

Star Trek: Pytheas To Serve the Unwise

By Brother Benny

*Historian's Note: This story takes place from early to late May 2378; beginning three days after **The All Consuming Fire**.*

Prologue

USS Pytheas

On approach to Eeroth Prime

Stardate 55359.1 (May 12, 2378)

The sunlight was reflected through the stained glass windows and made coloured patterns on the floor of the Hoobishan baths, providing a relaxing atmosphere. Soft music played through hidden speakers and Leza Astar felt calmer than she had in weeks. Ever since she had reluctantly accepted this assignment, she felt physically ill and there was nothing that her godson could do about it. She looked over at Lieutenant Arlon Maxx, as he sat with his eyes closed in the Jacuzzi.

'Tell me you haven't fallen asleep again, Arlon?'

The young Bolian opened one eye lazily. 'Oh I'm still awake, but you looked like you wanted to think so I let the conversation drop off.'

She chuckled. 'You fell asleep again.'

'I can't help it,' he shrugged. 'The waters of the Hoobishan baths always make me sleepy. And the holographic representation is almost as good.'

'Well, you'd know, having been to visit me several times on Trill. Which reminds me; you were asked by the Symbiosis Commission to help because of your familiarity with my people, weren't you?'

Maxx nodded. 'I was, I assisted in several surgeries to remove symbionts and helped the Guardians to calm the surviving symbionts. Why do you ask?'

'Astar has been restless of late, and I think it might be to do with the distance we are from the homeworld.'

Maxx shook his head. 'The symbionts, and yourselves, are highly curious, the likelihood of feeling homesick or worried about being too far from home in the event of an emergency is slim.'

'What else could it be?'

Maxx sighed and she could tell that it wasn't going to lead into something pleasant but she waited for him to speak. 'Have you ever performed the *Zhian'tara*?'

'The rite of closure? No, I haven't.'

'The Symbiosis Commission requires that it is performed by all new hosts. And since you've been joined for more than fifteen years, I'm surprised that they haven't contacted you already, although the recent upheaval could account for that,' Maxx replied. 'It has to be performed by a Guardian so when we return to Federation space, I'll contact the Symbiosis Commission.'

'Isn't that unusual?'

'Highly, but as one of the few doctors in Starfleet to know about how important the rite is, and as your personal physician, and your friend, I'll push for a Guardian to come here. My only other alternative is to get Starfleet Medical to divert us to Trill. You must let me know if you or your symbiont is feeling unduly distressed, above and beyond normal stressors.'

Astar nodded, unable to speak.

'*Captain Astar to the bridge, we are approaching the Eeroth system,*' Wright called out over the comm.

'I'll be right there, Commander,' she replied and climbed out of the Jacuzzi, thinking that his voice sounded a little tight.

She picked up her towel and dried herself off, put her uniform back on and then tidied up her hair, tucking it back into the ponytail that she was currently wearing.

'You'll be needed too, Arlon.'

'I know,' he replied as he followed suit. 'Maxx to sickbay, are we ready for casualties.'

'Yes, Doctor, and the EMH is standing by.'

'I want to adjust certain parameters on that thing.'

Astar smiled. She thought it was too much as well. 'Computer, end program.'

As the baths faded to the grey-and-yellow grid of the holodeck, Astar sighed and exited through the massive doors, making her way to the bridge as her chief medical officer returned to sickbay.

The turbolift doors opened and Astar took her chair. Wright never sat in it now when he was in command; he preferred to sit in his own chair, which suited her just fine. He was never going to have command potential, and the sooner she figured out why, the better.

'What have we got?'

'We've picked up masses of debris strewn across the system and no active subspace or tachyon communication. There's nothing here.'

'Get Rashal up here, and find out where Cadet Jenak is. I want her to see this.'

'Aye sir.'

'Gonzales, can you tell me something about the debris? Do you detect any Cha'lav energy traces?'

'I'm running continuous scans, Captain. So far, I've picked up nothing but elevated levels of radiation to the background norm.'

'Mister Mahtani?'

'Nothing definitive, Captain.'

Astar scowled as the turbolift doors opened to reveal her passengers. 'Rashal, welcome home.'

The Eerothian took in the debris field that the *Pytheas* was passing through and recognised the discoloured hulls of several vessels. 'Captain, the sixth moon of Eeroth VI is a colonial haven for my people. I'd like to know if anyone is still alive.'

'What about your homeworld?'

'It was on the verge of a nuclear holocaust. I doubt that the Cha'lav would have needed to help it along.'

'Captain, picking up an approaching vessel.'

'On screen, do you recognise it?'

Rashal sighed, he did. 'It is a government shuttle, Captain.'

'We're being hailed.'

'On screen,' Astar ordered.

The Eerothian looked to be the same race as Rashal but older. '*Whoever you are, you're holding an enemy of Eeroth. Return it or be destroyed.*'

'I am Captain Leza Astar of the Federation starship *Pytheas*. We are returning Rashal to his homeworld.'

'*No, Captain, you are returning an exile. Rashal is the leader of a rebel movement, exiled for crimes against our people,*' the old man cried out. '*He is the one who brought destruction upon us all by allying with the Agent Races of the Underworld.*'

Astar turned to Rashal, her eyes narrowed to slits. 'Is he telling the truth?'

'I made a deal with the Cha'lav, they reneged. It was not my fault.'

'Take him to the brig,' she said and turned to face the old man. 'If you would care to come aboard, I would like to hear what has transpired. My people have defeated the Agent Races before, perhaps we can help you.'

'*I accept,*' he said and the screen blanked.

'Captain, the Prime Directive?' Wright whispered.

'The Cha'lav represent a threat to all life. If Starfleet wants to court-martial me then fine, but I will do everything in my power to prevent the Cha'lav from destroying any more civilisations.'

Chapter One

USS Pytheas

Eeroth IV orbit

Stardate 55359.2 (May 12, 2378)

'...Once we fought off the Agent Races of the Underworld in the last battle of what turned out to be an almost completely one-sided war, we felt that there was only one thing that Rashal could do to reclaim his honour. We sent him with a number of intelligent missiles into a rift to find the Agent Races' homeworld and eliminate them for good. It clearly appears that he was unable to complete even this simple task.'

The senior staff stared in mute shock at the old man once he finished telling his tale. Rashal, when he was Vice President of the Eeroth Council (a token position to be sure), made a deal with the Cha'lav to end the bloodshed on the planet by committing genocide against the Dahreki Dominance. The Fahira representatives were immediately removed from office, their territories seized and their families exiled from the homeworld. Both the Dahreki Dominance and the puppet government of the Fahira Alliance fought side by side against the Cha'lav.

'President Janar, you said the Great Searing occurred just a few weeks ago?' Astar pressed, asking for more clarification on the precipitating event at the end of the war.

'Yes, we had all been fighting the Agent Races for months and each world we lost was boiled to extinction or destroyed. Four weeks ago we made a final stand on the homeworld. Almost every one of our vessels was destroyed and the survivors fled to whatever safe haven they could find, whether it was Eeroth or not. We fought them until our homeworld where we had arranged one last surprise for the Agent Races should all else fail. We had destroyed a good number of their vessels but those that remained rained destruction upon the homeworld and killed the millions that were unable to escape.

'The radiation is deadly to us and almost nothing can survive on the homeworld,' he said, leaning back in the chair. 'We used a secret weapon to turn their own energy against them and after their lead ship was heavily damaged, they fled into the rift—which remained open long enough to send Rashal and his missiles.'

