is secured?'

'I'm sure, we need to leave.'

'All right, engaging atmospheric thrusters.'

The *Beowulf* shuddered as it lifted off, shedding a few external hull fragments as it hurtled through the air, away from the encroaching storm.

'This is gonna get bumpy,' Kelly said as the transport hit the lower atmosphere.

Gene held on as the ship broke through the atmosphere, and almost collided with the largest vessel he'd ever seen. 'Evasive!'

'Damn! That was close,' Kelly muttered as she pitched upward and over the hull of the orbiting vessel.

'Go to warp, now. We have to warn *Starbase 535*.'

'The ship is following us,' Kelly replied as the *Beowulf* jumped to warp.

'Increase speed, can we get a signal out.'

'Maybe, try it.'

'This is the Transport *Beowulf* to *Starbase 535*, you're attack is about to begin. Repeat, this is the Transport *Beowulf* to any Federation ship or outpost.'

'We're being jammed, I'm not sure if you got through.'

'Screw the patron, set a course for the starbase, maximum warp.'

'We won't get far at warp five.'

'It'll do the job, I hope.'

'They're gaining, warp seven and increasing.'

Gene sighed. 'Can we get anything more out of the engines?'

'Not in this bucket,' his co-pilot replied sourly. 'And before you suggest it, we can't fight either.'

'I wasn't going to,' Gene said with a wry grin.

'Uh huh.'

A klaxon sounded suddenly and the ship shuddered violently, more than it had ever done before. 'I have no idea what they're doing but our warp field is collapsing. I'm trying to recalibrate, but this isn't a Starfleet ship. We don't have the same capabilities,' she added to forestall his questions.

'Any idea what we can do?'

Kelly turned to him. 'How do you want to die? On their terms or ours?'

'Ours,' he said grimly. 'What did you have in mind?'

'I was planning to fly straight into the nearest star and detonate the warp core. It'll either create a solar flare or do nothing.'

'And if they're close enough the flare will destroy them as well. I like it. Have we got any of those torpedo casings left?'

'One or two, why?'

'I suggest we send a message to the Starbase while we still can.'

'You'll have to prep it.'

'I already configured one for a messenger capsule. Tube one.'

'Is it ready to launch?'

'Two seconds...now!'

The torpedo raced away at warp and went completely unnoticed, or ignored, by the alien ship. 'Adjust course, take us back to the Kolari system. That's the nearest star.'

'I've activated the self-destruct mechanism, all I have to do is input a final code and it will detonate instantly. We'll never know what happens.'

'How far are we from the star?'

'Three minutes.'

'I'm dumping the cargo,' Gene said. 'Increase to five point three.'

'Increasing speed. Time to star, one minute and three seconds.'

'Transfer detonation sequence to my console.'

'Gene?'

'Do it!'

'Done. Time to star, thirty seconds. The ship is still pursuing.'

'Drop out of warp in eight seconds, right in the corona.'

'On my mark,' she replied. 'It's been nice working with you, boss.'

'You too, Squawk,' Gene said. 'Mark.'

The *Beowulf* dropped out of warp and they both shielded their eyes from view as the brightness overwhelmed the polarisation in the monitors. An aft image showed the alien vessel had also slowed but was now trying to manoeuvre away from the star.

'It's too big to get out the way fast enough, go to full impulse.'

'Solar surface in fifteen seconds.'

Gene input the detonation code.

'Nine seconds.'

'I hope to God this works.'

The *Beowulf's* warp core exploded just as the transport's bow hit the surface and vaporised. The resulting solar flare lit up the entire system with radiation and took the alien vessel by surprise. Every living thing aboard was killed in minutes and the ship itself was pulled into the star by the gravitational forces of same.

## **Chapter One**

### ***Starbase 535***

#### **Kursican Sector**

**Stardate 55431.8 (June 7, 2378)**

Captain Lionel Logan entered the conference room to find everyone already seated. Captains Dhrex, Aurelia, Astar and Vikagh were on the left with Subcommander Sokal, Commander Madden and General Allak seated on the right. These people represented all that Starfleet had amassed, or was able to, to combat the imminent Cha'lav attack. He caught a glance of himself in the reflective surface of the table as he sat down and realised he looked haggard. Sleep had not come easy to him for the last week and a half. He leaned back in his chair and spoke to his assembled guests.

'I've asked you here because we no longer have time to waste. A distress signal was picked up in the Kolari system six hours ago from the *Beowulf*, a freelance transport ship. Along with the audio call, we picked up detailed sensor logs. They were being chased by a large vessel which is Cha'lav in origin. It is almost twice as large as the control ship sitting outside the system. It will be here in less than a day.'

Vikagh stood up. 'Then we shall be ready to send the Cha'lav to their choice of afterlife.'

The others followed suit. 'We'll be ready for them,' Aurelia added.

'All right, you'll receive your combat assignments within the hour, dismissed. Captain Astar, if you could remain a moment, please.'

She nodded as the others filed out and Logan could see that she had been expecting this.

'I assume you are relieving me of duty?' she asked.

'That is what Starfleet wants me to do, yes. However, considering the fact that you and your crew have had more interaction with the Cha'lav than anyone else, I was able to grant you a temporary reprieve. You will remain in command until the current crisis is resolved, provided you survive of course, and then you will be relieved pending the results of a general court-martial. Lieutenant Commander Gonzales will take over as acting Captain until a replacement executive officer can be found.'

'She is quite capable of performing that duty.'

'I agree, however she only holds the rank of Lieutenant Commander and the billet of tactical officer because you swapped roles and ranks with Lieutenant Parker. Command wasn't exactly happy with that decision but Admiral Ranar pulled strings to keep the status quo. He won't be batting for you on this occasion as he believes, as I do, that you violated General Order 283 while in the mirror universe and possibly the Prime Directive in this one.'

'I did what I had to do to get my crew home, and the others from this universe trapped in that one. I stand by my decisions.'

Logan stood up. 'I would expect no less from a fellow Captain. The court-martial may even agree with your decisions, but that will not matter if your mental state is called into question. I know everything about you, Leza, and I hope to God that things work out for you because Starfleet can ill afford to lose commanding officers of your calibre. Things should be fine if your crew stand by you.'

'If that's all, Captain?' she asked through clenched teeth.

'Almost all, Captain. I'd like to see Cadet Snowcroft please, immediately; dismissed.'

Astar strode from the room and he sighed, throwing himself back into his chair. He hated giving orders like that but she did have it coming. As her immediate superior, he'd been responsible for making the decision as to whether a court-martial should be convened and the simple fact of the matter was that she had wilfully ignored standing Starfleet orders by assisting the Terran rebellion. He had passed her logs and his recommendation up the chain of command and they had agreed.

What she did completely changed the balance of power in that universe and could even have consequences for theirs. Command had only given him his orders for her just before the meeting, hence his being late for it. He should have relieved her regardless of the situation, but he was here and the admirals were there, so he believed he had a little leeway in that regard. What he told her was the truth. He needed her in command until after the battle.

The door chimed. 'Come.'

Cadet Maria Snowcroft entered the room and stood just inside the door. 'You wanted to see me, sir?'

'I did,' Logan replied. 'I've had my chief medical officer look over your genetic make-up and at first glance it does appear to be human. Since I'm sure you knew that entering "unknown" for your father's species would have raised red flags and plenty of questions, I understand why you put human. The question now remains what to do with you.'

The young woman squared her shoulders. 'I lied on my admission form, sir. I will accept whatever disciplinary action is deemed necessary.'

Logan smiled. 'Your situation is unique, Cadet. As far as my CMO can determine, there has never before been a time when a parent was of unknown species. Since it is unknown, it is therefore deemed non-hostile. As you know, we accept candidates from a variety of worlds, many of them former enemies. It is therefore my decision that you be returned to duty with no reprimand entered into your file.'

'Thank you, sir.'

'I will inform Captain Astar of my decision and you will report for duty at your next scheduled duty shift, dismissed.'

'Aye sir.' Snowcroft tipped her head in salute, turned and exited.

Logan stood up and left the conference room. At least of Astar's decisions was unwarranted, he just hoped that none of her more serious ones were. There still remained the logs of her other senior staff to go through, but he decided most of them could wait, at least for a little while. The chief engineer was a Romulan and he still didn't trust them, especially considering his most recent experience with them. As he walked to his office, he considered his own heritage, and wondered how many races there were in the galaxy who had such turbulent histories.



## **Chapter Two**

**USS *Pytheas***

**Starbase 535**

**Stardate 55433.8 (June 8, 2378)**

Lieutenant Commander Sheena Gonzales entered the bridge to find that the rest of the alpha shift were already there. She had intended to meet the captain before her shift started but a message had come in from Earth which had delayed her. Astar looked up from the console her chair and beckoned the acting first officer over. Gonzales sat down beside the captain after seeing Snowcroft at tactical.

'What do we have?'

'You can see the tactical plot here,' Astar replied. 'Any suggestions?'

'Make every shot count,' the Betazoid replied. 'Parker finally cracked a few hours ago and provided us with shield and weapons modifications which should punch through their defences, but we won't know for sure until we engage them.'

'Is there anything I should know?'

'The Cha'lav have small fighter-like craft and they can do significant damage because of their size and manoeuvrability. I was going to ask for permission to have all the shuttles from all the ships break off and go after fighters which the Cha'lav launch against us. That way, we can concentrate on the capital ships.'

Astar nodded. 'I want our best pilots on those shuttles. Larson stays here though, I need him at the helm.'

'It's all organised, I was just waiting on your order.'

'Planning ahead?'

'Contingency plans,' Gonzales replied. 'There are far too many ships, even with the Ynelavii contingent on our side. We do have an advantage though, and I plan to utilise it myself.'

'Go on.'

'The Eeroth missiles. We didn't give them back. They're still in our shuttlebay. They're capable of independent action. With that many Cha'lav vessels, there will be no lack of targets for them.'

'One of them needs to be manned, and it could be suicide,' Astar replied, lowering her voice.

'Captain, I'll have an emergency transporter beacon on me. Those missiles may be enough to turn the fight to our favour.'

'Who'll be at tactical?'

'Parker, she knows the Cha'lav better than any of us.'

Astar couldn't fault that selection but was wary of it at the same time. 'We're just waiting for word from Logan before we deploy. I want you ready to leave at a moment's notice.'

'I am,' Gonzales said. 'I have a site to site transport waiting for me on the primary missile.'

'Captain, incoming message from the Cha'lav on all local subspace frequencies.'

'On screen.'

It was an old Cha'lav-Reptilian that appeared on screen. A scar crossed through his right eye and he leaned forward. *'This is a message for all Federation and allied forces in this sector. Your galaxy has been selected for conquest by the Cha'lav Hegemony and you have chosen to fight back against a clearly superior force. In order to prevent rebellion being fomented, you will be destroyed unless you surrender immediately. There are no terms. Your surrender must be unconditional.'*

'I wonder what Captain Logan's response will be,' Gonzales muttered to her commanding officer.

'Something along the lines of "go to hell."'

*'This is Captain Logan of Starbase 535. I speak for all Federation forces in this region. You have committed numerous acts of aggression against the*

*Federation, its allies and protectorates. Any and all of these can be considered an act of war. Withdraw immediately or you will suffer the consequences. There will be no further warning.'*

'So I see,' Gonzales replied.

'*Then the battle is joined,*' the Reptilian stated and the communication ended.

'Incoming from the Starbase, Captain,' Snowcroft said. 'We're being ordered to our position. Cha'lav forces are on the move. First wave of vessels is entering the system. They'll be in weapons range in eleven minutes.'

'Larson, take us out. Gonzales, as soon as we're in position, launch the shuttles and keep the missiles on standby,' Astar said. 'Red alert. All hands to battle stations.'

'Aye sir,' they replied in unison.

The turbolift opened and Parker entered the bridge to relieve Snowcroft. The cadet stepped to one side but did not leave her post. Astar had replacements for all senior officers on the bridge, ready to take over if any of her alpha shift were injured and thus far, Snowcroft had been found to have a singular talent for tactical solutions.

'Captain, all stations report battle stations readiness.'

'Excellent, as soon as we're in position, deploy the SPRA network across the front lines.'

'Aye sir.'

The *Pytheas* moved into position proximate to the *Oxelus* and the *Independence*. The *Weisskopf* was closer to the starbase with the *Everest* and the other Ynelavii ships arrayed spatially above and below the main battle group. The *Gilded Talon* and *Ditagh* were cloaked and would be used when needed.

'Lieutenant, what weapons are the larger vessels likely to possess?'

'The large control ships have phasers and disruptors, plasma torpedoes and singularity cascades.'

'I've never heard of that.'

'You wouldn't have. Subspace weapons were banned by the second Khitomer Accords.'

Astar turned to face her chief of security. 'That introduces a problem. If they were to use one, we'd have no defence against it.'

'Neither would they, Captain. The weapon is used only as a last resort.'

'How do you know that?' Gonzales asked. 'How do you know any of this?'

'Now is not the time,' Astar replied.

'Captain, I think it is as good a time as any,' Parker replied. 'I come from what you know as the thirtieth century, where the Cha'lav had all but defeated the Federation and its allies. They had overrun most of the galaxy and the Federation made its final desperate assault at the Battle of Rura Penthe. We lost that battle but several officers were sent back through time to provide information about the Cha'lav at points we know they in our galaxy testing our weapons capability.'

The entire bridge crew looked at her. 'When was their earliest known entrance into our galaxy?'

'The 2150s, a period that was the final years of the Temporal Cold War.'

## **Chapter Three**

**USS *Pytheas***

**Kursican system**

**Stardate 55433.9 (June 8, 2378)**

'That explains why Captain Archer was never able to find out who the future factions were. It was probably all the Cha'lav playing sides off one another,' Gonzales said.

'No, the Federation was involved, as was the Vulcan Alliance.'

'The who?'

'A loose alliance of Vulcanoid peoples including the Vulcans, Romulus, the Watraii and the Mintakans.'

'The Vulcans seceded from the Federation?'

'We're in position, Captain,' Larson said and then joined the rapt crew.

'In 2698, in order to complete the Reunification which Ambassador Spock and his family had worked so hard for. The Alliance mustered as many Vulcanoid peoples as they could find to defeat the Cha'lav attack on Romulus. They were only partially successful. It was then that the Cha'lav started the Temporal Cold War in order to destabilise the quadrant by creating a Klingon civil war which would drag the other powers in, leaving them primed for an invasion.'

'Three minutes to weapons range,' Snowcroft informed them.

'Make final checks to all systems,' Astar ordered.

'Suffice it to say, I have been fighting the Cha'lav for a long time and I know a great many of their weaknesses, including their tactical errors.'

'Such as?'

'Their reliance on set tactics. They're not a very imaginative bunch.'

'If we're so much better, how did they beat us?'

'Sheer numbers. By the end of the war, ships kept pouring in through

hundreds of spatial rifts and we had no way of closing them. We were completely outnumbered.'

'Weapons range in one minute.'

'Stations people,' Astar ordered.

'The shuttles are in position,' Gonzales said.

*'This is Captain Logan to all vessels, do not open fire until they have. I will not be responsible for starting this incident.'*

'Acknowledge the message and lock weapons on the largest target. Prepare a full spread of photon torpedoes, target weapons and engines,' Astar ordered.

'Weapons and engines target locked,' Parker replied. 'The Cha'lav are now in weapons range.'

The seconds seemed to take forever to pass as the Cha'lav ships manoeuvred into attack positions. The large control ship which was the fleet's point vessel remained outside the system. Four cruisers, four destroyers and three fighter frigates entered weapons range, a third of the Cha'lav fleet in the area. The destroyers broke formation and headed for the *Weisskopf*, the *Independence* and the *Everest*, the smallest ships and easiest targets. They opened fire first and three of the Cha'lav fighters were blown away instantly by the *Everest's* phasers. The *Defiant*-class ships were small and mean.

'Wait until that control ship attacks.'

'Incoming!' Parker yelled as Astar saw another large vessel, a destroyer, moved into their line of fire.

The blast rocked the *Pytheas* but did little damage.