'What happened to the Agent Races when your world was destroyed?'

Gonzales asked again.

'They returned to wherever they came from,' Janar replied. 'We've been rebuilding ever since on whatever habitable planet, moon or asteroid we can.'

'Where is your primary base of operations?' Astar asked, hoping for somewhere to be to start work on helping these people.

'You'll forgive me if I don't provide you with the location, Captain,' the President answered. 'Trust is currently a sore issue for us.'

'Of course,' Astar accepted. 'We'll hand Rashal over to you after a hearing to determine whether he is actually guilty of the crimes you say he has committed.'

'We don't want him back, Captain. He is persona non grata to our people.'

'Commander Wright, what do you know about terraforming?' Astar asked, and steadied herself against the table as a jolt of pain shot through her.

'Not much, Captain,' he replied. 'Only the basics we all get taught at the Academy.'

She nodded, seeing Maxx look at her worryingly. Anyone familiar with Wright's file would see that he had just blatantly lied, since he had been at Terraform Command as his first posting from the Academy, but this wasn't the time to make that public. 'Have a look through the ship's database and see if you can find a way to repair the damage which the Cha'lav have wrought.'

'Aye sir,' he replied but made no move to leave.

'Now please,' Astar forced the issue.

'Yes sir,' he said and got up, leaving the room quickly.

'President Janar, we'll remain in orbit until we can find a way to help you.'

'Thank you, Captain, but that is unnecessary.'

'We've come a long way to do a kindness, Mister President,' Astar countered. 'We would be remiss if we did not at least attempt to help. We can provide food and medical supplies, and we will assist you in removing some of the

debris from orbit of your homeworld and around the system.'

Janar bowed his head. 'Thank you, Captain. I am grateful for any help you can provide, but I must decline until Rashal is no longer in a position to cause any trouble. As long as remains alive, he is a danger to my people, and to yours.'

'I will not execute him. But if you want to have that extradition hearing, we'll deal with him that way. If found guilty, he'll be turned over to you and you can execute him yourself.'

'Captain,' Gonzales stood up. 'That violates a number of Federation statutes. I cannot allow you to agree to such an extradition taking place. You know the law. We do not extradite people who will be executed by the interested party.'

Astar glared at her tactical officer. 'Your objection is noted, Commander, but if the extradition is successful he will be dealt with by the laws of his own people, as dictated by the Prime Directive. I cannot in good conscience allow him to remain on board where he may once again prove to be treacherous,' she said, ignoring the small voice in her mind that said she was doing exactly that for her executive officer.

'Captain, this isn't right,' Gonzales remained standing. 'Doctor?'

'Commander Gonzales, be seated or you will be relieved of duty,' Astar said.

Gonzales stood her ground and Astar grabbed the table again to stop the room spinning. This time, everyone looked at her in surprise as she almost collapsed.

'What you're doing goes against the very ideals the Federation was founded upon, Captain.'

'Commander Gonzales, you're relieved,' Astar replied through gritted teeth as Maxx rose from his seat to attend her. 'Return to your quarters pending a hearing.'

President Janar looked on in surprise as Maxx reached his commanding officer. 'Captain, I must protest. You are clearly suffering from something and I believe it is clouding your judgement.'

Chapter Two

USS *Pytheas*

Eeroth IV orbit

Stardate 55359.3 (May 12, 2378)

'I'm fine, Arlon,' Astar said as another jolt rocked her body and she closed her eyes.

'She has done nothing that warrants her being relieved of duty,' Maxx replied, then added with a sad note: 'You, on the other hand, have and I don't believe that you are in full control of your faculties. Captain Leza Astar, under Starfleet protocol 121, section A, I hereby relieve you of duty pending a full physical and psychological evaluation. Please return to your quarters.'

'Arlon, please.'

'Captain, you've been relieved. Commander Wright will assume command in your absence.'

'But he's...' she started and held her tongue, realising that she could say nothing without raising his suspicions.

'He's what, Captain?' Maxx asked politely and tapped his combadge. 'Commander Wright, Captain Astar has been relieved of duty. Please assume command.'

'*What did you say, Doctor?*' Wright replied, and where surprise should have been evident in his tone, there was none, only a sense of righteousness which raised the doctor's interest. There was nothing he could do at this moment in time, since Wright was the first officer and next in the chain of command.

'I have relieved Captain Astar of command. You're in charge now,' he repeated.

'*Acknowledged, Wright out.*'

'Since you're unwilling to return to your quarters, we'll go to sickbay,' Maxx said and turned to the alien dignitary. 'President Janar, I am sorry you've had to witness this. Until I know what is going on, I'm afraid that this meeting is adjourned. Commander Wright will contact you in due course.'

'Thank you for your candour, Doctor. I will return to my vessel.'

'Commander Gonzales, could you escort the President,' Maxx asked as he took Astar by the arm and led her out of the conference lounge to the turbolift.

'What the hell are you doing?' she hissed as she was led across the bridge.

'Saving your career,' he shot back in a whisper. 'What you were planning was murder by proxy, which as I'm sure you're aware is against Federation and Starfleet regulations. I know that symbiont and none of your previous hosts have had such a streak, so I'm assuming that the problem lies with you. You're clearly in a lot of pain and I have to wonder why you haven't told me about it.'

'It started in the meeting,' she replied as they waited for the turbolift. 'I've been feeling a little under the weather but I assumed it was the stress of dealing with the Cha'lav.'

'I will conduct a full battery of physical tests and have Counsellor Zayner conduct a thorough evaluation of your mental state.'

'The evaluation isn't necessary, Doctor. I'm fine.'

'As your earlier comment adequately showed, you're not thinking clearly,' he replied as the turbolift arrived. 'Sickbay. I know you well enough to know that were you in your right mind you would never sanction such a hearing knowing what would happen to Rashal.'

Astar sighed. 'I don't want Wright in command. He's not cut out for the big chair'

'Why not?'

'His jacket speaks for itself, Arlon. This ship isn't going to be in safe hands with him in command.'

'I see.'

Astar pressed the issue. 'He's less fit for command than I am, how can I make you see that?'

'Show me proof, and I'll have Gonzales take command. I need something he's done on this ship that makes him unfit.'

'What about his actions on his other postings?'

'I said this ship, Captain,' Maxx shot back. 'I'm well aware of his supposed actions on the other ships on which he has served, but on this ship he has shown no outward sign of psychological unbalance or sociopathic behaviour. Unless you can give me something definitive, my order stands and not even Command can counter it unless my own mind is not sound and I find no evidence to keep you relieved of duty.'

Astar sighed as the turbolift came to a halt. 'I don't have anything concrete.'

'Then my order stands. You can discuss Commander Wright's situation with Lieutenant Commander Gonzales after I've completed my tests. Then you will be confined to quarters. Lieutenant Zayner will see you in your quarters for one hour a day until I'm satisfied that you are once again fit for command. Is that understood?'

'Perfectly.'

'Good, now take a seat and let's get started,' Maxx said with a smile as Astar climbed onto a biobed.

As the doctor waved the medical tricorder over her body, paying particular attention to her brain and the symbiont, Astar considered her actions. Yes, there was something wrong with her, that much she knew as Maxx was right about her decision-making ability but she had no idea what was going on.

'Are you still experiencing the pain?' he asked.