'Change target and fire!' Astar ordered and half a dozen photon torpedoes hurtles toward the destroyer.

It was too big to manoeuvre quickly and the torpedoes all impacted the shields over the fuselage. The shields flickered and died and without asking, Parker followed the barrage with a phaser volley. The destroyer's engines crumpled and the ship imploded.

'Damn, I was afraid of that,' the security chief muttered.

'What?' Astar asked.

'Some of those vessels are using singularity drives, more powerful ones than what the Romulans use, and easily capable of creating a black hole if we're not careful.'

'How big could the black hole get?'

'Big enough to swallow the system if enough of them merge.'

Astar and Gonzales shared a look. 'Is there a way to destroy the ships without the singularities imploding them?'

'No, there isn't. Most of the black holes that form will be too small to sustain themselves. But there is a danger that some will be.'

'We'll have to take that risk. Continue firing.'

'Sir, the *Weisskopf* has taken damage to its port nacelle. They're venting plasma.'

'Can we give them any backup?' Astar asked as the ship shuddered. 'What was that?'

'We're pinned down by three Cha'lav cruisers.'

'How are the shuttles?'

'Holding their own and taking out the fighters.'

Astar turned to her acting exec. 'Be ready to launch the missiles.'

Gonzales nodded. 'Larson, now would be a good time for one of your fancy tricks. Parker, as soon as you get clear shots, take them.'

'Aye sir,' the helmsman answered without turning round.

'My pleasure,' the hybrid Klingon added.

The *Pytheas* dived in a barrel roll on the z axis, taking it below the three

attacking cruisers while avoiding every shot from disruptor or torpedo alike, and giving Parker a clear shot at the engines of all three. She used the SPRA network to attack the shields and engines of one ship, phasers on another and torpedoes on the third. All three veered off to avoid the strikes but Parker gave them no edge and highlighted one particular target. The lead attack cruiser was vaporised in flame as the SPRA network made concentrated bursts of fire at the engines.

'One of the probes has been destroyed,' Talen stated. 'The *Independence* and the *Oxelus* are taking on the remaining destroyers.'

'What about our friends?' Astar asked after the Klingon and Romulan ships.

'They have not yet joined the fight.'

'There's a surprise,' Gonzales muttered. 'Where's the *Weisskopf*?'

'Captain Dhrex is leading the shuttle contingent in taking out the fighters.'

'Seems like we're winning out against the first wave,' Gonzales said. 'Not going to be so easy with the second.'

'The control ship is hailing us, Captain,' Parker said.

'Keep firing at those cruisers. On screen.'

The ship rocked as they were blasted from two sides but the Reptilian seemed to care not a jot. '*I want to keep your ship in one piece. You have something I want. Surrender and I will let you all live.*'

Astar sneered at him. 'How little you know us. We will die before surrendering to you.'

'*I want that half-breed wretch,*' the Reptilian spat. '*Hand her over and we will leave this sector.*'

'Not a chance,' Astar replied and terminated the conversation.

'Why is she so important?' Gonzales mused aloud.

'Because I am hunting someone who is important to them,' Parker replied. 'Prani has clearly been manipulating events and I don't like it.'



'None of us do,' Astar replied as the *Pytheas* bucked suddenly.

'Hull breach on deck seven, forcefields in place and control teams responding,' Talen stated calmly as he looked at the evolving tactical plot on his console.

## **Chapter Four**

**USS *Weisskopf***

**Kursican system**

**Stardate 55433.9 (June 8, 2378)**

Captain Dhrex grabbed the armrests with both hands as the *Nova*-class ship shuddered again. The lights dimmed and then came back on at less than a third of their standard level. Several consoles were dark, cracked but not shattered, and a quick glance around him showed that none of his bridge officers were dead.

'Damage report?' he ordered.

'Shields are down to seventy percent,' Lieutenant Commander Kareni Renn answered, the first to return to her station from the deck. 'Hull breaches on decks six and seven, aft torpedo launchers are down, internal communication and warp engines too. That hit to the port nacelle took the wind out our sails. We're venting drive plasma.'

'Let's just hope that Johnson can fix it all. I need you to concentrate on that fight.'

'Aye sir,' Renn replied. 'May I suggest that in our weakened condition we take command of the shuttlecraft contingent and take out the Cha'lav fighters?'

'Signal the shuttles and have them form up around us in two wings. As soon as they have locked a target, tell them to break and fire, we'll hold the rest off.'

'Aye sir.'

'Captain, incoming cruiser,' Ensign sh'Felen said from the helm even as she went into evasive manoeuvres. 'Epsilon-nine,' she added for the Denobulan's benefit.

Dhrex smiled thinly. 'Just make sure we're not hit. Fire all dorsal phasers and then roll over to hit them the ventral phasers. Follow it up with a volley of torpedoes. We have to protect the shuttles.'

'Aye sir,' sh'Felen and Renn replied, coordinating their manoeuvres.

The *Weisskopf* lurched forward as the Cha'lav cruiser fired and then let loose

the phaser barrages and torpedo volley. The intensity of the attack was too much for the cruiser and the torpedoes all impacted the unprotected hull, destroying the ship.

'Seven fighters destroyed, the remainder are focussing their fire on the allied ships, not ours.'

'Order the shuttles to pursue and destroy, we cannot let the Cha'lav get through our lines.'

'Aye sir, they're responding. The *Jarvis*, *Scobee* and *Babylon* are going after most of the fighters. The *Giza* and the *Onizuka* are trying to prevent the others from fleeing back to their lines,' Renn said. 'The allied ships, the *Everest* and the *Independence* have taken out the last of the destroyers. The cruisers are trying to pincer the *Independence* and the *Everest* has been damaged and fallen back.'

'Where are the shuttles?'

'Still rounding up the fighters,' Banks answered as he looked down at his console.

'All right, let's give them some help, find one of the fighter frigates and fire.'

'Captain, one of the cruisers is now headed our way!' sh'Felen yelled. 'They're on a collision course.'

'Evasive!' Dhrex called out.

Sh'Felen pushed the *Weisskopf* into a loop and the cruiser passed harmlessly below the shield envelope but then came around for another pass, firing its beams at almost point blank range. The *Nova*-class ship bucked and shuddered as the cruiser pounded it.

'We're losing attitude control,' Lieutenant sh'Freen, the operations officer called out over the din of the alarms. 'Hull breaches on all decks, life support failing. Damage control teams are responding.'

Banks jumped up to the tactical station. 'Renn's dead, sir. We've lost weapons.'

Dhrex cursed as he felt himself rise from his chair even though he was

secured by the straps. 'Gravity too,' he muttered.

'Helm's out,' sh'Felen added.

The ship shook harder than ever before and several crewmembers were thrown from their stations.

'Report.'

'That was the starboard nacelle being sheared off,' Banks said calmly.

'Do we have the tractor beam?' Dhrex asked.

'Just about.'

'Send it to the Cha'lav, a gift from us.'

Banks smiled. 'My pleasure, sir. Shame we can't wrap it.'

'Bridge to engineering.'

*'Johnson here, sir.'*

'I need weapons, fast.'

*'I can give you the aft launcher in a few seconds,'* the chief engineer replied.

Dhrex looked at Banks who nodded. 'That's great, we only need one shot.'

*'That's all you're likely to get.'*

'Incoming!' sh'Felen yelled and everyone grabbed on.

As the *Weisskopf* shook violently, Dhrex closed his eyes and muttered a prayer to an ancient deity that most of his people had forgotten. 'I suppose that was the port nacelle?' he asked.

'Yes sir,' his tactical officer answered. 'We have the aft launcher.'

'Is the cruiser still in range?'

'Yes sir.'

'Lock on to the nacelles and drop them in front of the cruiser, then fire a torpedo.'

'Sir, you are aware that at this range, and with our shields as weak as they are, we'll likely be badly hit.'

'I'm aware of that, Andy. Prepare to fire.'

'Aye sir.'

Dhrex activated the intra-ship comm. 'This is the Captain. As you all know we've been badly hit by the Cha'lav and we're about to try a dangerous manoeuvre to destroy the enemy ship. Even if it works we will likely be destroyed so I want all non-essential personnel to get to escape pods. They've been preprogrammed to make landfall on Kursica, where I hope you will be relatively safe. It has been an honour serving with you. That is all.'

'Ready sir, they're coming around...for a final pass.'

'Euhena, I'll take the helm. The rest of you get to your escape pods,' Dhrex said as the evacuation alarm sounded and he stepped down to take her place.

She looked at him and wiped away a tear. 'Aye sir.'

Banks waited for a few seconds. 'Escape pods are away, we can't wait any longer, sir.'

Dhrex narrowed his eyes at the main viewscreen. 'Do it.'

As twin tractor beams latched onto the drifting nacelles and pushed them in front of the oncoming Cha'lav cruiser, Dhrex turned the *Weisskopf* around so the working launcher was facing the enemy. It tried to avoid them by making its own evasive manoeuvres but Banks was too fast and the single torpedo detonated on impact what had been the starboard nacelle. The explosion took out the port nacelle as well and the conflagration crippled the Cha'lav cruiser.

'Coolant leak in engineering, sir,' Banks said as the *Weisskopf* was buffeted by the shockwave. 'With no one to stop it we're headed for a breach.'

'I know, get to an escape pod and save yourself. I'm going to ram the cruiser.'

'Sir!'

*'Warning, warp core breach in two minutes.'*

'Go!' Dhrex ordered. 'I'm going to take them out.'

Banks stood for only a moment longer. 'It's been an honour, sir.'

Once his first officer was gone, Dhrex loosed the log buoy before aiming his ship at the Cha'lav.

*'Warning, warp core breach in one minute.'*

## **Chapter Five**

### ***USS Independence***

#### **Kursican system**

**Stardate 55433.9 (June 8, 2378)**

Captain Sintina Aurelia grabbed the chair as the ship shuddered under the impact of a volley of shots from two Cha'lav cruisers. She pulled herself up to sitting position and narrowed her eyes at the flanking cruisers. Being a war captain, she knew how to get the upper hand in a fight, or she wouldn't be sitting in the chair today, but the Cha'lav was a completely different enemy to any she had fought before and thought differently to any species she'd fought before.

'Faltyne, target the port ship's engines. Use two quantum torpedoes, maximum yield. As soon as the torpedoes are away, fire phasers continuously, give them something to swat at. Signal the *Oxelus* to keep the starboard destroyer busy for a minute.'

'Aye sir,' the tactical officer replied. 'Target locked, weapons ready.'

The ship shook under another impact. 'Helm, I need you to make evasive Weston-six as soon as we launch the torpedo.'

'Ready, Captain.'

Next to her, bin Nadal gripped the armrest of his chair.

'Fire!'

The quantum torpedo hurtled toward the enemy, and the *Independence* followed a few hundred metres behind, firing continuous phasers from their forward strips. The phaser barrage had the intended effect and weakened the shields enough for the torpedo to punch through. It sliced through the engines, detonating on impact and the destroyer exploded, cerulean flame dancing in the void for a few seconds before the oxygen was gone.

'Yes!' Weston crowed.

'We still have the other one to deal with,' Faltyne reminded the helmsman. 'The *Oxelus* has taken damage and is falling back. The other cruiser is also falling back, and the remaining fighters are providing an escort.'

'The shuttles?' Aurelia asked.

'Still chasing the fighters,' Faltyne replied and then paused.

'Lieutenant?' bin Nadal asked, noting the expression on the tactical officer's face.

'The *Weisskopf* is gone,' he said with furrowed brows. 'It rammed one of the crippled heavy cruisers after detonating its warp nacelles against it. All escape pods have been launched, but the fighters are picking them off. The shuttles are having trouble catching up to them.'

Aurelia growled low in her throat. 'Helm, bring us about. Lieutenant, target the fighters and take them out. Do not miss!'

'Aye sir,' Faltyne replied. 'Three seconds to firing range.'

'Go to full impulse, look out for stragglers.'

'Aye sir,' Weston said.

The *Independence* side-swiped debris from two Ynelavii ships and took out two fighters before they could even reach the escape pods.

'Even the Dominion let the escape pods go,' bin Nadal muttered.

'The Cha'lav aren't interested in demoralising the troops, just destroying them,' Aurelia returned equally quietly. 'Get me a damage report.'

'I'm on it.'

'Sir, the escape pods have reached Kursica's atmosphere. The remaining fighters are breaking off.'

Aurelia considered her options. 'Give them the same chance they gave the pods,' she told the tactical officer.

'With pleasure,' Faltyne said. 'Captain Astar reports the first wave has been successfully countered. Captain Logan is asking all ships to return to original positions and wait for the second wave, which will be here in eighteen minutes.'



'All right, signal acknowledgement,' Aurelia replied with a sigh. 'All stations to make repairs as best they can. Karim, where's my damage report?'

'Hull breaches on five decks, aft torpedo launcher is out, phasers down to sixty percent charge and auxiliary shields are offline. Seventy wounded, eleven seriously, and eight fatalities.'

Aurelia slammed her fist into the arm of her chair before calming herself somewhat. 'I'm going down to sickbay. Please ask Captain Logan whether we have anything that can turn the tide of this battle.'

'We're being hailed,' Faltyne interrupted. 'It's Captain Logan.'

'*What's your situation, Captain?*' Logan asked.

Aurelia repeated her exec's report. 'We can't weather a second wave like that. Where the hell are the Klingons and Romulans?'

Logan grinned slightly. '*They've taken out one of the two control ships and the Cha'lav are now regrouping. We should have about an hour before they attack in their second wave. Before you give me a verbal browbeating, Captain, let me tell you that we have taken out a third of their ships, and lost only five of our own.*'

'Captain Dhrex and his crew deserve more than a footnote,' Aurelia countered angrily.

'*Most of the crew survived, but Captain Dhrex went down with his ship. Rest assured his death and every other that happens here today will not be a footnote. We will defend ourselves and we will win the day. Logan out.*'

Aurelia tugged her uniform down and then stood to face her crew. 'He's right, we will win but it won't be because we're defending ourselves. It will be because we're making a good offence against their lines. You have thirty minutes to give me options people and I want something that will take out as many ships as possible.'

'Sir, what do we do about the *Weisskopf's* shuttles?' Weston asked.

'Leave that to Logan and Astar, they might be able to make better use of them than we can,' she answered. 'There will be another wing or two of fighters in

the next wave and they can take those out.'

'Aye sir.'

'We could mine the system with cloaked quantum torpedoes,' bin Nadal suggested. 'As soon as they detect a Cha'lav signature, they attack and detonate.'

'It would take too long to mine a large enough area,' Faltyne replied. 'But we should keep it in mind if we need a longer-term plan.'

'I'll be in sickbay,' Aurelia replied. 'Keep thinking.'

As she made her way to where the injured lay recovering and her dead lay awaiting their afterlife, she considered her captaincy and the covert operations she was forced to take part in and the people she'd lost, the decisions she had been forced to make and the people she served with, and she realised that the centre seat was where she wanted to be. Regardless of who she had to face, friend or foe, she was a Starfleet captain and while she was in that chair she could improve the lives of countless millions, and that's exactly what she intended to do here. The Cha'lav would be made to pay for every kilometre they took.

## **Chapter Six**

**USS Pytheas**

**Kursican system**

**Stardate 55434.0 (June 8, 2378)**

Lieutenant K'Tyra Parker paced her quarters, thinking hard about the situation as she changed into a fresh uniform. The captain had given all alpha shift personnel a chance to shower and change considering the likely length of the next encounter with the Cha'lav. She would do the same once Gonzales, as acting first officer, returned to the bridge. The only way to prevent more deaths was to give herself up to the Cha'lav and she knew that Astar would never allow that, even though the Cha'lav couldn't be trusted anyway. What was needed was another ploy which would give them a fighting chance at winning this battle—and it came to her in a flash of inspiration.

'Parker to Astar, I think I have an idea.'

*'Observation lounge in five minutes,'* the captain replied.

'Aye sir, Parker out.'

She grabbed a padd and hastily scribbled down her idea and the problems associated with it. For it to work, they would need covering fire and there were only two vessels able to assist, and they both had to agree. The rest of the allied fleet would need to keep the Cha'lav busy and take the fight to them. Everyone was seated by the time she arrived and Astar let her have the floor.