'Occasionally,' she replied. 'The pain is the most recent addition to my symptoms.'

Maxx sighed. 'I have no idea what is causing it, but since there is elevated activity in your metathalamus, I would have to say that what you are suffering from is essentially a Trill form of Vulcan Bendii syndrome.'

'Doctor, there is no Trill form of Bendii syndrome. It is a disease unique to Vulcanoids.'

'Ordinarily I would agree, but the preliminary evidence is there. I will culture a tissue sample and we'll see, all right?'

'As you wish,' Astar replied, knowing that for the moment there was very little she could do. 'Can you contact the Symbiosis Commission to see if they have anything on this?'

'I took the liberty of getting a copy of the latest edition of two of the Commission's largest resources: *Symbiont Illnesses and Their Effects on the Host* and *Host Illnesses Which Effect the Symbiont*. I will be looking through everything I have on Trill physiology and neurochemistry to determine what is causing it and how to combat it.'

'Thank you.'

Chapter Three

IRW Gilded Talon

Ynelav IV orbit

Stardate 55361.8 (May 13, 2378)

Subcommander Sokal watched the planet below from the discomfort of her throne-like chair on the bridge. The planet's civil war had all but stopped when Romulan soldiers beamed down to the surface to scan every single person for Romulan DNA. She knew that one of her family's ships was down on the surface, and had been for a long time, at least three generations, and it was high time that it was returned. According to her Starfleet spy, the ship had been taken apart and integrated into their technology about two centuries ago when it crash-landed. She intended to find every piece and vaporise it. Her top priority however, was to find her ancestor and regain her honour.

'Subcommander, the centurions in the capital city have something.'

'People or technology?'

'Both,' the Decurion answered.

Sokal smiled. 'Excellent, have the people transported to the brig and the technology put in the secondary cargo section. I will inspect it myself.'

'Right away,' the Decurion replied and saluted, the old-fashioned way.

Sokal returned the salute and returned to her chair. At least she now had a specific alloy signature to search for and that would make the technological search that much easier. As for the DNA search, Romulan blood would have been diluted so much in three generations of Ynelavii that it might prove difficult, unless she could find a specific bloodline to follow.

'The "guests" are aboard,' the Decurion reported. 'One of them is the soldier who greeted us.'

'General Allak? Interesting, I did not notice his Romulan heritage.'

'Doctor Gral may have an answer for you on that score, Subcommander.'

'Then we shall go to the medical bay,' Sokal replied, rubbing her hands

together. She turned to one of the centurions. 'Let me know if anyone else is found.'

'Immediately, Subcommander.'

By the time Sokal and her first officer reached the medical bay, and torture chamber—depending on her mood, Doctor Gral was ready for them. Sokal listening to his prattling on about the latest crew physicals, which had been mandated by Praetor Hiren and which Gral cared about much to her annoyance, before cutting him off mid-stream.

'Doctor, the Ynelavii?'

'Ah yes, our backward cousins,' the doctor replied. 'Ynelavii DNA is somewhat stronger than most of the humanoid DNA we have encountered in the past, except of course Vulcan, and maybe Klingon.'

'Doctor?' Sokal warned.

'Yes of course, my apologies. As I was saying, the Ynelavii DNA is actually dominant enough to repress certain Romulan characteristics. The ears, and blood type, for example. The blood samples I have taken from General Allak indicate that he a ninth-generation hybrid.'

'Meaning?'

'The Romulan hybrids on this world have a Ynelavii life-span, not a Romulan one. How many people were aboard the vessel?'

Sokal hesitated before answering. 'Just one.'

'He led a very active life. I believe, based on the genetic drift, that there are approximately four hundred hybrids on this planet.'

Sokal frowned. Her House had been disgraced and this would serve only to deepen it. 'I want them all found and executed. Make sure you know who they all are first. Trace the bloodlines. My ancestor held a secret before he died and I want to know if he passed it to any of his descendants.'

'I'll get on it straight away, Subcommander,' Gral replied.

'Breathe a word of this to anyone and your honour blade will come in very

useful.'

Gral nodded solemnly.

Sokal knew that every member of the crew was loyal to her and her House, but they didn't need to know everything. 'Decurion, join me in the cargo section. We will analyse the hull fragments. Once we have the alloy signature, I want you to scan the entire surface and beam every piece you find aboard. Once you have exhausted the surface scan, I want you to send soldiers to scan every inch of the planet and find the rest.'

'If we don't?' he asked as they left the medical bay.

'We find as much as we can. Whatever my ancestor knew, I want to know.'

The Decurion nodded. 'We'll find out what he was working on. Are you sure you want to execute all the hybrids?'

'The hybrids are an affront to the purity of Romulus.'

'Successive praetors have kept Sela alive.'

Sokal bristled at the mention of the reviled hybrid. 'Perhaps Hiren will do away with her once and for all.'

'Perhaps.'

They entered the guarded cargo section and saw a familiar piece of Romulan technology.

'Is that what I think it is?' the first officer asked.

'An ionic impulse drive,' Sokal replied. 'What was it used for?'

'The pride of Ynelavii power generation. It was their oldest fusion generator.'

'A nuclear power station?'

He nodded. 'It went critical the second we beamed these components aboard.'

'Damage?'

'Three thousand square kilometres uninhabitable for centuries. Four hundred dead, and the extensive loss of the local ecosystem.'

'That should show them that we mean business. Perhaps Regent Dolan will be more receptive.'

Her first officer smiled. 'His warships have taken up attack positions around us and we have been ignoring his hails.'

'Weapons capability?'

'Their vessels are no match for ours, Subcommander,' he said.

'You're certain.'

'You can engage them now if you wish?' he asked, clearly relishing the prospect.

'Starfleet might need their help later. I will destroy them if the people resist our scans. Have you scanned the ships?'

'Their shielding prevents our scans from penetrating the hull.'

Sokal turned to him. 'Ask the Regent to make his ships lower their shields or we'll destroy them. Mention the nuclear disaster he's dealing with. That should hold his attention.'

'Right away.'

Chapter Four

Regent's Office

Ynelav IV

Stardate 55364.5 (May 14, 2378)

Regent Dolan stared at the screens around him in horror.

The Romulans had thus far caused a nuclear tragedy, kidnapped two hundred Ynelavii citizens and now wished for access into the reliquaries. He was not going to allow his citizens to be executed, as the Romulans had expressed their wish to do so, especially not with the damage caused to the coastal region outside the capital city. Three civilisation centres were now nothing more than radioactive wastelands and the capital city's power was existing on batteries and solar power. The remnants of the radioactive cloud were still visible in the sky and he had every available medical resource on alert combating the radiation sickness which was sweeping through the southern edge of the city.

Standing beside him was Jonek, his former aide and now liaison to the Romulans. 'It would be wise to have our ships lower their shields. Once the Romulans have taken our people we can negotiate for their release, but preventing them from taking our people could cause more damage, not only to the planet but to the people's morale.'

Dolan nodded. 'I agree, but how much more technology do we have that they will just take?'

'I have asked that question and I believe them when they say that they have as much of the warbird and its innards as they are likely to find, now that they have raided the reliquaries.'

'Very well, have the shields lowered and let them complete their scans. Do you think you could see to it that their troops are removed?'

'They won't remove their troops until every Ynelavii citizen has been scanned for evidence of a Romulan bloodline.'

'What are their estimates?'

'They have traced fourteen bloodlines back to the Romulan who crash-landed. The one coordinating the troop movements tells me that there will probably

be another forty bloodlines.'

'Another six hundred people?' Dolan made the calculation in his head. 'And they still want to execute them?'

Jonek nodded. 'Yes, Regent.'

Dolan shook his head. 'Forget it. I'm not putting up with this anymore. Who is in charge of the fleet?'

'Colonel Ferok, sir.'

'Open a channel, secure frequency.'

'Regent, this course of action is not recommended.'

'Do it.'

'Yes sir,' Jonek replied and opened a secure channel to the *Oxelus*.

'*Regent?*' Colonel Ferok asked.

'I am giving you a green light,' Dolan said. 'Remove that ship from orbit using whatever means necessary.'

Ferok nodded. '*It will be done, Regent,*' the colonel replied and cut the channel as he turned to face the bridge crew.

Dolan activated the planet-wide emergency broadcast network. 'This is Regent Dolan and I speak to you now of the day of a grave injustice. The Romulan troops you have seen and been in contact with have destroyed the nuclear generator outside the capital city, killing hundreds, and destroying the local wildlife sanctuary. They are kidnapping your friends, lovers and relatives with plans to execute them when they have them all in custody. I call on you now to do whatever it takes to resist their efforts at destroying our way of life. This is Ynelav and we will protect our land and our people from any who would destroy it.'

'That was a mistake, sir,' Jonek replied.

'No, what was a mistake was letting this get so far in the first place. You can either remain as liaison to the enemy, or join me as my Vice Regent.'

Jonek smiled. 'I will join you, Regent.'

'Excellent, I suggest you pass out weapons to everyone. A worldwide insurgency is the only way we're going to get rid of these Romulans.'

'We will lose a lot of people.'

'But we'll save our world.'

'At what point is the price too high? How far do you think Subcommander Sokal will go to get what she wants?'

'She'll go as far as she needs to, to get everything she wants. I have no doubt that she will kill a lot of people just because they represent a threat that doesn't exist,' Dolan replied. 'I cannot foresee a time when eight hundred Ynelavii will travel to Romulus and ask for their birthright. We had no idea the Romulans even existed before they arrived here.'

Jonek started at a noise down the corridor.

'Sokal can beam into this office if she wanted to,' Dolan said.

'Another coup?'

'Unlikely,' he said but opened the door a fraction and peered down the hallway.

The militia guards were gone and the corridor was deserted. None of the aides or ministers or scientists could be seen either.

'Regent?'

'Yes?' Dolan asked, turning to face his colleague and friend.

'We're getting reports of fighting across every province. The people are attacking Romulans on sight using whatever weapons they have to hand.'

'We'll get a response from her soon enough.'

As if on cue both men were caught in the tingle of a transporter beam. They materialised on the bridge of the Romulan warbird and faced Subcommander

Sokal.

'Your actions today have cost a great many lives,' she said and pointed him toward the debris on the screen. 'This is what remains of your space fleet. My troops have the upper hand on the surface and your world will cower in fear before this day is over.'

'I have more ships,' Dolan pointed out with a smile. 'My people will never give up until every last Romulan is dead or off-world and the Ynelavii fear no one. You will have to kill every last one of us before we give you anything.'

Sokal stepped toward him but was stopped by Jonek, who rested a hand on her arm. She couldn't move.

'You will take your people off our world and return every Ynelavii to the surface. Take what remains of your ship and leave this sector.'

Chapter Five

IRW Gilded Talon

Ynelav IV orbit

Stardate 55364.6 (May 14, 2378)

'I will not!' Sokal replied but felt her mind waver.

It was unnerving that she could not move anything except her head. She looked around the bridge and saw that the rest of her crew were in similar situations. They were at the former liaison's mercy.

'You will do as I ask or you will be struck down,' Jonek warned. 'I will protect my people from any who wish to harm them.'

'Remove your hand,' Sokal said. 'I will do nothing to harm you.'

Jonek did so and Sokal lashed out at him, hoping to slam him to the deck. He stayed upright but the warbird shuddered.

'What in Erebus was that?' Sokal asked as alarm klaxons sounded across the ship.

'A solar flare, Subcommander, directed at our shields,' her Lieutenant stated sourly, glaring at Jonek. 'They are down.'

'How did you do that?' she asked as she slumped in her chair.

'I can do more than that,' the liaison replied with a crooked smile.

'Subcommander, we have radiation alarms along all sections of the outer hull. I have to seal them.'

'Do it!'

'But the crew?'

'The crew are unharmed,' Jonek stated flatly. 'Your vessel is another matter.'

'What is the status of the rest of the ship?'

'The singularity drive is offline, weapons are down and the computer is

experiencing a cascade failure.'

Sokal turned to the Regent and his liaison. 'You have crippled us. How are we expected to leave your system with our systems damaged in this fashion?'

'Once you agree to leave, I will repair your vessel but not before. Will you return the people you have taken?'

'No, they are an affront to the purity of the Romulan people.'

'It would seem that your bloodline is not so pure either, Subcommander, since you are all Vulcan stock,' Jonek taunted the arrogant Romulan.

'We are nothing like our distant and pacifistic cousins!'

'Consider your position,' Regent Dolan interjected. 'I have no control over the Seer, and he is the saviour of the Ynelavii people. He has come in our darkest time and he will protect us. You have one vessel that is heavily crippled against someone who can manipulate matter and energy at will. What chance do you think you realistically stand?'

'Lieutenant, order our troops on the surface to stand down and return to the ship. Return the Ynelavii we have taken to the surface, and be careful not to harm them.'

'Immediately, Subcommander,' the first officer answered and set about giving orders.

Jonek waved his hand and viewscreen changed to that of the site of the former nuclear power station.

'Our world will be healed,' he said and Dolan and Sokal watched as the radioactive cloud dispersed, the ecosystem spontaneously regenerated and there appeared to be no sign that the station had ever been there. 'I can do nothing about the power loss, Regent, so we will need to quickly discover another way of powering the capital.'

'I will speak with my advisers as soon as I return to the surface,' Dolan replied and vanished from the bridge.

'You will get off my bridge,' Sokal ordered the Seer.

'When your people are back aboard and mine are on the surface.'

Sokal turned to her tactical officer. 'The Ynelavii are in cargo bay two are they not?'

'Yes, Subcommander.'

'Space them!' she ordered.

Jonek narrowed his eyes at her as she grinned cruelly.

'I gave you no reason to doubt my word,' he stated and the tactical officer's station melted. 'The next person who attempts to kill those people will be incapacitated.'

Sokal's lips thinned. 'How dare you presume to give orders on my bridge.' She turned to another officer. 'Space the natives, centurion.'

The centurion stood shock still as Sokal stalked over to him and touched him on the shoulder. He toppled to the deck. 'He is unharmed. Since you are incapable of returning my people to the surface, I will do it.'

There was an audible thump and then a whine. 'Subcommander, we are on the surface,' her lieutenant said.

'Will we be able to take off?' She asked.

'Not under our own power. These vessels are not designed to land.'

She ground her teeth. 'Once your people are on the ground, you will return us to our previous position and we will leave the system.'

Jonek smiled. 'An excellent suggestion, Subcommander,' he spoke quietly and vanished.

'Damn him, are we back in orbit?'

'We are, Subcommander. All our systems have been repaired.'

Sokal looked at the tactical station to see it in one solid piece again. 'Target the capital city and raze it to the ground.'