'The only way we're going to stop the Cha'lav is by taking out that other control ship. Without it, the other ships will be on their own and easy targets. What I'm proposing is that two tactical teams beam aboard the control ship and take the bridge and engine room. With those sections under our control we can shut down the ship and then beam over more people to secure the Cha'lav.'

'How do you suggest we get aboard?' Gonzales asked.

'We fire tachyon bursts at their ship. They'll have to reset their shields and when they do, the teams beam aboard in stealth suits. The *Gilded Talon* and *Ditagh* will have to provide covering fire as they cloak and will confuse the Cha'lav sensors in their strafing runs. We can't do this without them.'

'What about the rest of the fleet?' Larson asked. 'We'll be leaving them three ships short.'

'The rest of the fleet will be attacking the remaining Cha'lav ships directly, outside the system. Leaving them no quarter to manoeuvre.'

'You're forgetting one thing, Lieutenant,' Astar said. 'The starbase will be undefended.'

'Not quite, sir,' Parker replied. 'While the starbase may not be as well armed as other starbases of comparative size, it still has sufficient weaponry to take out a Cha'lav cruiser. The Kursican weapons system was augmented with Starfleet technology. It is a formidable defensive force.'

'Let me speak with Captain Logan. He'll have to give final authorisation on this crazy plan of yours. In the meantime, prepare your tactical teams for insertion, security personnel only. I don't want to lose any more than I have already in this war.'

'Aye sir.'

'The rest of you, get your departments ready for insertion and attack. I want to be ready to go as soon as Logan gives the word.'

'And if he doesn't?' Talen asked.

'He will. He won't want to be playing defensive all the time,' Astar replied. 'Dismissed.'

Parker headed for her office and thought about who she could take with. All of her people had the experience and training, but she needed someone who was capable of using their initiative under fire. 'Ensign Faragas, report to my office for a briefing immediately.'

'*On my way,*' the Rigellian-Chelon answered.

'Parker to Xeris.'

'*Go ahead, Lieutenant.*'

'I need a stealth suit for Faragas, can you give me in half an hour?'

Xeris laughed. *'Are you crazy?'*

*'Yes or no, Commander?'*

*'You'll have it.'*

*'Thank you, Parker out.'*

By the time she reached her office on deck four, which had formerly been crew quarters on the first batch of *Intrepid*-class starships built almost a decade ago, Faragas was already waiting outside.

*'You wanted to see me, sir?'*

*'Come on in,'* she said and sat down at her desk. *'I need two tactical teams to infiltrate a Cha'lav control ship and take the bridge and engineering sections. I'll lead one, you'll lead the other. Everyone will be wearing stealth suits—Xeris is working on one for you as we speak—and we'll be leaving as soon as we're geared up. The heads-up displays will provide a real-time view of the layout gathered from my knowledge and from astrometrics.'*

Faragas looked at her and clicked his beak in what she knew was consternation. *'I take it that you believe we cannot win this battle?'*

*'As it happens, I don't. The Cha'lav have more than thirty ships in this galaxy, and I want to know where they are. There's also the additional problem of them being able to open a rift and bring in ships that could be waiting outside the galaxy for their moment of glory. The only way to know is get on that control ship and download the database, and interrogate that reptilian commander who wants me prisoner.'*

Faragas nodded his head. *'I assume you have provided the Captain with a means of getting us aboard?'*

*'I have.'*

*'Then all that remains to do is get our gear together.'*

*'Pick your team, Ensign and let's get to work.'*

*'Aye sir.'*

*'Astar to Parker.'*

*'Parker here, sir.'*

*'Captain Logan has given the mission a go, and both Subcommander Sokal and Captain Vikagh have agreed to take part. How are your preparations going?'*

*'I'm just picking the teams now, sir. We should be ready to go in thirty minutes.'*

*'You have twenty. The Cha'lav are regrouping faster than we expected them to.'*

*'Acknowledged, Parker out.'*

*'You knew we would be given the go ahead?'*

*'Starfleet doesn't like to play defence when offence is preferable.'*

*The Rigellian nodded. 'I look forward to this battle, Lieutenant. The Cha'lav have to be stopped and we are the vanguard of their downfall.'*

*'Well put, let's get to work.'*

## **Chapter Seven**

**USS Pytheas**

**Kursican system**

**Stardate 55434.1 (June 8, 2378)**

Lieutenant Parker was putting her helmet on when Astar entered transporter room one. The other five members of her team were already in their stealth suits and she couldn't even tell who they were, but would be able to once the heads-up display on her helmet was activated. In transporter room two, Faragas and his team were also gearing up for the insertion. Their timing needed to be perfect which was why the computer had been programmed to transport them as soon as the Cha'lav control ship's shields were down. They needed just four seconds for the sequence to complete—and she hoped it was going to be enough.

'Are you ready, Lieutenant?'

*'Yes sir, we should begin the tachyon run now.'*

'The rest of the fleet are in position, delta formation, and Captain Logan is ready to defend the starbase,' Astar told her security chief. 'We'll take point in formation and then break to fire the tachyon pulses. Once we start, you can be sure the Cha'lav will attack us without mercy.'

Parker nodded her agreement. *'Show them the same consideration, Captain.'*

'Of that you can have no doubt,' the captain replied and turned on her heel.

'*Sound off,*' Parker ordered her team.

*'All systems functioning normally,'* Hoya said, the Benzite sounding breathless through the suit.

*'All green,'* Snowcroft added.

*'All systems are go,'* zh'Velan chimed in.

*'My suit is fine,'* D'rass hissed.

*'All good, Lieutenant,'* Yuri Delco replied.

*'Faragas, are your people all set?'*

*'Yes sir, all suits are green.'*

*'Parker to Astar, we're ready down here.'*

*'Acknowledged, bridge out.'*

Parker waited, knowing that she would be unlikely to feel the tachyon pulses being fired and that the first moment she'd know it was successful was when the computer beamed her team onto the Cha'lav ship. She didn't have to wait long. The formation had already been on the move when they started to get into their suits. The transporter cycled up and her team dematerialised from the *Pytheas'* transporter pad, materialising inside a cargo bay on the cavernous control ship.

*'Weapons hot, set to kill,'* Parker ordered. *'Move out.'*

Taking point, she led her six-person team into the corridor. They encountered no resistance and she used hand signals to direct them. Heading along the corridor toward the forward part of the ship, they found a trio of Insectoid security guards on patrol and took them out before they could fire a shot. Unfortunately, a crewman passed by and let out a shriek. Snowcroft silenced him but the alarm had been raised and a klaxon sounded across the ship. Parker knew the Cha'lav couldn't use the gas trick they had done once before because there were too many people and they were in the middle of a battle, so she guessed they would just beam more security personnel into the section.

*'Incoming,'* D'rass hissed and pounced on a guard just as he finished materialising.

The falling guard scattered the others who had no idea what they were shooting at and started firing blindly hoping to hit something.

*'Everybody down low and fire,'* Snowcroft said and the others followed her lead, crouching or just hitting the deck and firing their phasers or phaser rifles.

The six remaining guards were taken out quickly but more materialised. *'We have to get out of this section or we're going to get pinned down,'* Delco muttered as he fired three shots in quick succession.



The phaser rifles were capable of firing pulses or beams and he had his in pulse mode, which seemed to be more effective. *'Pulse mode, everybody,'* Parker ordered as she rose and moved forward. *'We need to get off this deck. There should be a service hatch fifty metres ahead.'*

*'We're going to have to work for it,'* Snowcroft said as another phalanx appeared in front of them.

The six of them fired continuously as they stepped forward, changing position so the guards couldn't hit them but it was inevitable that one would get hit and D'rass took a blast on his suit which immediately failed. He stumbled and fell, ripped off his useless helmet and jumped into the fray before Parker could stop him. His suit had prevented the kill shot from being fatal but it still hurt and the suit smouldered from the burn.

*'Careful with your fire.'*

Snowcroft and Delco stepped aside from each other and took out the guards trying to flank them just another slammed into Delco. Before Snowcroft could change position, the guard lifted Delco off the ground and snapped his neck. Snowcroft used her rifle as a club and sent the guard sprawling before she finished him off with a pulse blast and turned to the others still fighting.

*'Maria, stop!'* Parker yelled.

Snowcroft did not heed the warning and fired continuously at anything that moved. Guards and crewmen who couldn't scramble out of the way fast enough all fell before her rifle as she almost single-handedly cleared the path to the service hatch.

*'All clear,'* she turned to face Parker as the others approached.

*'We'll be back for him,'* Parker promised on a person-to-person comm.

*'No we won't,'* the cadet replied angrily. *'This is a suicide mission and you know it. As long as we take out the control ship our job is done. We're security and we're expendable.'*

*'How did you know?'* Parker asked as they stepped through the hatch and began climbing.

*'This ship can hold over four thousand people. Twelve security officers will not be enough to secure the ship. You want us to get to the bridge and engineering and destroy them.'*

*'Yes I do, but I have no intention of dying here. There is a way to get off this ship and it is risky. It hasn't been tried by anyone other than Lieutenant Torres on Voyager five years ago but it's the only way. The Pytheas will have to be extremely close to the control ship to get us off.'*

*'I'm going to make sure we succeed. The rest is up to you,'* Snowcroft promised and Parker switched back to the team comm line as they climbed up the starboard forward service shaft.

## **Chapter Eight**

### **Cha'lav Control Ship**

#### **Kursican system**

**Stardate 55434.1 (June 8, 2378)**

Faragas and his team materialised in the auxiliary maintenance bay. There was no one on duty repairing any fighters or shuttles and he used hand signals to make his team split up. Two teams of three, one to exit the bay on the upper level and one team to exit on the lower level, increasing their chances of survival and mission completion. Cadet Jenak, Crewmen Richardson and th'Hakin took the upper level while Crewmen Zinkin and Ballantine joined Faragas by the doors on the lower level.

Faragas raised a hand and the six burst out into the corridors, stunning a dozen crewmen who were going about their business. A moment later, as they headed service hatches at the end of the corridors, klaxons sounded and the Chelon realised that his superior was in trouble. Unfortunately he wasn't going to be able to help her unless he was able to take engineering and shut down the warp core, which would make the ship go to auxiliary power and severely limit it's ability to help in the fight. He could only herd his people through the ship and make sure they did their part, but be ready to take the bridge or reroute control if necessary.

*'Let's go, this section is going to be flooded with gas or guards in less than a minute.'*

*'Unlikely, sir,' Zinkin said. 'Parker's team will be keeping the security forces busy while we get to engineering. They won't have expected two infiltration teams.'*

*'She's got a point, boss,' Ballantine agreed. 'The faster we get there, the less likely they are to notice us.'*

*'All right. Richardson, take your team down the port service shaft to the aft section of the upper engineering deck. I'll take my team through the starboard shaft to the forward section of main engineering.'*

*'Aye sir.'*

The open com-link meant that he could hear all the orders given by his team, but not by Parker's. They'd decided on different frequencies just in case they

were caught and their equipment used for counter-espionage. Faragas entered the service shaft last, and then swung the hatch back into place. The size of the ship was good for him considering his size compared to a Starfleet ship, he didn't need to duck through doorways or hug the wall if other large officers were walking by.

*'Sir, this hatch is welded shut,' Richardson told him almost half an hour later. 'They're going to hear us if we try and burn through.'*

*'Go down to main engineering and we'll the forward and aft sections at the same time.'*

*'What if those hatches are sealed as well?'*

*'We'll blow them.'*

*'Aye sir,' Richardson replied with a chuckle.*

The alarm klaxon stopped and Faragas wondered for a brief moment whether or not Parker's team had been captured. Then he held on tight as an explosion rocked the ship. He had no way of telling whether that came from a hull breach due to the battle raging outside, or if Parker and her team had blown up a section of the ship to throw off their pursuers.

*'We're in position,' Richardson called.*

*'As are we,' Faragas replied. 'The hatches are sealed here as well. We'll have to blow them. Set the charges.'*

*'Who seals an escape route from engineering?' Jenak asked. 'Unless they're using slave labour.'*

*'That's unlikely, considering the possibility of sabotage or mutiny,' the Chelon countered.*

*'Charges set,' th'Hakin said. 'Detonation in five.'*

Five seconds later, both teams flooded engineering as the doors blew inward. Using their heads-up displays, they were able to see the bewildered engineers and soldiers and took them all out with a heavy stun. Disruptor fire from above melted the deck where it hit and they dived for cover. The suits had been shorted out by proximity to the explosion.

*'Set to kill,' Faragas ordered and everyone changed settings.*

Well aimed shots took out three soldiers on the upper level but Richardson was felled by a pulse that melted his insides instantly. Th'Hakin and Jenak lay down covering fire for each other as they moved around engineering and took out two more guards. Faragas, Zinkin and Ballantine were mostly hidden from view and took turns taking pot shots at the soldiers on the upper level who moved into view to get a better line of sight on their near-invisible attackers.

Taking advantage of the distraction, Jenak and th'Hakin climbed to the upper level and took out the rest of the soldiers, leaving just bewildered engineers who cowered under consoles. Surprisingly, none of them had tried to sound the alarm.

*'All clear up here,' Jenak said.*

*'Get these engineers secure and seal us in here,' Faragas said. 'th'Hakin, I want you to start entering the commands Lieutenant Parker gave you. The sooner this ship is shut down, the better.'*

*'Aye sir,' the Andorian thaan replied as he reached one of the main consoles. 'Blast doors are coming down now. Shut-down sequence should take approximately three minutes. We should disable the auxiliary systems as well.'*

*'Do it.'*

He watched as his remaining three team members herded the engineers into the chief's office and sealed them in. In a large area such as this, only eleven engineers were on duty. It was a disquietingly small number, but this was the main engineering facility on the ship, so the astrometric scans told them.

*'Sir, there's a problem,' th'Hakin said. 'My commands are being overridden from the bridge.'*

*'Go to plan B,' Faragas replied, having expected this issue.*

Th'Hakin nodded sagely and took out his phaser, aiming it at the engineering console.

*'Wait!' one of the engineers cried out. 'You can disable the warp core over*

*there. It's an emergency shut-down.'*

*'How do I know you're not lying?'*

*'I'd rather be a prisoner of war than dead,'* the engineer replied and the others agreed.

*'You heard the man,'* Faragas said, indicating the console the engineer had pointed to. *'What species are you?'*

*'Cha'lav-Primate, low caste,'* he shrugged. *'Small enough for manual labour.'*

Faragas snorted in derision.

*'Shut-down in progress,'* the Andorian said with a grin just before a blast from a hidden soldier disintegrated him.

## **Chapter Nine**

### **Command and Control Centre**

#### **Cha'lav Control Ship**

**Stardate 55434.1 (June 8, 2378)**

'General, internal security has been compromised!' the Tactician cried out. 'We have intruders on deck twenty-seven and main engineering does not respond to commands.'

'Send soldiers, and keep your mind on the battle,' the Cha'lav-Reptilian leader replied absently. 'These Federation people and their pathetic allies should be no match for our might, and yet we are losing ships faster than they are.'

'The half-breed knows our weak points. She has been helping them,' the Tactician responded. 'You should have just destroyed the Federation vessel.'

'Perhaps, but I need to know what they know. Prepare a boarding party.'

'I will need to divert soldiers from the search for the intruders.'

The General finally turned to look at the pathetic Insectoid. 'Where are the soldiers?'

The Insectoid tactician shrank back. 'Protecting the Andorian on her cruiser, General. As you asked.'

'You left us with little defence, you insufferable fool. Go, I want you to personally see to the capture of the intruders.'

The Insectoid nodded and headed for the exit when the doors blew inward, rocking the ship and splattering him across the deck. Five aliens in black suits entered the command centre and fired at everyone by a console, felling them instantly. The one in front took off her helmet.

'General, I believe you know who I am.'

The ageing Reptilian attempted to stand but two of the suited figures stepped forward, weapons raised. 'What do you want, half-breed?'

'I want you to order your ships back into the Voidspace and leave this sector, and this galaxy.'