'Is that wise?'

'Just do it!' she screeched.

Twin disruptor beams lanced out from the warbird and were absorbed by the upper atmosphere.

'What happened?'

'The energy was dissipated. There is a shield around the planet.'

'Natural?'

'No, Subcommander. It is artificial, and does not appear to be the work of the Seer. I would speculate that he alone know how to operate the device.'

'I don't suppose we can beam down to the surface?'

'I wouldn't want to risk it.'

Sokal nodded, thinking to herself. 'Set a course for *Starbase 535*. We'll be back once we have been checked over by their engineers. In the meantime, begin analysing the debris for evidence of Vulcan energy fire.'

'Vulcan?'

'Yes, I believe they followed my ancestor out here and destroyed his vessel to stop him from reporting the truth to the Praetor.'

'What truth?'

'That although life in the galaxy was seeded by the Progenitors over four and a half billion years ago, Vulcans and Romulans are direct descendants of the Tkon Empire, a civilisation dating back more than a million years.'

The Lieutenant smirked. 'I believe the Office of the Praetor has been disputing that claim for the last four centuries, since the idea was first introduced by a self-proclaimed prophet from Vulcan.'

Chapter Six

USS Pytheas

Eeroth IV orbit

Stardate 55368.1 (May 15, 2378)

Commander Aaron Wright sat in the captain's ready room with a smile on his face. For the last eight years he had planned this and it was now coming to fruition. All he needed was a few minor adjustments to the ship and he would be ready to go. The rest of the crew would just be along for the ride. He was busy with the administrative side of being a commanding officer, confirming reports and crew rosters, when someone pressed the enunciator to enter.

'Come,' he called.

Lieutenant Jamal Mahtani entered, looking somewhat bewildered. 'Commander.'

Wright smiled but it made Mahtani feel worse. 'I want you to take a look at this padd and tell me whether you think the modifications can be made to the deflector dish.'

Mahtani took the padd and glanced at it. 'I believe so, but Commander Xeris would be better suited to making the modifications.'

Wright stood and leaned over the desk. 'I don't want Xeris to do it. I'm asking you. I want those modifications ready as soon as possible, dismissed.'

'Aye sir,' Mahtani replied and hurried out the room.

Wright knew that it would take several days and in the meantime he would continue to follow Captain Astar's previous orders, to help the Eeroth rid themselves of the Cha'lav. He looked over the current situation on the planet, provided by the former president over the last two days, made a decision. Since the Eeroth were already in the process of rebuilding, it made sense for the ship to be where the action was, but he wanted to make sure the atmosphere was completely breathable first—which meant pulling his chief science officer off the deflector modifications. Apparently his plan was going to have to wait a little longer.

'Wright to Mahtani, meet me in science lab three,' the commander said, remembering the lab which was set up for such a possibility.

'On my way.'

Mahtani was already there when Wright entered the room, and no other science officer was in sight. 'Where is everyone?'

'Working on their assigned tasks, sir,' the chief science officer replied. 'How can I help you?'

'How badly damaged is Eeroth IV's atmosphere?'

This was an area for which Mahtani had no compunction about working for. 'Pollution is approximately equivalent to the immediate post-World War Three era and the radiation is exceptionally high in some locations. All the rebuilding they're involved in will come to nothing unless the atmosphere is given a chance to heal, and quickly.'

'Is there anything we can do to help?'

Mahtani considered his answer for he had been asking himself that very question since they arrived. 'It is possible to force a large storm front which would remove the pollution, but it is extremely dangerous for anyone living on the planet.'

'How so?'

'The northern hemisphere would freeze and as much of the population as possible should be moved below the equatorial region.'

'And after that?'

'The air will be clear of most of the major pollutants, the airborne radiation will have dispersed and we can work on the irradiated soil.'

'How long before the planet is habitable to Eeroth norms again if we go this course of action?'

'We should be able to do everything in about three weeks, if we accelerate all the timetables. But there is a significant chance, if our calculations are off by too much, of permanent damage to the planetary ecosystem.'

'We'll render it totally uninhabitable?'

'Yes sir.'

'Prepare a report for President Janar and I will propose it to him.'

'Yes sir,' Mahtani said and paused, as if waiting for something.

'Make this your top priority and reassign whoever you need.'

'Aye sir,' the science officer replied, knowing that the deflector modifications would have to wait. It would also give him a chance to speak with the captain about them because what Wright was planning was illegal and carried a serious penalty. But he needed more proof than a few specifications on a padd, he needed intent for Astar and Maxx to declare Wright unfit for duty. He let none of that show on his face though.

'I'll be on the bridge if I'm needed.'

'Yes sir.'

Wright left the science lab and realised as he walked down the corridor that Mahtani knew what he was planning and probably wouldn't do it, unless he had a reason to. It was time to look at his Starfleet file and see if anything cropped up. He knew that he couldn't arrange an accident for that would look too suspicious, especially since the Captain was indisposed, and hoped that the file would give him something.

'Maxx to Wright.'

'Go ahead, Doctor.'

'I need to speak with you, urgently.'

'I'm on my way,' Wright replied and cursed himself again. It would appear that the damned doctor had figured out what was wrong with the captain. His fears were confirmed when he entered sickbay and saw Lieutenant Parker, the ship's security chief.

'Commander, thank you for coming so quickly,' Maxx said and indicated the only occupied biobed.

'What is it?' he asked, his tone appropriately concerned.

'Leza has been poisoned, but it is only affecting the symbiont, not her. That's the reason she acted so strangely the other day, the symbiont's former personalities are coming through.'

'Who would do something like that, why? What can you do?'

'Until I find out exactly what poison was used, there's nothing I can do. I have taken enough blood samples to use and enough scans of both host and symbiont to conduct an investigation, but I need your permission to put her in stasis until I can stop the damage, otherwise they'll both die.'

Wright inwardly sighed with relief. 'Very well, we need her at full capacity as soon as possible, Doctor,' he said. 'How long has this been going on?'

'I don't know.'

Wright turned to Parker. 'Lieutenant, I want to know the captain's exact movements since she arrived on board. The sooner we pinpoint how the poison was delivered, the sooner we can reverse it.'

Parker nodded. 'I'll get right on it, sir.'

Chapter Seven

USS *Pytheas*

Eeroth IV orbit

Stardate 55368.2 (May 15, 2378)

Lieutenant Jamal Mahtani waited for the computer to finish its current set of simulations regarding Eeroth's atmosphere and he stared at the padd sitting atop his station in science lab three. He wasn't going to let it out of his sight, and didn't want to go to anyone just yet. As long as Wright was concentrating on helping the Eeroth as per Captain Astar's orders, the deflector modifications weren't going to be his primary concern. Mahtani knew what the guy was planning, or was pretty sure of it, but he couldn't authorise a search of the computer library without alerting him. As soon as the captain entered stasis, the ship's command codes were automatically transferred to Wright, giving him the full run of the ship and its crew.

'Computer, where is Lieutenant Parker?'

'Lieutenant Parker is in Captain Astar's quarters.'

Mahtani made a decision and grabbed the padd. He let the computer continue to run its simulations, though he did lock out the console, and headed for the captain's quarters. His entire science team, numbering almost thirty officers and crewmen, were working on the problem and feeding new variables into the computer as they went along. It was tedious work and he was thankful for the distraction, negative as it might be. Beta shift was on the bridge at present so there were few personnel walking the corridors, and he encountered none of his alpha-shift companions during the walk and turbolift ride from the atmospheric science laboratory on deck eight to the captain's quarters on deck three.

He pressed the enunciator and when the doors opened, he saw Parker standing just inside the main room. 'Lieutenant?' she asked.

'We need to talk.'

'Here?'

'As good a place as any.'

'Before you tell me anything about our acting captain, which I presume is the

reason you're here and clutching that padd as if your life depended on it, I want to know if someone can poison someone else without them knowing it.'

Mahtani considered the question and looked around the captain's quarters as he passed Parker the padd. There were a number of photographs and Trill artefacts in the room, as well as a good number of padds of all sizes.

'It is possible, but in the old days it would be added to food. I don't see how that could be...' he paused and then with an alarmed look in his eyes, crossed over to the replicator and pulled off the panel at its base.

Parker followed and the two crouched down. 'Is that supposed to be there?' she asked, pointing to a small padd-like device attached to a power junction.

Mahtani stood up. 'No, Lieutenant, it isn't. That device is actually connected to the materialisation relay. Whatever the captain has eaten in this room will have been contaminated by whatever was poisoning her.'

'I'll have the doc examine this,' she replied, disconnecting it. 'And then pass it to Xeris. Maybe he can tell me who would have the know-how for this.'

'Anyone that was in the Maquis or has used guerrilla warfare tactics. This type of device is something that the Bajoran resistance might have used against the Cardassians.'

Parker glanced at the padd held in her other hand. 'Or someone who might have been in a longer-term resistance movement?' she asked.

Mahtani nodded.

'Don't worry, I know what it's like to fight a losing battle every day. He'll never know we're onto him. I'll just have to make sure that anyone else I involve will also keep quiet.'

'He'll figure it out before too long. He's too smart not too.'

'Wright to Mahtani, report to Science Lab Three immediately.'

'He knows I was here,' Mahtani replied and tapped his combadge. 'On my way.'

Parker nodded as Mahtani headed out the door.

Mahtani reached the science lab in just under two minutes and saw two security officers standing there. 'What's going on?'

'You locked out the console, why?' Wright asked as he continued to try in vain to override the lockout.

'I didn't want anyone to stop the simulations while I wasn't here,' Mahtani replied.

'You could have used your authorisation code.'

'I'm a little compulsive when it comes to running such serious simulations, Commander.'

Wright narrowed his eyes. 'Unlock the console. And give me the padd I gave to you.'

Mahtani reached under the console and passed the padd back to him, then unlocked the console and stepped back.

Wright examined the console and then the padd. 'You haven't copied this have you?'

'I didn't need to.'

'That is not an answer, Lieutenant.'

'No, I haven't copied the contents of that padd.'

He nodded, satisfied. 'Carry on,' he added and walked out.

Mahtani breathed a sigh of relief as the ship's first officer left the science lab. He hoped that Parker, Maxx and Xeris were going to have better luck in gathering proof against him. In the meantime, he had bigger problems to deal with, such as how to fix a planet's atmosphere without destroying the population in the process. The simulations were all coming out negative, telling him that everything they were trying was not going to work. He needed something else and decided to go down to deck thirteen where the majority of the science labs were located and see exactly what his team was up to.

No sooner had he left his lab than the intruder klaxon sounded and the ship instantly went to red alert. Something had got onto the ship and he knew exactly what it was.

'Commander Wright, I'm detecting a null-space rupture on deck nine, there are six Cha'lav aboard,' he reported to the bridge as the chirp from his tricorder alerted him.

'I'm sending security, do not engage,' the exec replied.

'I'm close, I can find out what they are doing.'

'Do not engage, that's a direct order.'

'I wasn't planning to attack them, Commander, just observe,' Mahtani replied and headed for the turbolift, ignoring repeated calls from Wright and Gonzales.

He would be able to reach them faster than security unless Wright authorised a site to site transport, which he knew wasn't going to happen.

Chapter Eight

USS Pytheas

Eeroth IV orbit

Stardate 55368.3 (May 15, 2378)

Rashal sat in the brig aboard the Federation starship and wished, not the first time, that he had never been found by these people. After his vice-presidential government had been deposed and the rest of his cabal imprisoned or executed, President Janar had given him a merciful choice, execution or banishment. On the surface it seemed merciful but prior to the arrival of the Cha'lav, the Eeroth believed themselves to be the only intelligent life in the galaxy, cut off as they were by the Great Fire Plains. He'd chosen banishment and been placed in a converted missile on a mission to destroy the homeworld, then ejected into a Cha'lav rift which opened close to the warship he was on. Rashal knew that he'd been drifting for a long time before he was found and was immediately grateful. It was only after learning what kind of a threat the Cha'lav were that he accepted the offer to return home, knowing it meant certain death if the government was still intact.

Since the *Pytheas* arrived in the Eeroth system, and after the peculiar power play between the captain and first officer, he'd learned that the Dahreki and the Fahira had joined forces to combat the Cha'lav threat, though it proved fruitless. Dozens of worlds and inhabited moons had been laid waste to, and the few million survivors of his entire species had all but forgotten about their racial divide. It was not the end he hoped for, but it was positive. With the Federation's help they could drive off the Cha'lav and rebuild their world with a new government and none of the old hatred. He just hoped that he was alive to see it, though with Commander Wright in charge, he didn't think it was likely. The man looked like the others, but he wasn't one of them; he was a fighter, a man who had grown up in a world where survival was granted only to those who fought for it.

The doors the brig slid open and Commander Wright entered, followed by President Janar and two Fahira soldiers. Wright stood back as Janar strode closer to the forcefield. 'Commander Wright has held a hearing in your absence and granted me with your custody, but only because I agreed not to execute you. There are too few of us left to allow a petty thing like treason get in the way.'

'Parker to Wright.'

'Excuse me a moment, Mister President,' Wright said and took a few steps back. 'Go ahead, Lieutenant.'

'There is no sign of the Cha'lav on deck nine and we're doing a deck by deck search. We've picked up no more null-space rifts opening so they must still be on board, but the internal sensors aren't picking them up.'

'How did Mahtani find them then?'

'The tricorders can pick them up if they're within about forty metres in any direction,' Parker answered. *'We're trying to create a network that covers the entire ship.'*

'Keep at it, Lieutenant. I don't want the Cha'lav doing anything to my ship.'

'Aye sir, Parker out.'

'I apologise for that,' Wright said and turned his attention back to Rashal.

Rashal looked to Wright and sighed. The ship's first officer seemed to have skirted the law on this one, having a hearing in absentia, to convict him of treason; whereas he believed that Captain Astar would have at least granted him a proper hearing in accordance with their laws which he had looked up on while he was enjoying their hospitality. 'Do with me what you will. The Cha'lav have beaten you but you are better for it.'

Janar looked at the soldiers and Rashal was surprised that they were not Fahira, and that the president did not see it. 'We have learned to tolerate each other, but there is still much work to be done if we are to heal ourselves. The longest journey starts with the smallest step and so, being the sole law-giver left alive, I absolve you of treason.'

Rashal blinked twice, unsure if he had heard what the President said. 'Mister President?'

'I have absolved you of treason and sent out a message granting a full pardon to all of the Fahira rebels and their Dahreki sympathisers and collaborators. You are correct, the Cha'lav have beaten us, but only into recognising our own faults as a species. If we are to be the heralds of a new generation, where we are of one race, then we must start somewhere. I am asking you, Rashal, to return to Eeroth to work at my side as my right hand once again.'