'I don't take orders from you,' he replied with a smile and then turned to his own command console. 'I see that engineering is now under your control. That won't last long.'

'Keep your claws where I can see them, General.'

'I think your time has just about run out,' he said as he entered a sequence of commands faster than her eye could see. One of the black suited figures fired at the console and the General screeched, grasping the stump of his wrist. 'You will pay for that.'

The figure pulled off its helmet. 'Consider that a down payment on my revenge.'

'Snowcroft, stand down.'

'Aye sir.'

'Now, where were we?' Parker asked sweetly. 'Oh yes, your surrender.'

'Never!'

A klaxon sounded and a male computer voice intoned. '*Shields inoperative. Weapons systems offline. Main power failing.*'

'You did this!' the General said.

'Yes, order your fleet to stand down.'

'Computer, signal the fleet to commence pattern black,' he said. 'Now watch everything you have worked for crumble to dust.'

'*Acknowledged.*'

Snowcroft headed for a console and looked up at Parker. 'The Cha'lav are heading for the starbase. There's no way it can stop the whole fleet.'

Parker nodded and touched a control on her suit. 'Faragas, how you doing down there?'

'*We're all clear, sir.*'



'I want you to scuttle the ship. Signal the Pytheas for beam out when you're ready.'

'Sir?'

'Code Angelo, Ensign.'

'Aye sir, Faragas out.'

'So I am to die at your hand? You are the animals we believed you to be.'

'You're not dying at all,' Snowcroft said as she stepped forward. 'You're coming with us.'

'I would rather die.'

'That's as it may be,' Parker replied. 'But you will be taken aboard our ship and held as a prisoner of war. Signal the evacuation if you care at all for your crew.'

The General looked at her for a moment and then used his good claw to tap out a single command. 'There.'

'All crewmembers to assigned evacuation pods,' the computer voice informed them. '*This vessel will self destruct in seven minutes.*'

'Satisfied?'

'For now.'

Parker smiled as the transporter beam took her people and one prisoner. She rematerialised on the *Pytheas* transporter pad and three security officers were waiting for her. They took the General into custody and she quickly stepped down as Astar entered the room.

'Captain, a successful trip.'

'So I see, the database has also been completely downloaded. Where are the fleet going?'

'To take out the starbase,' she replied. 'We need to get there first.'

'I'll order all ships to fall back to the starbase. You did a good job.'

'I lost one, and I don't know how many Faragas lost.'

'We have a high-level prisoner for Madden to interrogate and we've destroyed two control ships and over half their fleet. I'd say that was good going.'

'Sir, these thirty odd ships represent only about half the total number they have in the galaxy. Hopefully the database will provide more information on where the other ones are.'

'Where do you think they are?'

'I think that Andraprani is leading them somewhere.'

'The Delta Quadrant is where she's supposed to be headed.'

'The rest of the Cha'lav ships are probably with her then,' Parker replied.

*'Gonzales to Astar.'*

'Yes, Commander?'

*'Priority one from Captain Logan, sir. He says that three cruisers are on an attack vector and there are more heading in.'*

'Plot a warp jump to take us just outside weapons range of the starbase, Commander. I'll be there momentarily. I think it's time we used the missiles.'

'Aye sir, I'll prep them for launch. Gonzales out.'

'I guess we have another battle to wage,' Astar muttered. 'Get yourselves checked out and then return to your assigned station.'

'Aye sir.'

As Astar returned to the bridge, Faragas entered and she knew he'd lost someone. 'I'm sorry, Lieutenant.'

'Who?'

'Richardson and th'Hakin.'

'Did we recover their bodies?'

'I've got Richardson's, but th'Hakin was disintegrated.'

Parker sighed. 'His killer?'

'Jenak put some holes in him.'

'Both our cadets performed extremely well today. I'm putting them both in for commendations.'

'Bitter sweet,' Faragas murmured.

'Come on, let's get ourselves checked out. We might have more work to do today.'

'Are we expecting trouble on Kursica?'

'I think the Cha'lav may land ground troops. We're going to have to lead as many people as we can against them.'

'The Cha'lav are starting to itch my beak.'

Parker grinned a little. 'Well, you know what to do then.'

## **Chapter Ten**

### ***Starbase 535***

#### **Kursican system**

**Stardate 55434.2 (June 8, 2378)**

'Three cruisers on approach vector,' Lieutenant Commander Ryan McNamara said as he stared at the Core, the table in Ops where everything happened. 'They will be in weapons range in less than ten minutes.'

'Send a message to Captain Astar, I need some ships back here now,' Logan replied.

'The rest of the Cha'lav fleet are five minutes behind them. Our ships will be here momentarily.'

Logan sighed. 'Red alert, seal the Vault, raise shields and prepare for battle.'

'Should we warn the Kursicans?' McNamara asked.

'Open a channel to Regent Juhstraffe, gold channel.'

'Aye sir, channel open.'

'Regent, I need you to get everyone inside their homes and get security to every major population centre. We have a major battle going on up here and I don't want your people to get hurt.'

Juhstraffe appeared on the main Ops screen. *'Thank you for the warning, Captain, but I have already taken steps to protect my people. I also have a surprise for you.'*

'Sir, six vessels are approaching from the far side of the first moon,' McNamara said with surprise.

'Regent?'

*'My fleet, Captain, at your service and ready to defend the Kursican people.'*

'Thank you, Regent. Be safe,' Logan said and cut the channel himself. 'Ryan, have them form a ring around the starbase, equidistant from one another.'

'Defensive pattern echo-seven, aye sir.'

'Time to weapons range?'

'Four minutes,' he replied and then glanced at his readouts. 'The *Pytheas* just arrived with the *Ditagh*, the *Gilded Talon* and the *Independence*. The other ships are taking the Cha'lav from behind and slowing them down.'

'I guess we're about to see just how much of a pounding this place can take.'

'Yes sir, all weapons systems are charged and ready.'

'As soon as the Cha'lav are in range, lock targets and fire at will.'

'Yes sir, two minutes to weapons range. The Kursican ships have broken formation, sir. They're going after the cruisers, two a piece.'

'On screen. Give them covering fire.'

The four screens in Ops lit up and showed the battle raging. The Kursican vessels were hammering the Cha'lav cruisers but were barely holding their own. They just didn't have the firepower to make enough of a difference. The Starfleet ships had now joined the battle and were loosing their quantum torpedoes and devastating barrages of phaser fire at the cruisers. A quartet of destroyers entered the fray followed by the *Everest* and the Ynelavii ships, excluding the *Oxelus*, which had to fall back.

'Sir, the destroyers are heading this way, they've broken through the Ynelavii line.'

'Even numbered launchers, fire!'

Logan watched as two dozen torpedoes hurtled toward the destroyers. One was destroyed, one lost shields and the other two kept coming.

'Odd numbered launchers, fire!'

The third destroyer exploded but the fourth kept coming, even though it was breaking apart.

'Sound collision alarms,' Logan ordered as huge fragments peppered the shields. 'Where's that second destroyer?'

'Heading for the planet.'

'Take it out, phaser and disruptor banks, fire!'

The second destroyer wobbled and then blew apart, fragments heading through the atmosphere.

'That was too close, Commander,' Logan said as the starbase shook slightly. 'What the hell was that?'

'Fighters, Captain. They're attacking the shield emitters directly with strafing runs. They're too close to get a lock.'

'Who's out there?' the captain asked, trying to see through all the debris flying around.

'The *Independence* is leading the shuttles against the fighters. The *Everest*, the *Ditagh* and the majority of the allied ships are keeping the bulk of the remaining ships away. The *Pytheas*, the *Gilded Talon* and the rest are assisting the Kursican ships against the cruisers.'

Logan watched the battle unfold as McNamara fired with every clear shot he had. The three Cha'lav cruisers had taken out half the Kursican ships and two more Ynelavii Cooperative vessels. The *Pytheas* suddenly executed a bizarre manoeuvre and almost rammed one cruiser, which exploded as the *Pytheas* flew through the expanding debris cloud. The *Everest* took a couple of torpedoes to the hull and fell back, out of the battle and one of the two remaining cruisers made a suicide run at the *Gilded Talon*. Both vessels exploding in the upper atmosphere of Kursica.

Another wing of fighters broke through the rear lines and destroyed the *Jarvis* and the *Babylon* before commencing their attack runs on the starbase itself. The *Independence*, the *Scobee*, the *Onizuka* and the *Giza* took up flanking positions and took out the fighters as they approached the starbase.

'What in God's name is that?' Logan asked, pointing to the central screen, where the largest Cha'lav vessel yet seen just dropped out of warp.

'That must be where the new fighters just came from.'

'I need whatever we have focussed on that monstrosity,' Logan ordered.

'This is McNamara to all ships, focus your fire on that behemoth,' he said and then paused. 'Look, they're leaving.'

Logan watched in utter surprise as the remaining Cha'lav vessels flocked to the enormous ship, entered gigantic shuttlebays and then there was a single blinding flash of light which shook the starbase to its core. When the screens reset, the ship was gone.

'I want to know what our losses were. Did you get much on sensors?'

'I got plenty,' McNamara said and looked up in shock. 'Captain Drummond is gone, sir. Everything is gone. Every physical piece of Cha'lav technology and the corpses we have. It's all gone.'

'Check with the *Pytheas* and see if their prisoner has gone. In the meantime, start the clean-up operation. There's a lot of debris out there. Ask Juhstraffe where, if anywhere, those hull fragments landed. We'll have to get rid of those as well.'

'Aye sir. Captain Astar reports that her prisoner was not taken. It appears as though we were the target of the transporter beam. Damage reports are starting to come in. Our losses were sixty percent but the Cha'lav fared worse.'

'See if you can get through to Madden. I saw the *Everest* take a pounding.'

There was a pregnant pause before McNamara responded. When he looked up, his face told the story. 'The *Everest* is gone, sir.'

'What do you mean, gone?'

'The crew of the *Oxelus* saw that *Behemoth* beam it up.'

## **Chapter Eleven**

**USS *Pytheas***

**Kursican system**

**Stardate 55434.4 (June 8, 2378)**

Captain Leza Astar was bored.

In the five hours since the battle had suddenly ended, the damage her ship had taken had mostly been repaired by the damage control teams and the debris which now littered the system was slowly being beamed aboard for analysis or vaporised. Almost a third of her crew were injured and she'd lost eleven, including two on the *Jarvis*. The *Weisskopf's* one remaining shuttle was on Kursica tracking the escape pods and rounding everyone up. The other ships were either still repairing their own damage and counting their dead, or assisting with the clean-up.

'Captain, we're being hailed by Captain Logan again,' Gonzales said.

'On screen,' Astar replied. 'Captain, what can I do for you?'

*'I want to know where the Everest is.'*

'As soon as we're through cleaning up our grid, I'll retrieve my people and we'll track them down, but it will be difficult without a warp trail,' she replied softly.

*'Is there no evidence at all?'*

'I have astrometrics working on it, Lionel, but they haven't come up with anything so far. As soon as I know anything, I'll let you know.'

*'Thank you, Leza. I'd appreciate that. I thought you might like to know that McNamara is having a nice conversation with the General. He's being incredibly cooperative.'*

'That doesn't sound good.'

*'Believe me, it isn't. That large vessel is apparently a Cha'lav-avian warship. They're unhappy that this galaxy is not falling to them as quickly as they'd hoped and are now taking control. The avians are the highest caste and the leaders of the Hegemony. I guess we got them angry.'*



Astar sighed. 'How many ships of any size could that behemoth hold?'

*'Enough to wipe out this entire sector, according to the General.'*

'Put the Federation colonies on alert, Captain,' Astar said. 'They'll be the first targets.'

*'Good thinking, Logan out.'*

Astar turned to Gonzales. 'Commander, finish this grid as soon as you can then set course for the nearest Federation or allied colony. The Cha'lav will likely take them all out. Have all allied ships return to their homeworlds at best speed. If we can stop the Cha'lav-avians we may well be able to make them think twice about our galaxy.'

'Aye sir,' Gonzales replied. 'They may also decide to leave subtlety aside and approach us with a full on invasion.'

'Which would leave their other galaxies undefended. I don't think they have as many ships as they'd like us to believe, just more powerful ones. What's the closest allied colony?'

'New Tokyo,' the tactical officer answered. 'And we've just finished this grid.'

'Where all this started two months ago,' Astar muttered. 'Get everyone back on board. Larson, set a course for New Tokyo, maximum warp.'

'Aye sir, course and speed laid in.'

'The shuttles are aboard, Captain.'

'Tell Logan where we're headed and let's go. Gonzales, you have the conn.'

As the *Pytheas* jumped to warp, Astar entered the ready room and sat down on the sofa by the window. She doubled over in pain and clutched her sides, noticing that the ankle bracelet monitoring her vital signs was flashing red. Maxx would be in momentarily to check on her and warn her that she was pushing herself too hard, that she was going to kill herself and the symbiont if she didn't slow down.

'What the hell are you trying to do, kill yourself?' Maxx asked as the doors slid

open.

'I knew you were going to say that,' Astar grimaced.

'You need to take more care of yourself right now. Try not to get agitated and you might live long enough to get back home and perform the Zhian'tara.'

'We're in the middle of a war, Doctor. I can't just be all nice and fluffy.'

Maxx smiled grimly. 'You've never been fluffy, Aunty. I'm giving you a broad spectrum shot which should make you feel better, for a while. Next time you feel this coming on, notify me immediately. I don't want to have to put you in stasis again.'

'I need to function,' she said as she felt herself feeling heavy. 'What did you give me?'

'A sedative. You need to rest.'

'Need to...' she said rising and fell back down again.

'You need to rest,' Maxx said and moved her into a lying position.

Within seconds, she'd curled up into a foetal ball and was snoring. Maxx tapped his combadge. 'Gonzales, please see me in the ready room.'

Gonzales entered and saw Astar asleep. 'What's going on?'

'She's pushing herself too hard and the symbiont is getting worse. I don't want you waking her until she wakes up on her own. Even if we come under attack. If she doesn't stay calm, she'll be dead before we get her back to Trill or somewhere a Guardian can help her.'

'Doctor, you realise that you've just placed me in command.'

He nodded sombrely. 'I know. Try not to get us all killed.'

Gonzales sighed and watched the captain for a few seconds until Maxx left, then she returned to the bridge and took the centre chair. It wasn't her first time in the chair, but she didn't feel she belonged there this time. They'd lost their first officer to another universe and now their captain was in danger of dying because of a powerful compulsion to return home and complete a

ritual.

'Sir, we're receiving a message from *Starbase 535*.'

'On screen.'

'*Commander?*' Logan asked.

'The Captain is resting and cannot be disturbed, sir. Is there a problem?'

'*I'd say. The General is dead. He committed suicide, some kind of neural implant.*'

'Damn,' Gonzales muttered. 'Were you able to get any more information out of him?'

'*Only that each galaxy has one of those avian ships in control, always on the move. The home galaxy has a dozen of them, and he's given us the location of that galaxy.*'

'Could he have been part of a rebellion?'

'*I hope so. If he was, he's just given us the biggest piece of intel we could have hoped for.*'

'At what cost?' Gonzales asked.

## **Chapter Twelve**

***USS Pytheas***

**New Tokyo system**

**Stardate 55437.7 (June 9, 2378)**

Prefect Kuwata materialised on the transporter pad and immediately stepped down, facing off against Captain Astar. 'The fact I do not wish to meet you as soon as you arrive is no justification for yanking out of a council meeting.'

'Actually, Prefect, it is,' Astar replied calmly, still smarting from her artificial nap induced more than a day ago. 'There is a warship in the sector which is larger than anything Starfleet has in its arsenal and we believe that it is heading here in order to destroy this colony.'

'Because we're human?'

'Because you're a Federation colony.'

'We renounced our Federation citizenship over two months ago. I guess I was right, you really don't let people go all that easily.'

'This isn't about being a Federation citizen. Your people are in danger and we can do nothing to stop them if they decide to attack. That ship is the size of a small asteroid and it has dozens, perhaps hundreds, of smaller vessels inside it. If you won't evacuate the colony, then I'll do my best to protect you, but I'm afraid it won't be enough.'