Rashal stood. 'I accept the position, Mister President.'

'It will not be easy, for almost everyone you meet will have lost someone to the Cha'lav or the aftermath of their attack.'

'I am responsible for what has befallen our people and our worlds, it is only right that I should assist in their recovery, no matter the cost.'

Janar turned to Wright and nodded, accepting the burden of responsibility he was undertaking by allowing a rebel and destroyer of worlds to be his number two. Wright took one step forward, to the only console in the room, and deactivated the forcefield. 'Welcome home, Mister Vice President.'

He stepped out of the cell and noticed the eyes of one of the Fahira soldiers, they were a shade too dark.

'You're not Fahira!' he pointed to one of the soldiers and then to Janar. 'His eyes are too dark, like a Dahreki.'

The other one turned and held a weapon on the one Rashal pointed out. 'Who are you?'

'I am loyal to the Dahreki Dominance, and I do not agree with the rule of the current administration,' the soldier replied and fired his weapon before disappearing in a transporter beam.

The other soldier grabbed Rashal and pressed a control stud on his wrist as he clasped Rashal's arm. Both men disappeared in another transporter beam as Rashal saw Wright kneeling before Janar's bleeding body.

Chapter Nine

USS Pytheas

Eeroth IV orbit

Stardate 55368.4 (May 15, 2378)

'Computer, lock on to my combadge and transport to sickbay, authorisation Wright-Everest-2-5-3,' the first officer ordered as he knelt by the Eerothian president.

He put a finger to the man's neck as they dematerialised. His finger was still there as sickbay coalesced around them.

Maxx was at his side instantly. 'What happened?'

'He was shot in the chest by one of his soldiers. It was some kind of plasma discharge weapon.'

'It was a high setting, designed to kill,' Maxx replied as two corpsmen transferred the president to a biobed and the surgical arch moved into place above the president's body. 'Where's Rashal?'

'I'm hoping that the other soldier was on the right side of the law and took the new vice president into protective custody.'

'What are going to do now?'

'You're going to save his life. I am going to find out how good the security is for vetting the presidential protection detail and make sure that the people who attacked the leader of a sovereign nation on my ship won't go unpunished.'

'That's not our way, Commander. But by all means go and find the rebels, I'll keep him alive.'

Wright narrowed his eyes but stormed out of sickbay, tapping his combadge. 'Gonzales, there have been two unauthorized transports in the last five minutes. Tell me you know what happened.'

'I was monitoring the situation, as you requested, Commander. The transports were directed to a series of relay stations throughout the system. It will take time to discover the eventual location.'

Wright sighed. 'Get to work, Commander. I need to find those rebels.'

'Sir?'

'If they have any chance of fighting the Cha'lav they need a united front. While the President is willing to provide that, there are some that aren't. I intend to assist them in making their planet habitable and making sure that the Captain's orders stand. Getting rid of the Cha'lav is our top priority.'

'Aye sir, I'll let you know the second I have a location.'

'While you're at it, deactivate the relay stations.'

'That's not a good idea, sir. The relay stations work for communications and an early warning grid. We would compromise their entire infrastructure if we shut them down.'

'Fine, tap into it so we can monitor everything. Have some security personnel on duty in astrometrics at all time, watching everything that comes through.'

'Aye sir, Gonzales out.'

Wright tapped his combadge again, 'Parker, where are those damned intruders?'

'Nowhere, sir. I'm not picking up any lifesigns other than the crew. I still have security searching every deck and all non-essential personnel have been restricted to quarters.'

He sighed, nothing was going right. 'Find them,' he snapped and turned a corner, bumping right into them.

They looked at him and raised rifles toward him as he backed up and wished he had a phaser.

'Sir, get down,' a security guard called out behind and Wright dropped to the deck as beams of phased energy hit the Cha'lav-Primates in the chest. Two of them went down but the other three retreated and fired back.

'Give me a rifle,' Wright said as the security guards approached him.

'Are you all right, sir?'

'You got to me just in time, Cadet,' Wright told the Ynelavii woman. 'Let me have that rifle. I'll provide cover fire for you.'

'Sir?'

Wright sighed. 'Whatever you have heard about me, or whatever you think of me, is irrelevant. I'm your commanding officer, and I gave you an order. Give me your rifle and go after them. I'll provide cover fire.'

'Aye sir,' Jenak said, tossed her rifle and trotted off down the corridor.

Wright followed the two security officers and when they began firing in earnest, Wright picked a spot just behind a bulkhead and set himself up. He edged round the corner and fired off two shots, each hitting their mark before moving back. Several shots from the Cha'lav hit the bulkhead but they had opened themselves to fire and were quickly shot down.

'Good work, both of you,' Wright smiled and tapped his combadge. 'Parker, your intruders are down in several sections outside sickbay. Come and pick them up.'

'On my way, sir, Parker out.'

'Good shooting, sir,' the older of the two guards said.

'I have always been a good marksman, never thought I'd be firing any weapons on board my own ship though. When Parker is through mopping up here, I want you too on brig duty—and tell Parker I want to see her in my ready room as soon as she's done.'

'Aye sir,' they replied as Wright headed back to sickbay.

Things were finally starting to look up, so he thought until he entered sickbay and heard the monitors in the surgical bay. He knew without being told that the president was not doing well, all the signs were heading down and the peaks were getting shallower.

The president was dying.

'Six milligrams inaprovaline, stat!' Maxx called out as Janar spasmed.

'It's not working, Doctor,' the Grazerite head nurse replied moments after injecting the contents of the hypospray. 'This is the third time we've tried it.'

Maxx muttered a curse and turned to Wright as everything flatlined again. 'Time of death, eleven forty-two. I'm sorry, Commander. There was nothing we could do. There was too much tissue and neurological damage. You should contact Rashal and let him know that he is now the President of the Eerothian people.'

'Great, just great,' Wright muttered. 'From exile to president in a day, that doesn't happen often.'

'Sir, will the people accept Rashal?'

'On that score, I have no idea, but he is legally the leader of the people, and while we're here we'll grant him full diplomatic status until someone takes his place, however that happens.'

'Completely impartial, sir.'

'Yes, Doctor, completely impartial,' Wright replied and headed for the door. 'I just hope we can do what we came here to do.'

As soon as the door closed on him, he sighed. Now he had to stay until he found out who killed the president. He didn't overly much care that the man was dead, but the fact that he was killed under Wright's nose rankled and Wright intended to punish the person or people responsible.

Chapter Ten

Presidential Base

Eeroth system

Stardate 55370.2 (May 16, 2378)

Former exile and now hastily sworn in President Rashal blinked in the harsh glare of the lamps before figuring out how to adjust the controls. He knew that there were more surgically-altered Dahreki posing Fahira in his entourage and was having everyone scanned to make sure they were weeded out. The rebellion now seemed to consist of both Fahira and Dahreki working together toward their own disparate agendas and he knew they would soon tire of working together. He needed to make sure that as many people as possible realised that the only way they were going to survive was to work together. The fact that Janar had made a public statement naming Rashal as his vice president before his assassination had eased his people's fears somewhat, even if they still blamed him for the problem at large. He doubted he would be re-elected but for now he was their leader and they would follow him to end the battle with the Cha'lav once and for all.