'You're serious,' the old man said, looking into her eyes. 'You're wise beyond your years but you are scared. Not just for us, but for everyone. This ship represents that great a threat?'

Astar nodded. 'Let me put it this way, I would make an alliance with the Dominion if I thought it would help.'

Kuwata nodded. 'Thank you for your honesty, Captain, if not your methodology. However, we have built homes here and we won't leave. Asking you not to defend us is likely an argument I would lose, is it not?'

'It is.'

'Then good luck and I hope the ship does not arrive.'

'So do I, Prefect.'

Kuwata returned to the transporter pad and disappeared in a whirl of atoms.

Astar turned to the operator. 'How many people are down there?'

'Eight thousand and twenty three. We couldn't evacuate them all if we tried and they only have two atmospheric skimmers for travel.'

'If it comes to it, we'll take the children first and as many young women as we can hold. If communication goes down those are your standing orders unless otherwise countermanded. Is that understood?'

'Yes sir.'

'Good, I just hope it doesn't come to that.'

'*Red alert. Captain to the bridge,*' Gonzales called out over the comm. '*All stations prepare for battle.*'

Astar reached the bridge in less than two minutes. 'Report.'

'That ship has just dropped out of warp,' Gonzales replied from the exec's chair. 'Long range communication is being jammed and at least four wings of fighters are positioned as escorts for the vessel. We're no match for that many fighters or the ship itself.'

Astar dropped into her chair. 'Hail them.'

'Aye sir,' Snowcroft replied from tactical. 'They're responding.'

'*This is Lord Ashal of the Cha'lav Hegemony First Fleet,*' the massive avian form told her. '*I am not interested in your surrender, or your lives. For the destruction of our vessels, your people have been sentenced to death. All Federation worlds, colonies and ships will be destroyed. Any who ally with you will suffer the same fate. Once we have conquered this sector, we will move on. What do you have to say in your defence?*'

Astar stood up. 'This planet renounced its Federation citizenship two months ago. They are longer a Federation colony.'

'Then why are you here?'

'I believed you would destroy this colony for being populated by humans, a Federation member race.'

*'Then you are wrong. We cannot have an Empire if there is no one to control. This colony now belongs to the Cha'lav and you are trespassing. Withdraw immediately or you will be destroyed,'* he said and the screen to the view of the giant starship.

'Ensign, get us out of here, maximum warp.'

'Aye sir, engaging.'

'Was that wise, sir?' Gonzales asked.

'I just saved eight thousand people. I think it was a good decision. Get Logan for me as soon as we're out of jamming range.'

'The jamming signal is gone sir,' Snowcroft replied. 'Receiving a distress call from the colony, audio only.'

'Put it on.'

*'This is Prefect Kuwata of New Tokyo to the Pytheas or any ship in range. We are under attack. Ground troops have landed and they're executing all the able-bodied men. Repeat....This is Prefect...'*

'It's on a repeating loop, sir.'

Astar narrowed her eyes. 'Bring us about, it's time we showed the Cha'lav that we will not go down without a fight. Break out the compression phaser rifles and have Parker ready to take security down to the surface.'

'Aye sir,' Larson and Gonzales replied.

'Time of arrival three minutes,' Larson added.

'Parker reports being ready, sir, and requests all people with security training be drafted for a mission of this scope.'

'Permission granted.'

'She's ready for beam down, sir. Has teams in all transporter rooms awaiting transport.'

'Gonzales, launch the missiles as soon as we drop out of warp. They are going to be our only hope of stopping this ship.'

'Aye sir. Computer, initiate site-to-site transport Gonzales-1.'  
She dematerialised and Astar was left standing alone in the centre of the bridge. 'Astar to transporter room one. Keep a lock on Gonzales.'

'Aye sir.'

'Approaching the planet, sir,' Larson said.

'Ensign, slow to impulse. Snowcroft, drop shields. Gonzales, launch missiles. Parker, energise.'

The *Pytheas* slowed to sublight speed and the shields went down as Parker transported forty-eight people to the surface in twelve seconds. Gonzales piloted the fleet of seventeen missiles into open space and headed for the Behemoth's weapons and engines. The shields went back up just as a wing of fighters began an attack run. The *Onizuka* and the *Scobee* launched from the shuttlebay a moment later to take care of the fighters as the Behemoth turned to fire it's primary weapons at the Starfleet ship.

'Brace for impact!'

## **Chapter Thirteen**

**USS *Everest***

**Inside the Behemoth**

**Stardate 55437.7 (June 9, 2378)**

Commander Martin Madden railed at himself for allowing his ship to be taken prisoner. All his crew were still aboard and they were all fine, except for the fact that they could not move the ship out of the cavernous hangar bay. The last time they tried, a disruptor beam hit the port nacelle, vaporising half the components, and he had no intention of that happening to the starboard nacelle.

'Doesn't anybody have options?'

'Sir, I've managed to hack into their security feed,' Lieutenant Maurice Tobias, his tactical officer, answered with a grin.

'Can you disable the weapons out there?' Lieutenant Commander Karl Archer, the ship's executive officer, asked.

'No sir, but I can tell you we're in orbit of New Tokyo, or what will shortly be left of it.'

'On screen,' Madden ordered.

The bridge officers watched as the colony's housing was destroyed from orbit and then fighters heading into the atmosphere to deal with the people.

'What else can you see?'

The tactical officer changed views. 'The *Pytheas* is attempting to destroy this ship, but even with the Eeroth missiles hammering at the shields over the engines, they're not doing much damage. The Behemoth is just too big.'

'I've had enough of just sitting here. If they're not going to interrogate us, we're leaving. Think you can hit those doors with a torpedo?'

'It's a big target, sir.'

'On my mark, raise shields and fire a quantum torpedo at the doors. At the same time, we're going to full impulse and we're going to eject the warp core



after setting it to detonate. I expect they'll take out the other nacelle once we start to move, but that's fine.'

'Sir?' Archer asked. 'What exactly are you planning?'

'An antimatter explosion should take out enough of the ship for the *Pytheas* to finish her off.'

'You realise that we could well be destroyed if we do this, sir?' Archer said.

'What would you prefer, Commander, sitting here and watching all those people die, or dying and making the Cha'lav pay for every life they've taken?'

'Since you put it that way, sir,' Archer replied. 'Helm, prepare to take us to full impulse. On your mark, sir.'

'Mark.'

'Shields up, torpedo's away. Full impulse, now!'

The *Everest* lifted off the deck and hurtled toward the hangar doors. As expected, the internal security system vaporised the starboard nacelle just as the quantum torpedo blasted a hole in the doors. The *Everest* punched through and ejected the core, the shields barely protecting them from the broken bay door fragments. Twenty seconds later, the entire rear of the ship exploded outward in a massive antimatter explosion.

'Yes!' Madden yelled.

'Shockwave incoming,' Lieutenant Merrit Tannis, the Bajoran helmsman, added. 'Brace for impact.'

Madden watched the screen as a large secondary explosion occurred toward the centre of the ship.

'That would be their fusion reactors.'

'Open a channel to Captain Astar.'

'*Thank you for your fantastic timing,*' Astar said.

'Not soon enough it looks like,' Madden replied as he saw the state of her

bridge.

*'We're still in one piece, but you look like you lost a few parts. Have you got any security personnel you can spare for ground troops?'*

'I think so, I'll organise it. We've still got weapons.'

*'Take out as many fighters as you can. We'll handle what's left of the ship.'*

'Acknowledged, Madden out.' The screen blanked and he saw the Behemoth losing attitude control and banking towards the planet. 'I hope she can take out that ship before it hits the atmosphere.'

'Sir, there's a wing of fighters approaching. Weapons range in eight seconds.'

'Don't ask my permission, just fire at will.'

'Aye sir.'

The fighters approached, surrounding the *Defiant*-class ship, but these ones had not witnessed the Battle of Kursica and were ill-prepared for Tobias' savagery. The *Everest* went into a dizzying spin, the inertial dampers whining in protest at the punishment they were receiving, and Tobias fired phaser and torpedo volleys in a constant barrage which whittled down the fighters quickly. As they came out of the spin, another wave of fighters attacked, but more torpedoes were already loosed and the phasers took out those the torpedoes missed.

In a matter of minutes the fighters were gone and the *Everest* turned back to the Behemoth to see it plunge into the atmosphere, churning up ozone in its wake. The *Pytheas* was following it down and pelting it with constant fire, and the last of the Eeroth missiles, but nothing seemed to be taking out the immense vessel.

'What will happen when that thing makes planetfall?'

'The speed and size of the ship will not cause the same damage as an extinction level event, but depending on where it lands, there will likely be tectonic and seismic activity, atmospheric storms, ozone depletion, intense radiation and a good proportion of the planet's native flora and fauna will die out,' Ensign Andok said from the science station.

'How is that not an extinction level event?' Archer asked.

'The population will survive with outside assistance.'

Madden sighed. 'Get Logan for me. New Tokyo are going to need some help unless they're planning on dying out.'

'Commander, I can't reach the starbase. The radiation from the explosions is preventing a signal from getting through.'

'All right, where's the *Pytheas*?'

'In the lower atmosphere, approximately three hundred kilometres above and five hundred kilometres due east of the impact site. The radiation down there is intense and I'm having trouble getting accurate readings.'

'Put us in a low orbit and let me know the moment you make contact with either the *Pytheas* or the starbase.'

'Aye sir.'

'Commander, are you all right?' Archer asked sotto voce.

'Oh yeah, just peachy. I'm sitting in a crippled ship while my colleagues are out of contact at the site of a near-extinction level event and eight thousand people are being butchered by a hegemonic empire.'

'Well, since you put it like that...'

'Sir, I'm getting through to the *Pytheas*. It's a weak signal, but I have them.'

'On screen.'

The bridge was almost completely dark and the amber radiation alarm could be seen alongside the crimson alert lighting. Half the bridge crew were on the deck and Astar was in her chair, trying to stay upright.

'We have to get down there,' Madden said.

'There's nothing we can do in our current condition. They're on their own,' Archer replied.

## **Chapter Fourteen**

***USS Pytheas***

**New Tokyo**

**Stardate 55437.8 (June 9, 2378)**

Ensign Daniel Larson pulled himself upright and stumbled into his chair. He fought unconsciousness and hunched over the helm console as he flew the ship out of the mushroom cloud created by the Behemoth's impact on the surface. Around him, the rest of the bridge tried to return to their stations in the dark. From his console, he could see that the shields were just about holding the radiation at bay but if they remained in proximity for much longer, they'd all start to die. Main power was offline and he was using auxiliary thrusters to move the ship away from the prevailing winds. As soon as they were clear and more than a hundred kilometres from the impact site, systems started to come back online.

'Ensign, don't move,' Astar croaked from her chair. 'The carbon dioxide levels on the bridge are too high to breathe properly.'

'Life support is coming back online,' Talen said. 'I need less oxygen than you do, I can still breathe well enough. It will be a few minutes before you start to feel it. Main power is still offline and we're operating on auxiliary backups.'

'What about the ship?' Gonzales asked.

'Decks thirteen through fifteen have suffered extensive radiation damage. They will need to be completely decontaminated. Recommend we evacuate deck twelve as well.'

'How many people?' Astar asked, turning to face him.

'I don't know, sir. Internal sensors are offline.'

'Cancel the radiation alarm and get damage control teams to deck twelve to start the evacuation.'

'Aye sir.'

'What about our teams on the surface?'

'They're not in the danger zone, and are still taking care of the Cha'lav problem. Once that's done they'll get everyone to a safe location,' Gonzales said. 'Parker's trained to do this, better than I am.'

'Get us on the ground, Ensign.'

'I wouldn't recommend it, sir,' Larson replied.

'Why not?'

'We can make it back into a stable orbit, but if we land I'm not sure we're getting off the ground again.'

Astar made a decision. 'Objection noted, Ensign. Go to blue alert and prepare for landing.'

'Aye sir, blue alert.'

Usually, the warp plasma was vented from the nacelles before entering the atmosphere, but there was enough radiation that the warp plasma dissipated almost instantly, and the warp core was already offline. Larson felt the ship slip sideways as they landed a few minutes later, but the landing struts held them steady and he took the impulse engines offline, matching the inertial dampers to the planet's gravity.

'We're down,' Talen said. 'Damage control teams are already decontaminating deck thirteen. Recommend we remain here until all systems are repaired.'

'Negative, Lieutenant. We'll do what we can but I intend to get us back to Kursica as soon as possible. With the majority of their fleet destroyed, the Cha'lav will have at least one more go. We know there is at least one more control ship in this galaxy if the reports from the other side of the sector were accurate.'

'They were, Captain. The *Independence* checked them out. The entire population was either killed or enslaved.'

'As soon as main power is restored and the warp core is back online, we're leaving. I want no more discussion on the subject.'

The turbolift doors opened and Petty Officer Beaujolais entered, carrying a medkit and travel pouch. 'Everyone is to be given hyronalin injections, doctor's orders.'

'What sort of injuries do we have?' Astar asked as received her shot.

'Everyone on decks fourteen and fifteen died from radiation sickness, but those on deck thirteen will recover in time, provided there are no complications. There are lots of broken bones and bruises but nothing else life threatening,' the medical technician answered honestly. 'I'm sorry, Captain.'

'Not half as sorry as the Cha'lav will be,' Gonzales muttered.

'Where's Maxx?'

'He's performing surgery right now and the EMH is setting bones and dealing with bruises.'

'Astar to engineering?'

*'Xeris here, Captain. Is it urgent? I'm kind of busy down here.'*

'I need to know how the ship is.'

*'Almost everything is offline. Auxiliary systems are the only things keeping us alive right now. The warp core is riddled with microfractures and I need to seal them before I can bring it back online. Shields and weapons are out until main power is restored but I have life support functioning for now. I hope you're not planning on taking us back into the radiation zone, the main computer core nearly suffered a cascade failure last time.'*

Astar sighed. 'Thank you, Commander. That will be all.'

'I'd like you to come to sickbay, Captain. Doctor Maxx wanted you and the symbiont checked out.'

'We're fine.'

'Sir, in your current condition, I have to insist,' the young man pressed nervously.

'Mister Beaujolais, you're not in any position to insist,' Astar replied and it seemed to galvanise the med tech.

'Sir, if you don't report to sickbay immediately I'll have you relieved of duty, pending a full physical check-up by the chief medical officer.'

'Fine, Gonzales, you're in command until I get back.'

'Aye sir.'

The two of them left the bridge and Larson started laughing uncontrollably.

'Ensign?'

'I can't help it,' he said between fits of laughter. 'I don't know what's wrong with me.'

Talen approached him with a tricorder. 'I'm reading elevated nitrogen levels in your blood.'

'Check everyone,' Gonzales ordered and tapped her combadge. 'Xeris, we may have a problem with the life support system. Check the nitrogen levels.'

*'Hu'fret, what's the nitrogen reading?'* they heard him call out.

*'There's almost no oxygen in the life support systems. We're all breathing nearly pure nitrogen,'* Hu'fret replied, panicking.

'I'm opening all access hatches to increase oxygen flow,' Talen said and did so. 'We should be all right in a few minutes. There will be some more deaths though, especially for species that need a lot of oxygen,' he added sadly, his antennae drooping.

'Get medical teams to those personnel immediately, use the shuttles' transporters if you have to,' Gonzales ordered.

'Already on it,' the Andorian replied.

## **Chapter Fifteen**

**USS *Pytheas***

**New Tokyo**

**Stardate 55437.9 (June 9, 2378)**

Astar and Beaujolais arrived in sickbay after travelling the Jeffries tubes through half the ship since main power was still down and with it so were the turbolifts, and found over thirty people crammed in, all being treated by med techs, nurses and the EMH. She looked around and didn't see Maxx, then turned to Beaujolais who shrugged.

'I thought he would have finished the surgery by now. Let me go and check. Find a biobed and sit down please.'

Astar grouchyly complied and waited for almost five minutes before Beaujolais returned, with the doctor. 'Sorry to have kept you, Captain. The surgery didn't go as planned.'

'What happened?'

'Ensign Benson was thrown across the shuttlebay when she landed and fractured a number of bones, including her spine. I was able to repair most of the damage but there's nothing I can do about her spine until I have access to a genitronic replicator.'

'Starfleet still has doubts about its uses, Doctor.'

'Yes, but it saved hundreds of lives during the war, which is the only reason that they're still in use. I will have to petition Starfleet Medical to authorise it's use though. I didn't ask you to come down here to discuss the use of genitronics, Captain. I want to check you out completely since Trill are notoriously susceptible to certain forms of radiation. I want to make sure that neither of you has been adversely affected.'

'I understand, but please make it quick. I can see you have more pressing matters to attend to.'

'I have a full staff and an EMH to handle everything. As much as I hate to admit it, that program does have it's uses and isn't completely incompetent.'

'You still prefer the Mark-I don't you?' she asked as he began waving a



medical tricorder over her abdomen.

'His bedside manner was atrocious but he was a damn good doctor. The Mark II and III were dithering idiots, third year medical students, and I hated them almost as much as the Mark I. At least the next ones were passable.'

'What is your problem with the Mark VII?'

'You mean other than the fact that my medical staff keep changing her visual parameters?'

'I noticed that she looked like a rather attractive Vulcan woman the last time.'

'Do you know who that was? It was T'Pol, the first Vulcan to serve on a Starfleet vessel, two hundred years ago. I prefer her looking like that,' he added, pointing over his shoulder.

Astar craned her head. 'I suppose she's pretty enough.'

'Her bedside manner still needs work, but her medical knowledge easily surpasses her predecessors.'

'How's the symbiont?'

'Minor radiation poisoning, but nothing that it can't heal itself from. You on the other hand, are a different matter altogether.'

'What's the problem?'

'Your neurological condition is deteriorating again,' Maxx told her. 'I couldn't find it before, but it's clearly there now. The poison that Wright dosed you with caused a slow degeneration in your neural tissues. Because you were in stasis, the effect was slowed and took time to going again, but it's working fast. Coupled with your other condition, I'm worried that this will cause a complete neurological breakdown which cannot be repaired.'

'Putting me back in stasis until we reach home is not an option, Doctor. We have no first officer and I don't want to leave the ship without a captain either.'

'If you don't let me treat you, you will both die.'

Astar looked up at him and considered her options. 'Is there anything you can give me to slow the degradation, even temporarily?'

'There are no drugs I can give you which will alleviate the symptoms, but a neural stimulator, applied regularly three times a day for ten minutes, may be enough to slow the damage until we return home. You must continue to use it or will be ineffective.'

'As long as I'm in command we'll get home and you can do anything you need to then.'

'There's nothing I can do. I'm hoping the Guardians might be able to assist you, or you'll have to have the symbiont removed before you die.'

Astar nodded, patting her abdomen. 'I understand, Doctor. I am hopeful that we can return home sooner rather than later.'

'I will contact the Guardians in Makala. They will know what to do.'

'Thank you, Arlon.'

He nodded and then turned away, and she knew he was trying to be strong for her. He didn't want to show her how hard it had been for him to tell her that she was likely to die if she didn't get help soon.

*'Captain, we're receiving reports from our teams that the Cha'lav have been contained,'* Gonzales called over the comm. *'Lieutenant Parker requests that cargo bay two be converted for prisoner containment.'*

'Denied. Leave the prisoners on an isolated island with basic survival gear. Let's see how they deal with that.'

*'Aye sir, Gonzales out.'*

'I need to get back to the bridge, Doctor.'

'Take this,' he said, handing her the stimulator. 'Remember, three times a day for ten minutes at regular intervals. I'm modifying the bracelet to monitor your neurological outputs as well. Be safe, Leza.'

She smiled and hopped off the biobed. 'I will, now see to your other patients.'

Astar returned to the bridge and found that repair teams were already sorting out the damaged systems. The lighting suddenly brightened and fans on the bridge whirled into life.

*'Xeris to bridge, the microfractures have been sealed and the warp core is coming online now. Main power will be restored momentarily.'*

'Excellent work, what about shields and weapons?'

*'Give me thirty minutes.'*

'Granted, Astar out. Talen, how bad is it on deck thirteen?'

'Damage control teams have found fourteen suffering from radiation sickness, Captain,' the Andorian replied. 'Decks fourteen and fifteen are still off limits until the radiation levels have gone down.'

'Which will be when?'

'At this rate? Not until we get into drydock and have the ship undergo a complete decontamination sweep.'

'All right, post security at all entrance points on deck eleven to deck twelve. Anyone going below deck eleven needs my authorisation.'

'Aye sir.'

## **Chapter Sixteen**

### **Behemoth Impact Area**

#### **New Tokyo**

**Stardate 55438.1 (June 9, 2378)**

Lieutenant Parker and the rest of her security forces on the ground had gotten the entire colony to their secondary site and were now approaching the impact site as close as they dared, even with radiation suits beamed down from the ship. The *Pytheas* was still undergoing repairs to its major systems, giving her a chance to investigate the wreck. The Behemoth had almost been completely destroyed, and what was left was intensely radioactive—not only from the impact itself, but also from the two antimatter explosions prior to its uncontrolled descent.

'The tricorder is picking up over fifty thousand rads and we're still more than five kilometres from the impact site,' Faragas said.

'The Doctor said that these suits aren't designed for such hard radiation. There's no way we're getting any closer than this,' Parker replied.

'Do you think the Cha'lav survived?'

'If any survived the impact, which is doubtful, the rest will have died of radiation poisoning hours ago. I find it highly unlikely that any planet-born biological species could withstand that level of radiation. It's probably even higher by the debris,' Parker said. 'This entire region is going to be uninhabitable for centuries, and the winds are a problem too. The thing we should be most grateful for is that enough of the ship was destroyed in orbit and burned up in the atmosphere that this was not an extinction level event. The planet will survive, though I have no idea about a nuclear ice age or anything.'

'Then we should speak with the science team,' Faragas suggested.

'Good idea. Parker to Malling.'

*'Go ahead, Lieutenant.'*

'Are you running simulations on the planetary ecosystem and the damage this ship has done?'

*'We are. There maybe a global decrease in temperature, but a mild one. The debris and dust cloud will not block out the sun. The biggest danger is the radiation. It's actually expanding as we speak. Something in that ship is radioactive and increasing. We have to get in there and stop it.'*

'Can any of the shuttles withstand the radiation?'

*'The Onizuka can for a period of two hours before the shields fail and the hull starts to irradiate.'*

'Patch the captain in, please.'

*'Stand by.'*

*'Is there a problem, Lieutenant?'*

'Yes sir,' Malling answered and repeated what she'd just told Parker.

*'Get the shuttle prepped. You leave in ten minutes. Parker move your people out and set up an inner and outer perimeter. I don't want anyone there at all.'*

'Aye sir, we should have Xeris try and create a forcefield for the region in case we can't stop the radiation expansion. At least it will limit the damage to the environment.'

*'I'll get him on it, Astar out.'*

'All right people, you heard the Captain. Double time it out of here. Spread out and mark out an inner perimeter of five kilometres, outer perimeter at ten. Ask for whatever you need to be beamed down. If you start to feel light headed request beam out to the decontamination site. Decks fourteen and fifteen have been completely irradiated, and decks twelve and thirteen are off limits so I don't want anyone carrying more radiation on board. Let's get this done.'

By the time they had placed the inner cordon of radiation markers around the site, the *Onizuka* hove into view and passed overhead, moving closer to the impact site itself than any of them could.

'Parker to Astar.'

*'Yes, Lieutenant?'*

'We should prep the *Scobee* for a rescue mission just in case. My team are heading to the outer perimeter now. Once we're through decontamination I'd like to make sure the colonists are safe before we leave the surface.'

*'I've spoken with Xeris and he says the Scobee just cannot be outfitted for radiation protection. The upgraded Flyer is specifically designed for missions in all conditions, as per the specs drawn up by Lieutenant Paris on Voyager.'*

'Aye sir,' Parker replied, not in the least bit convinced. She was sure Astar didn't want to risk any more people than were necessary since nearly a third of the crew were injured, dying or dead.

'*Malling to Parker,*' the chief science officer said through a static-filled channel.

'You're breaking up, Lieutenant. What have you got?'

*'Sensors are dropping off at about twelve meters, but I am detecting some kind of large fusion plant. Whatever it is was shielded before impact but the shielding is cracked and the radiation is leaking out, further cracking or splitting the shielding.'*

'Fusion technology is old, and I am not aware of any Cha'lav technology that utilises nuclear fusion. Can you tell where in the vessel it was located?'

*'According to the schematics we have for this vessel, the fusion plant would have been adjacent to the torpedo storage bays.'*

Parker almost slapped her head in stupidity. 'The fusion plant is for creating nuclear-tipped warheads used for conquering pre-warp cultures. It was never used when I fought them since most sentient species had actually passed that threshold. Can you stop the build-up? It will create another nuclear explosion if you can't.'

*'The radiation is too heavy for anything to work properly. I think the best we can do is find a way to carry out a controlled explosion if such a thing is possible for nuclear material.'*

*'Astar to all personnel. Return to the ship immediately. Commander Madden has just informed us that we have company. Two Cha'lav cruisers on approach.'*

'Captain, I'd like a small team to remain on the surface. The cruisers are probably here to investigate the destruction of the avian vessel. They may have technology to recover.'

*'Four people, Lieutenant, no more. The rest of you, return to the ship. Malling, that includes you.'*

*'Acknowledged, Captain, Malling out.'*

'Faragas, get these people back to the ship. Hoya, zh'Velan, Zinkin, you're with me. We'll take cover behind these rocks.'

She watched as her people were beamed up and saw the *Onizuka* streak into the sky. Parker knew that Astar and Madden would head for the edge of the system once they got the ship off the surface. The *Everest* would need to be towed back home but Astar wasn't going to leave anyone behind, especially not her resident expert on the Cha'lav.

## **Chapter Seventeen**

**USS *Pytheas***

**New Tokyo system**

**Stardate 55438.2 (June 9, 2378)**

'Talen, what is the ship's status?'

'All systems are fully operational,' the Andorian replied. 'The *Everest* is now holding position one hundred kilometres off our starboard bow.'

'Gonzales, weapons status?'

'Good to go. The Cha'lav cruisers are now approaching the planet.'

'On screen.'

Astar watched as the two vessels disappeared into the atmosphere. 'Can they land?'

'The only person you can ask isn't here,' the tactical officer replied wryly.

The captain grimaced at the reminder. 'Get Madden on the comm.'

'Aye sir, channel is open.'

'Martin, what's your status?'

Madden appeared on the viewscreen. '*I've got full shields and weapons. We might not be going anywhere in a hurry but we can fight.*'

'Good, I'm taking the *Pytheas* into the atmosphere to take out those Cha'lav cruisers. Follow us and maintain a high orbit. Be my eyes and ears.'

Madden nodded. '*You got it, Captain.*'

Astar glanced at Larson. 'Ensign, let's go atmospheric.'

Gonzales tapped her combadge. 'All hands, go to blue alert and prepare for atmospheric flight. Repeat, secure all stations for atmospheric flight.'

The *Pytheas* surged forward at full impulse and within minutes had eaten up



the distance between the edge of the system and the planet. The ship plunged into the atmosphere on a shallow glide trajectory.

'Hold us steady, Ensign. I want to take those ships out with a surgical strike and pick up our people at the same time.'

'Aye sir,' the helmsman replied.

'Transporter room is standing ready, Captain,' Gonzales added.

'Where are those ships? Give me a tactical plot.'

The main image shrank to the bottom left corner and a tactical overlay where all the ships were within the planetary atmosphere took up the view. The Cha'lav cruisers were flying low over the landscape, firing at the main buildings of the colony before turning to head towards their damaged ship.

'Take out that lead ship,' Astar ordered, pointing to the one firing.

'Aye sir,' Gonzales replied and fired a phaser barrage at the vessel's engines.

Without shields, the engines had no protection and the vessel exploded five hundred metres off the ground, sending debris in every direction. Unfortunately for the other cruiser, it was flying in close formation to its partner and some of the debris hit the unprotected hull.

'Fire again!' Astar ordered.

'...to Pytheas, come...Parker to....in, urgent...respond...' the comm stuttered before Gonzales fired.

'Go ahead, Parker. We read you,' Astar replied. 'Repeat your last message. You're breaking up.'

*'Do not fire on that last ship, Captain. They have picked up a nuclear cargo from the wreck. If you destroy that vessel, you'll be condemning this planet and its people to death.'*

Astar considered her options for a very brief moment. 'I'm sorry, Lieutenant. I must think of the bigger picture.'

'Acknowledged,' Parker replied. *'It's been an honour serving with you, Captain.'*

'Transporter room one is standing by. She has a lock on all away team members.'

'Energise. As soon as they're aboard, fire at the remaining cruiser.'

'Aye sir, it's heading to the wreck and charging weapons.'

'Radiation at the wreck?'

'Minimal now that the nuclear material has been removed. I've never seen anything like it. The wreck should still be completely irradiated...We have them.'

'Fire!'

Gonzales did as she was asked and a second mushroom cloud was created as the cruiser was destroyed by a direct hit from the *Pytheas*' phaser banks. As the Starfleet ship headed through the clouds and returned to orbit, Parker emerged from the turbolift followed by her away team as they tried to hold her back. She marched up to the centre chair as Astar stood up and before the captain could say a word, Parker made to backhand her, but the captain grabbed her hand.

'Do you want to be removed from duty and put through a court-martial?'

'You didn't give those people a chance.'

'I have to think of the rest of the galaxy, Lieutenant. Destroying that ship and possibly dooming those people to death may have saved hundreds of thousands or millions of others.'

Parker withdrew her hand. 'We'll see about that. Request permission to return to the surface?'

'Denied, we need to return to the starbase.'

'I'll be filing a formal protest with Starfleet Command about this,' Parker replied. 'You made the wrong decision.'

'Be that as it may, the decision was made and acted upon. Your objections have been noted.'

Parker snorted in disgust and headed back to the turbolift, muttering to herself. 'Won't need the Cha'lav to kill us, we're doing it ourselves.'

Astar refused to comment, believing that she had made the right decision.

'Sir, we're receiving a coded message from *Starbase 535*,' Gonzales said and looked up. 'Six Cha'lav cruisers of a design not seen before have been spotted by the Resoto heading toward the Kursican system. They'll be there in approximately five days.'

'Get the *Everest* in tow and then engage at maximum warp. It's time we ended this. They're going to keep coming at us until we're done.'

'How can we stop them?'

'I need to talk to Parker alone,' Astar said. 'You have the bridge.'

'Aye sir.'

Astar found the angry security chief in a corner of the galley, sitting alone at a table.

'We need to stop this next wave of six ships. How do you suggest we do it?'

'Cruisers?'

'Something we haven't seen before.'

Parker sighed. 'Dreadnoughts. Only way to stop them is to whittle down the shields and ram them. The hull can withstand a number of quantum torpedo hits before it even gets dented.'

'We won't have enough ships.'

'Then I don't know what to suggest.'

'Is there no other way?'

'Not that I know of. Though I am surprised that they have brought the Dreadnoughts in so soon. They're the second largest vessel in the Cha'lav fleet, second only to the avian control ships and there aren't many of them

around. The fact that there are six of them means that the Cha'lav are worried about losing this galaxy and have called in reinforcements. I don't know how many ships they have in this galaxy any more, they seem to be pulling them off other fronts.'

## **Chapter Eighteen**

### **Cha'lav Cruiser**

### **Delta Quadrant**

**Stardate 55440.1 (June 10, 2378)**

Andraprani zh'Malashan stalked the control centre of her personal cruiser, mindful not to kill any of the crew. The remaining vessels in the Milky Way galaxy were presently engaged in a conflict with the Borg which was displacing hundreds of thousands of people, scattering them across the galaxy. What had her worked up was the fact that six Dreadnoughts had broken from the Andromeda galaxy fleet and gone back to the Kursican sector to finish off the battle that the previous contingent had started with no success. Every vessel had been destroyed and the Cha'lav Hegemony were now pulling ships off other fronts to combat Starfleet and their allies, but it was to the detriment of the other wars they were fighting. Since their attacks on this galaxy had commenced, more than a million other worlds across their nearly three hundred thousand galaxies had started to fight back with resources they shouldn't have had.

Her mission to cement the Cha'lav hold on the Milky Way was not going well and her Starfleet contacts had provided the troubling information that there was a Code Black warrant out for her. Clearly they were taking no chances with her and her death was a top priority amongst the intelligence community. Two consoles started to chirp with new information coming in and she strode over to them as the technicians retrieved the data. It was not good news. The Eeroth had joined the Ynelavii Cooperative and Starfleet were rallying their forces for a final showdown which would end with the Cha'lav ships taking Kursica and the orbiting starbase or the ships being destroyed and the Cha'lav needing to find another access point.

'My Lady, Lord Fetar wishes to speak with you,' a Primate communications officer told her.

'Put him through.'

*'Andorian, you have failed again. I will not spare any further ships for the Milcha Wae campaign.'*

Prani stepped closer to the screen. 'Your own incompetence has cost you this galaxy, my Lord. I warned you that your tactics would be unsuccessful because Starfleet know how to improvise. You must adapt and counter their

innovation with your own or this galaxy will never fall under your feathers.'

*'You are the warrior leading the people in the Milcha Wae, therefore it falls to you to make the decisions.'*

'Perhaps you should have informed the late Lord Linta of that fact,' she replied. 'He used one your vessels and it was later destroyed, with all the remaining vessels dedicated to the battle still inside. All I have is the remainder of the fleet in what this galaxy calls the Delta Quadrant.'

*'The war with the Borg is going well?'*

'The fluidic vessels are eager to get revenge on the Borg and are making our job much easier. I have lost a few ships to the Borg's nanite weapon that Voyager provided them but the cubes are being destroyed and thousands of vessels are fleeing the area, toward the Alpha Quadrant.'

*'We will wait until those vessels arrive and the local political players are busy dealing with them before we attack again.'*

'Exactly as I suggested to Lord Linta, which I assume he took the credit for.'

*'So it would seem,'* Fetar agreed. *'You will continue the fight?'*

'Of course, though I fully expect the Dreadnoughts to be destroyed and Starfleet to be successful in defending the sector.'

*'What will happen then?'*

'Starfleet will lay claim to the region, set up a new starbase and assign more ships, making it more heavily defended. It is unlikely that you will be able to make another attempt in that area.'

*'We don't need to. While you have been doing what we asked, I have been assigning infiltrators to soften up the local political entities. By the time the refugees arrive, everyone will be so busy that we'll be able to attack and overwhelm their fleets, forcing a surrender.'*

'They won't surrender.'

'Then they'll die.'

'That will be the end result. You will end up with a galaxy full of corpses.'

*'Once enough of them have died, they will surrender. It is the way of the universe.'*

'Then you have met your match in this galaxy. Every race will fight until the last man.'

*'Is that what usually happens when an invading force has overwhelming numbers?'*

'Yes, it happened three years ago and they successfully fought the invaders off.'

*'I see, I want all the information you have on Starfleet and they're allies. It is time I took a more active interest in this galaxy.'*

'Of course, my Lord. The information will be sent through with the next crewmembers.'

*'I want it immediately. There is much to learn about these Starfleet people.'*

'As you wish, beginning transmission.'

*'When do you reach your next objective?'*

'I will reach the Byzari homeworld in approximately one standard month.'

*'Excellent. I want the population enslaved, not killed. They are strong people and their engineering knowledge is urgently needed to further the Hegemony. We are currently building new ships with superior technology to end the rebellion before it can spread further.'*

Prani felt no need to mention that the rebellion had already spread too far to control and would soon be a civil war between the Cha'lav races. It was only a matter of time before the Council was disbanded and the avians would be left in ultimate control of the Hegemony with the aquatics.

'I will inform you of the result of the battle with Starfleet and when the Byzari will be available to you.'

*'I look forward to hearing from you, Andorian; Fetar out.'*

'Birdbrain,' Prani muttered once the channel was closed. 'Contact the Dreadnoughts and have them submit their battle plan. I want to make some changes to it.'

'As you command, my Lady.'

She took the command chair and looked around her. They were scared of her, and she knew that at least one of them would kill her in her sleep if they had the opportunity. She needed loyal soldiers if she was to pull off her escape from these barbarians and run deeper into the Delta Quadrant. It would only be a matter of time before Parker managed to extricate herself from Starfleet and come after her.



## **Chapter Nineteen**

### ***Starbase 535***

#### **Kursican system**

**Stardate 55442.8 (June 11, 2378)**

There were fewer vessels than last time but all had been repaired and had their weapons replenished. Parker had spent the last two days overseeing the retrofit and refit of every ship in the fleet, over subspace and then in person, making sure that everything was working properly. She had gone to the Vault to look at what was left from the Cha'lav removal beams and saw that as McNamara had earlier said, Captain Drummond's stasis tube and every other piece of technology was gone. All they had left was the database which they were still translating.

'Do you have any suggestions?' Madden asked the *Pytheas*' security chief.

'None. I have no idea how we can combat the Dreadnoughts. Even in my time they were almost impossible to destroy.'

'But not completely impossible. How did you do it?'

'By whittling down their shields and then sacrificing dozens of ships by ramming the Dreadnoughts and self-destructing the warp cores. If we don't find another way of doing it, then we're not going to survive this.'

*'Astar to Parker.'*

'Go ahead, Captain.'

*'Will the Eeroth satellite weapon work on the Dreadnoughts?'*

'They might if they were sufficiently powerful enough. But we would need hundreds of them.'

*'Every ship capable of industrial replication has been given the specifications. We'll deploy them throughout the inner system, orbiting every moon and planet, and then bring them online.'*

'What if they get here first?'

*'Then someone will have to hold them off while we complete the task.'*

Parker considered what that would mean. 'We'd be sitting ducks. We'll need half a dozen ships to cover for us, while the remaining ships work on bringing down the Dreadnoughts' shields.'

*'And the starbase can provide a provide extra cover if needed.'*

'Great idea, Captain. I'll have a tactical plan on your desk before the end of shift.'

*'Excellent, Astar out.'*

'Commander, we have a battle plan to work out.'

'Do you think it'll work?'

'It's the best plan we have.'

Parker returned to the ship and watched as the satellites were replicated, put together, programmed and stored in the cargo bays ready for deployment. She completed her battle plan and submitted it to Astar two hours before the end of her shift. Astar looked at it and then glanced up at her security chief.

'Why have you split the fleet like this?'

'Each race knows how to fight alongside others of their race. The Ynelavii Cooperative has almost twenty ships remaining among their number and the Kursicans another five, two of which are still undergoing final shakedowns. They'll split in half to go after the Dreadnoughts while the Eeroth will be mining the system with the satellites, as will we. The Resoto will be left to swarm one Dreadnought at a time while covering us as best they can.'

'And the starbase?'

'I think at least one of the Dreadnoughts will try to destroy the starbase and/or Kursica itself. The starbase will be out of the fight.'

'I don't like the look of your estimated losses.'

'Neither do I, Captain, but they are realistic based on how difficult the Dreadnoughts are to destroy and the capabilities and battle damage of the available ships.'

'Still, sixty-five percent is rather high.'

'Yes sir, it is. The odds will significantly improve if the *Mandela* and *de Keyser* are able to reach us in time.'

'When did we get two *Sovereign*-class ships?'

'Captain Logan was able to convince Command that this sector would fall unless we got some additional firepower. The only problem is that they still have their current missions to complete beforehand. Hopefully they'll arrive in time to make a difference.'

'How long before the Dreadnoughts get here?'

'A little over two days,' Parker replied. 'We've currently got ninety-three satellites ready to be deployed. I suggest we begin deployment immediately and replicate the others as we go along.'

'How are the Eeroth doing?'

'They don't have the capability to replicate the satellites. We do, as do the Romulans and Klingons. They're both working flat out but they estimate that they'll be able to replicate seventy before their raw material is exhausted. The Eeroth are supplying the power cells for the satellites.'

'What type of power do they use?'

'It is some kind of zero point energy device, but they've refused to let us study the technology.'

'We'll take what scans we can of it.'

'Every zero point energy power cell they've given us is shielded from our sensors with an unusual metallic alloy. I'll keep working on a way to get through it.'

'Keep me apprised of your progress. This zero point energy may be the key to ending the Cha'lav's machinations in our galaxy.'

'I'll need Xeris and Malling to assist me.'

'Take whoever you need, but remember that our priority is to stop the Cha'lav by deploying the satellite field.'

'We're ready to begin deployment, Captain. The Klingons and Romulans are deploying their satellites in orbit of the fourth and fifth planets, and their moons. Our job is to deploy the remainder around the first, second and third planets and their respective moons.'

'All right, I'll order the ship ready for departure. Have Gonzales coordinate with the other ships.'

'Aye sir,' Parker replied and left the ready room.

She did not immediately return to her office as she had some unfinished business to take care of with the starbase's resident intelligence operative.

Lieutenant Paul Marshall had been reassigned at the *Everest's* chief of security while Admiral Nechayev sorted through his reports on the Ocampo girl, Murdoch and his own actions over the last few weeks. He was enjoying a raktajino in the starbase's recreation lounge when she approached him.

'What do you want?' he asked sourly.

'Missing your boyfriend?'

'What's it to you?'

'I think that Ocampo girl told him something and he went off to find out if she was telling the truth. It would explain why no one has heard from them in weeks.'

'Such as?'

'A way to defeat the Cha'lav. I want you to go and look for them.'

'On what grounds? And where would I start?'

'You're the Intelligence guy, figure it out,' she replied and walked away.

## **Chapter Twenty**

**USS *Pytheas***

**Kursica III orbit**

**Stardate 55448.1 (June 13, 2378)**

Captain Leza Astar felt the ship slow as the next satellite was dropped into a high orbit of the third planet in the system. If her calculations were right, it was the last one for this planet and they could move on to the first of its three moons. She watched the viewscreen as the satellite moved into position with its thrusters and then aligned itself to the others already in orbit. From what she'd been told, the satellites would be able to operate independently or as a group, both in planetary groups or as a whole, capable of destroying an entire planet if necessary. From the tactical console behind her and to the right, Gonzales confirmed her theory.

'That was the last one, now moving into position to drop five satellites in orbit of the first moon.'

'How long until the Dreadnoughts reach the system?'

'Less than an hour. We need at least twice that long to finish dropping the satellites.'

'We won't have it. I suspect we'll have fifteen minutes once the Dreadnoughts arrive,' Astar replied. 'Tell Xeris to calibrate faster. We can move faster if we need to.'

'We should not exceed one tenth impulse or the satellites already dropped will consider us a target. Only when when the entire array has been dropped can they be uploaded with the Cha'lav targets. It's a major flaw in the Eeroth design and we didn't have time to correct it before we started the deployment.'

'Have the *Ditagh* and *Gilded Talon* finished their drops?'

'They have and they cloaked immediately afterwards. I don't have them on sensors.'

'We'll have to make do without them.'

'Sir, incoming from Captain Logan.'

'Put him on.'

*'Leza, they're entering the system now. How are you doing?'*

'We need another ninety minutes. How long till they're in weapons range?'

*'Thirty-one minutes, work faster. Logan out.'*

'How inspiring,' Talen muttered.

'Captain, the fleet is in position,' Gonzales said. 'Still no sign of the Klingons or Romulans. Xeris believes he's found a way to decrease drop time and is requesting permission to try it.'

'Negative, continue at present speed until we're out of options. I don't want to damage the network.'

'Aye sir.'

Astar continued to watch the viewscreen as the ship entered high orbit of the Kursica III's first moon. She saw one satellite move into position and then felt the ship shudder and the lights dim. 'What the hell was that?'

'Gonzales to cargo bay two.'

'Get down there, Commander.'

Before Gonzales made it to the turbolift, Xeris responded. *'One of the satellites fired prematurely, Commander. It took out power to half the deck and melted the cargo bay door. There's no way of getting back in there. The forcefield is down.'*

'Damn,' Astar cursed. 'Is there any way to remote drop the satellites?'

*'They are programmed to be controlled remotely,'* Xeris acknowledged. *'Stand by.'*

As Larson guided the ship into position for the next drop, three satellites emerged from the ship and moved to their pre-determined coordinates. Astar sighed in relief. At least they would be able to get them in position before the Cha'lav attacked with an all out assault.

'Take us to the next moon, Ensign.'

'Aye sir, Kursica IIIb is our next stop.'

'Captain, there's a ship approaching from the outer system. Intercept in thirteen minutes.'

'Can you identify it?'

'It's a Dreadnought. The other five are still on trajectory for the starbase.'

Parker entered the bridge as Astar ordered, 'on screen.' The Dreadnought was a large arrow-wedge-shaped vessel with gun ports along every side. 'Weaponry?'

'Sixteen torpedo launchers and over thirty disruptor turrets. Once they have a firing solution on us we're dead in the water.'

'Ensign, I'm going to need your piloting skills on this one, but do not exceed one tenth impulse until the last satellite is dropped.'

'Aye sir,' Larson replied as he glanced up at the viewscreen and the massive ship approaching their position. 'Now approaching Kursica IIIb.'

'Xeris is remotely dropping the satellites.'

'The Dreadnought will be in firing range in seven minutes.'

'How long until the last satellite has been dropped?'

'Eighteen minutes. We still have one more moon to seed.'

'Red alert, ready phasers and quantum torpedoes.'

'All systems ready.'

'Shields?'

'Ninety-seven percent, but we can't raise them while we're dropping the satellites.'

Astar watched the large vessel move ever closer and her experienced eye caught something. 'Gonzales, magnify the lower left quadrant, and enhance.'

'Sir?'

'What do you see?'

'It looks like an jagged breach in the hull. Have they been in a battle?'

'If they haven't been fully repaired, then we could have the upper hand. Parker, what do you think?'

'I think you're right, Captain. They were obviously rushed out here without completing their repairs. This may give us the upper hand, but these vessels are still immensely powerful.'

'Two minutes to firing range,' Gonzales called out.

'Bridge to Xeris, how's it coming?'

*'I'm calibrating the last of them now, Captain. I'll drop them all at once and then we can get out of here.'*

'Excellent, keep me informed. Astar out.'

A blue beam suddenly erupted from the Dreadnought and Larson slewed the ship down the z-axis to avoid it, but the weapon still impacted the shields, albeit with a glancing blow.

'Shields down to eighty percent. We cannot take full on shots from that weapon, whatever it is,' Gonzales said. 'It blew out a bunch of power relays on two decks. Recommend we avoid that ship.'

'I'm trying,' Larson replied through gritted teeth as three torpedoes began their inexorable flight toward the *Pytheas*.

Gonzales used the phasers to good effect and took out one of the torpedoes but the Dreadnought chose that moment to fire it's beam weapon again and the *Pytheas* was in the wrong position to avoid it. 'Shields are gone,' Gonzales said as the ship shook violently, throwing Astar from her chair. 'I've lost the lock on the last torpedo.'



Astar scrambled back to her chair as the ship flew through the expanding debris cloud from the satellite and the two torpedoes, to see the last one coming straight for them. 'Incoming, all hands, brace for impact.'

## **Chapter Twenty-One**

**USS *Pytheas***

**Kursican system**

**Stardate 55448.2 (June 13, 2378)**

Astar watched in horror as the torpedo slammed into the unprotected hull and blew apart the secondary deflector on the primary hull. She saw explosive decompression ripple across every forward section of the primary hull, and then the chair restraints snapped into place as the viewscreen was completely blown into space along with the helm console, Ensign Larson and two other crewmen before the forcefield initialised. Larson turned to her as he was sucked out of the ship and she knew that she was never going to be able to forget the look on his face. She would remember the look of terror and helplessness as long as she and the symbiont lived.

Quickly realising that the Dreadnought would now come around for another pass, she threw the restraints off and turned to face what remained of the stunned bridge crew. 'Evacuate this deck, now!' she ordered. 'Gonzales re-establish bridge control in main engineering and have Ensign Jatarn take over helm duties for now.'

'Aye sir,' the tactical officer replied, sending the order, and then glanced at her console as it chirped for her attention. 'The *Ditagh* and the *Gilded Talon* have arrived, Captain. They're distracting the Dreadnought.'

'Thank the Gods for small mercies,' she said as the remaining crew entered the turbolift and tapped her combadge. 'Jatarn, get us out of the fighting for now. We need to take stock of our damage.'

'Aye sir, withdrawing. Damage to the primary hull is extensive, Captain,' the beta shift helm officer replied. 'We've lost sections one to six on decks one through eight and the main deflector has taken a minor hit. Shields, torpedoes and aft phasers are gone, forward phasers operational at sixty percent.'

'Thank you, Ensign, continue to monitor the situation. We'll join you momentarily.'

'Aye sir, Jatarn out.'

'Are we out of the fight, Captain?' Gonzales asked.

'Not a chance. Once we get back online in engineering, we'll mine the Dreadnought's path with proximity-armed torpedoes and then we'll finish dropping the satellites.'

'That won't be possible, sir,' Xeris told her as they arrived in engineering. 'The cargo bay doors are fused shut. We won't be dropping any more satellites. I've had to disarm the remainder.'

'How many?'

'Eight,' the chief engineer replied. 'But although there will be a gap in the field, what there is should be ample for the task of disabling or destroying the Dreadnoughts.'

Astar considered her options. 'Contact the Eeroth and have them activate the network as soon as they are able. I want you to take a team and mount the remaining satellites on our hull. We'll be a mobile planet. Work out where to place them and get started. We'll activate them once they're all in place and slave our mobile network to the Eeroth.'

'I'm not happy with our not being in control of the ship, Captain,' Gonzales interrupted.

'Neither am I, Commander, but we've suffered extensive damage to the point of it not being safe to go to warp. We're stuck here for now and I'm damned if I'm going to let the Cha'lav win. We've already lost a lot of ships. Now, what is the situation with the rest of the fleet?'

'Captain Logan is fending off one Dreadnought, as are we with the *Gilded Talon* and *Ditagh*. The Resoto are close to disabling a third, while the Cooperative fleet have split into three groups and taking pot shots at the remaining three vessels. The Eeroth have just finished dropping the last of their satellites and accept our delay in completing our section of the system. They'll be ready to activate the network as soon as we're ready.'

'Xeris, how long will you need?'

'If I can pull everyone with engineering expertise off regular duty, I can have all eight in place in twenty minutes.'

'Do it.'

The chief engineer nodded and hurried off.

'How many people have we lost?' Astar asked the tactical officer.

'In the last five days we've lost twenty people, and almost the same again are seriously injured. Maxx and the EMH are both performing surgery on the most critically injured, but I don't know how many more we're going to lose before this day is over.'

Astar squeezed the Betazoid's shoulder. 'Before this day is over, every Cha'lav ship in this sector will have been destroyed or sent home. That's a promise.'

'Aye sir,' Gonzales replied without much enthusiasm.

'Captain, we're receiving a message from Captain Logan,' Talen called out. 'He's requesting assistance from any available ship. The Dreadnought has broken through his defences and is making a run at Kursica.'

'Damn,' Astar muttered, adding some choice Trill profanities. 'Tell him we're involved at the moment. Have the *Everest* lend a hand.'

'*Everest* and *Independence* have broken from the Cooperative ships and gone to assist him.'

'We need a miracle to stop them.'

'*Xeris* to Astar, you may signal the *Eeroth* that the satellite field is now complete,' the engineer called from the hull. 'I'm slaving the last one now.'

'Excellent work, Commander. Get back in here, before we start moving.'

'Aye sir, *Xeris* out.'

'The *Eeroth* are initialising the network,' Gonzales said. 'The satellites are confirming activation and power levels. Estimated time to full charge, ten minutes.'

'Sir, the *Gilded Talon* has been destroyed,' Talen interrupted. 'The *Ditagh* has taken damage but is continuing to pursue. The *Resoto* have disabled one Dreadnought and are coming to our assistance.'

'Gonzales, use whatever phaser power we have and hammer the

Dreadnought's shields. The more we can disable before those satellites are charged, the better.'

'Aye sir, acquiring target lock, firing.'

'Someone give me a screen,' the captain yelled, annoyed that she was unable to see anything.

The transparent aluminium partition that served as a barrier between the warp core and the secondary engineering stations, and now serving as the secondary bridge, came alive as a viewscreen. The Dreadnought was unable to avoid the continual battering launched against it by the Klingon warship, the seven Resoto vessels and the *Pytheas* itself, damaged though it was. The alien ship's shields flared through the colours of the rainbow before flickering out completely.

'Sir, the Eeroth are ready!' Gonzales yelled.

Astar turned to her. 'Then by all means, fire!'

## **Chapter Twenty-Two**

### ***Starbase 535***

#### **Kursican system**

**Stardate 55448.3 (June 13, 2378)**

Captain Lionel Logan held on to the Core for dear life as the Dreadnought's powerful beam hammered at the starbase's shields. McNamara was targeting the beam emitter but he needed to get through the shields first and although he was using the complement of quantum torpedoes at their disposal, he didn't seem to be making a dent in the Cha'lav shields. They flared occasionally but didn't fail. The Dreadnought turned as the starbase shook again and headed for the planet.

'Our shields are down and the Dreadnought is on course for Kursica,' McNamara said glumly. 'I've just lobbed the last of the quantum torpedoes at them. We're down to photon torpedoes now.'

'Keep firing at the those shields and request backup. I've got to protect the Kursicans.'

'Aye sir, the *Everest* and the *Independence* are on their way, though both are damaged.'

'What about the *Pytheas*?'

'Dropping the last of the satellites, sir.'

'How long before they're online?'

'Ten minutes,' McNamara replied. 'The Dreadnought is entering low orbit and realigning. I think they're going to bombard the surface.'

The captain mumbled a profanity and then stabbed a control on the Core. 'This is Logan. Do whatever you have to do, but stop that ship firing on the surface!'

*'This is Madden. I'm in the middle of something to help, sir, but it will disable us completely. Recommend you beam us aboard once we're done. We'll be a prime target.'*

'We'll be ready, Martin, just get on with it.'

'Aye sir, Madden out.'

'Sir, Commander Madden has activated the *Everest*'s warhead module.'

'That's the fore section, right?'

'Yes sir, he's firing now.'

Logan watched the large screens above him as the small starship's warhead module was shot in the direction of the Dreadnought. It had the power of six photon torpedoes, though those had been replaced with quantum torpedoes for this run. The warhead hit the Dreadnought amidships and there was a flash brighter than a warp core explosion. When the screens adjusted for the brightness, he saw the Dreadnought turn and fire its beam at the *Everest*.

'Beam them up and fire everything we have at that thing,' Logan ordered.

'Aye sir, we have everyone from the *Everest*. The Dreadnought's shields are down, firing at the emitter.'

'Did we get them?' Madden asked as he emerged breathless from the turbolift.

'You knocked out their shields, good job. We're trying to take out the beam emitter.'

The Dreadnought returned to its previous position and fired its beam at the surface. 'I can't get through. There appears to be a secondary shield around the emitter. The *Independence* has been damaged, sir. The Dreadnought caught it with a torpedo.'

'Fire tachyon bursts and when they reset their shields fire again. Do it quickly. Tell the *Independence* to back off and lick their wounds. They've done what they can.'

'Aye sir, firing tachyon bursts. It's not having any effect.'

'The capital city has almost been completely destroyed,' Madden said from another console. 'Luckily we had them evacuated two days ago.'

'The Eeroth say they're ready. Astar's given the order to fire.'

'And?'

'Our Dreadnought is the first target, Captain. The Eeroth beams are firing.'

'I have eyes, Ryan,' Logan retorted as he saw the orange-hued beams from dozens of satellites converge on the unprotected hull of the Dreadnought.

Just as the reports from the *Pytheas* had said, the ship began to collapse in on itself. The ship turned and fired its beam at the starbase. The lights dimmed and consoles sparked and popped as the electrics failed. The Dreadnought's hull crumpled like a piece of paper in an iron fist and before long it was nothing more than a lump of metal burning up in the atmosphere.'

'It worked,' McNamara and Madden both sounded surprised.

'Thank the Eeroth and ask them to continue firing on the remaining ships,' Logan replied. 'And get me a damage report.'

'The next two targets are the Dreadnoughts attacking the *Pytheas* and the one that the Resoto disabled. Our main power is offline, auxiliary power at sixty percent. Fusion generators one, three and four are disabled, two and five are completely destroyed and six is building up to an overload.'

'Can they attack more than one?'

'They are, sir,' McNamara answered as two more Dreadnoughts crumpled.

'Hail the lead Dreadnought.'

'On screen, sir.'

*'What do you want, human?'*

Logan bristled. 'This is Captain Logan of the United Federation of Planets. You have seen the weapons we now have at our disposal and we will not hesitate to use them on any Cha'lav vessel that enters our territory or that of our allies. Withdraw or you will all be destroyed.'

*'You will see us again.'*

'Take a message back to your people. This galaxy knows you are here, and we will fight back.'



The screen blanked and within moments the three remaining Dreadnoughts vanished into a spatial rift.

'They're gone, Captain.'

'Signal our people to stand down. We need to take stock of our losses and start getting the Kursicans back into their homes.'

'Sir, we've lost forty percent of our ships and the capital city is completely gone. Kursica will need major infrastructure work,' Madden said. 'It's not a simple thing.'

'Captain, we need to eject the fusion core.'

'We'll be without power.'

'It can't be repaired before it goes critical, sir,' McNamara replied in a harassed tone.

'Computer, eject the fusion core. Authorisation Logan-3-5-6-Yosemite.'

*'Authorisation confirmed, core ejection in progress.'*

'Can you get the shields back up?' Madden asked.

'Not in time,' McNamara said. 'We're going to take heavy damage. I've already evacuated the lower half of the starbase. Core's been ejected.'

'Captain, two starships coming in. It's the *Mandela* and the *de Keyser*.'

'Tell them to hang back,' McNamara overrode Logan's response. 'Detonation in five seconds. Hang on.'

Logan cursed his run of bad luck as the fusion core overloaded, sending a compressed shockwave in the direction of the starbase and anything else in range. Whatever worked before immediately stopped as the electromagnetic pulse fried everything. The starbase shook violently as the rest of the shockwave hit. Bulkheads groaned and buckled, hull plates were sent spinning into the void or down toward the atmosphere of the planet below.

'Hull breaches on all decks,' McNamara said as something hit Logan and he blacked out.

## **Epilogue**

### ***USS Independence***

#### **Kursican system**

**Stardate 55451.7 (June 14, 2378)**

Captain Sintina Aurelia glanced at her counterpart and smiled grimly. 'He deserves this, even in the midst of all the tragedy. What were our total losses?'

'Twenty-seven ships and over six thousand people, plus another ten thousand Kursicans,' Captain Leza Astar answered. 'Starfleet is considering whether to rebuild the starbase or just replace it with a modern one.'

'So this sector falls under Federation jurisdiction now?'

'President Satie feels that it's our fault that this happened and although she'd like nothing better than to leave the sector to rebuild itself, the Federation Council and Starfleet urged her to take a more pro-active role.'

Aurelia snorted. 'It shouldn't have even been up for discussion. Who will be assigned to the sector?'

'Captain Logan's not sure. He thinks that it'll be handed off to the Border Service, but Starfleet hasn't decided what to do yet. It could be months before a final decision is made.'

'Typical bureaucracy.' The door chimed and the two captains shared a glance with one another. 'Come.'

Ensign Bradley Weston walked in, looking unsure of himself. He stopped short when he saw Astar and then glanced at Aurelia. 'Is there a problem, ma'am?'

Aurelia smiled and picked up a brush-finished cedar-wood box from her desk, handing it to the young man. 'Ensign Bradley Weston, as of stardate 55451, you are hereby promoted to the rank of Lieutenant junior grade, with all the rights and privileges granted therein. You are also requested and required to report to Captain Leza Astar of the USS *Pytheas* in order to undertake duties as chief of flight operations and alpha shift helm officer.'

'Thank you, Captain,' he said to Aurelia and turned to Astar. 'Captain Astar,

Lieutenant Bradley Weston, reporting for duty.'

Astar shook his hand. 'Go get your stuff, Lieutenant. I'll meet you in transporter room one.'

'Aye sir,' he replied and ran off, light on his heels.

Astar turned to Aurelia. 'I'm not leaving you in the lurch am I?'

'I spoke to Starfleet a few hours ago. I need to make another promotion.'

'In that case, I will leave you to it and get back to my ship.'

'Where are you going?'

'We're heading to *Starbase 185* and we'll get some repairs before heading back to Earth for a refit.'

Aurelia sighed knowingly. 'The *de Keyser*'s giving us a tow to *Starbase 185*.'

'The *Mandela* will remain on station until Starfleet decides what to do with *Starbase 535* and Captain Logan and his staff will be heading back to Earth on the *de Keyser* to be debriefed by Admiral Ranar.'

'This has been a total mess,' Aurelia agreed. 'Good luck to you, Captain.'

'To you as well.'

Once Astar left, Aurelia picked up the other box and decided to make this one in person. She headed down to the crew quarters and pressed the chime. The door slid open and the two occupants were in the middle of a heated debate about the state of their quarters. They were obviously expecting another visitor and not their commanding officer.

'Captain,' they stood at attention.

'Is there a problem?'

'Nothing we can't sort out ourselves, Captain,' Cadet Trevix answered, shooting a glare at his companion.

'Whose clothes are these?'

'Mine, ma'am,' the ensign replied.

'You can tidy it up later, and I'll be round to make sure it's done. For now, go and find something to do.'

'Yes, ma'am,' he almost ran through the wall in his haste to leave, and shot Trevix a "you're in trouble now" look.

'Captain, I'd like to apologise for our display,' Trevix said.

'Forget about it. What happens in your quarters has no bearing on what happens anywhere else on board, including the bridge.'

'Ma'am?' the Denobulan looked confused.

Aurelia handed him the cedar-wood box. 'Cadet Trevix, as of stardate 55451, you are hereby promoted to the rank of Ensign, with all the rights and privileges granted therein. You are also requested and required to report to the bridge in order to undertake duties as chief of flight operations and alpha shift helm officer.'

'Thank you, Captain. You don't know what this means.'

'I spoke with the Academy Commandant and he agreed that your jacket and conduct was exemplary. Consider yourself graduated. You might need a new uniform,' she replied with a smirk before leaving.

'Ah, there you are, Captain,' Lieutenant Commander bin Nadal said as he caught up to her. 'Have you made the rounds?'

'I have, what's our status?'

'Warp drive is still inoperable, and Windslow doesn't think he can do anything. The plasma injectors have been fused, half the warp coils are shot and the antimatter flow regulators have melted. Whatever it was that hit us did a damn good job of disabling us.'

Aurelia bit back a curse. 'Fine, signal the *de Keyser* that we're ready to depart. Have Windslow make whatever repairs he can en route to *Starbase 185*. They'll give us a quick once over and do what they can. Hopefully we'll be able to limp to the nearest shipyard and get a refit. I know a few systems that could use overhauls.'

'At least we have our bridge. I hear the *Pytheas* doesn't even have that.'

'I spoke with Astar a little while ago. A Dreadnought torpedo took out the bridge and they've set up an auxiliary bridge in engineering. She said she would ask for a battle bridge like the *Galaxy*-class ships have got. It's a good idea on larger ships, especially considering the bridge's location at the top of the primary hull.'

'Have we got new orders yet?'

'Came in about an hour ago. Once we're repaired, we've been ordered to Kessok Prime, on the far side of Cardassian space. And we'll have a few other ships tagging along.'

'Who's in command of this little fleet?'

'I will be.'

Bin Nadal smiled. 'Hopefully another string in your bow and maybe we'll get explore that region of space. Doesn't sound like it's been explored all that much.'

'That's what I was hoping,' Aurelia replied, thinking that she was finally getting to do what a Captain was supposed to do, explore uncharted space.

But life was never that simple.

**END**

*The crew of the Pytheas will return in **Broken Bridges**.*