Rashal did not like being kept waiting, especially since his duties included overseeing every aspect of Eerothian life and making sure they were all safe. He was meeting with the leader of the cell who killed Janar, to ascertain why they had done so. The cell leader was overdue by almost ten minutes. While he waited, Rashal's eyes focused to the different level of light and he concentrated on the map of the solar system on the screen in front of him. The Federation ship was in orbit of the homeworld and there were several Fahira and Dahreki patrols working together in the outer system, and it pleased him. Perhaps when this war was over he would not be reviled, but hailed as the bringer of peace to the warring nations. Yes, his overture to the Cha'lav had been a mistake, but he was desperate not see his family's lands destroyed by a politician eager for the approval of the fast-breeding Dahreki masses. He'd personally vetoed as many Dahreki-centric reforms as he could and he was well-liked by the Fahira for it.

'Mister President, General Teliz to see you,' an aide said, ushering in the old fair-haired rebel leader.

'My apologies for my tardiness, Mister President,' Teliz said as he entered the room. 'A strategy meeting went longer than expected. I expect you're glad to be out of that Federation cell.'

Rashal narrowed his eyes. 'I was released prior to your assassination of President Janar. Would you mind telling me you decided on that act of treason?'

Teliz shook his head, his short hair looking wrong against his pale face. 'You're one to talk about treason. Janar was going to surrender to the Cha'lav and hope they allowed us to live. I made sure that someone we could trust held the office.'

'So you waited until I was released, how kind of you,' Rashal replied sadly. 'Janar's offer still stands, a full pardon for any rebel who wants to rejoin the people against the Cha'lav. Any who don't accept it will be tried and executed for treason. If you do not renounce the rebellion you will not leave this room a free man.'

'A pardon for what? I have done nothing that was not in the best interests of our people,' Teliz responded angrily. 'The Dahreki will never work with us for long. As soon as the Cha'lav are gone things will go back to the way they were. I wanted to change that.'

'Things will never be the same,' Rashal replied. 'Three quarters of our population have been wiped out. Those of us who are left have to work and live together if we are to survive. The only way is to breed together to broaden the gene pool so that we do survive, otherwise why fight?'

'You have changed since I knew you, and I see that perhaps another assassination is needed. We need someone we can trust.'

'You can trust me to get rid of the Cha'lav and to lead our people to salvation,' Rashal replied.

'You brought this on us all. Why bother to save us now?'

'It is the only thing to do, and I must repent for my mistakes,' the new president stated flatly. 'Will you renounce the rebellion and rejoin the people?'

'No, I won't,' Teliz replied. 'All I can do is order the rebellion to attack only Cha'lav vessels until this war is over.'

'Very well,' Rashal said. 'Guards!'

'What are you doing?'

Three guards entered the room. 'Take him to the prison cavern.'

'Of course, Mister President, right away.'

Once he was gone, Rashal heard a knock at the door and sighed. 'Enter.'

A Dahreki man and Fahira woman entered the cavern carrying a data slate. 'Mister President, I am Serea,' the woman said, 'and this is Mital. We're doctors. We need to begin inoculating everyone with broad-spectrum antibiotics and anti-virals to prevent the spread of diseases which will become rampant if not checked quickly.'

'Do it, but if I find out that anyone is getting preferential treatment, I'll have your heads.'

Mital stepped forward, putting a protective arm around Serea. 'I will protect my wife at all costs, Mister President. We heal everyone, no matter what.'

'If we survive this, I'll make you both my medical advisers.'

'Thank you, Mister President.'

'You're welcome, now go and save our people.'

They scurried out of the room and Rashal sighed. This was going to get harder before it got easier, if at all. At some point, he was going to have to contact the Federation starship again and find out what was happening with their efforts to rebuild the homeworld. After all, he would be forgiven in a large part if he could erase the damage the Cha'lav had wrought, even though he couldn't bring people back from the dead.

All of a sudden he felt vibrations through the caverns and realised that someone was taking a ship from the hangar. He ran from his office as fast as he could and met up with a security detail but it was too late. Just as they reached the hangar, the largest vessel passed through the barrier of the hidden asteroid and into open space.

'Who was it?'

'I don't know, sir.'

'I want a full roll call. Find out who is missing.'

Chapter Eleven

USS *Pytheas*

Eeroth IV orbit

Stardate 55372.9 (May 17, 2378)

She knew there was something about Wright that made her uneasy. He'd always given her the creeps but ever since that incident in the observation lounge, he had become more creepy. It was like there was no longer anything stopping him from doing what he wanted to do. She wouldn't be a very good tactical officer, and former security chief, if she couldn't see what was going on. Mahtani was jumpy around him and the doctor barely spoke two words. Even Parker was suspicious of him, but then she was suspicious of Parker. Wright was an unknown variable in the command crew, and she didn't like that. She'd already looked up his jacket and noticed that three previous incidents were classified and needed a level nine security clearance. Hers, as third in command of the ship, was level eight since Wright had not officially granted her the promotion to first officer, even though he now asked that the crew address him as captain. Mentioning it to him would likely make him suspicious and she didn't want him to know that she suspected him of anything. She didn't even know what she suspected him of, except maybe taking the captain out of commission.

Lieutenant Commander Sheena Gonzales perched at the tactical station, having raised the chair from its lowest height position, and watched the information of all shipboard systems scroll across her screen. It was all mundane. The ship was at yellow alert as she ran continuous searches for the presidential base that Rashal had most likely been taken to after his unusual exodus from the ship. Wright was in the ready room doing who knew what, leaving her in charge. So far she'd had no luck in finding any trace of Rashal and Wright didn't like communicating with someone he couldn't find. Time was running short. The latest scan came back negative and she began it again, adjusting the parameters to account for a cloaked location. A positive result came back almost instantly.

'Gonzales to Wright, I've got something. A small cloaked asteroid seven hundred million kilometres from our current position.'

'Acknowledged, Commander,' Wright replied. 'Make no move to intercept as yet, I want to see what is happening before we do anything.'

'Aye sir, should I deploy the SPRA probes?'

'Negative, we don't want to tip our hand. I want you to track anything that leaves the cloaking field. If you think we're going to lose it, tractor it and bring it aboard.'

'Aye sir, Gonzales out.'

The least they could do was nothing. But even her morality argued against that. By bringing him back they had caused a new set of problems for the Eeroth, and they had to make it right somehow. Even though he had been granted the presidency in a bizarre turn of events, Rashal was still an unknown to them. Perhaps this was Wright's way of evening the odds, but she believed that there was something else going on in his head. She couldn't read him properly and that scared her. No human she had ever encountered had mental shields that strong, not even those strengthened against torture. It was that singular fact which caused her to look deeper into his background.

'Has anything happened yet?' Wright asked as he emerged from the ready room.

'Not as yet, sir,' she answered, having no intention of calling him "Captain."

He narrowed his eyes at her. 'Keep looking. We're only going to get one chance at this.'

'Aye sir.'

'Sir,' Larson called, 'There's a small flotilla of ships headed our way.'

Wright sighed. 'Gonzales, concentrate on the cloaked asteroid. I'll bet these ships are a diversion.'

'They're firing,' Gonzales said.

'Transfer firing control to the helm,' Wright ordered as the ships firing in concert. 'Larson, fire at their engines. I'll bet they're drones.'

'Aye sir.'

'They are drones, Commander,' Mahtani added. 'I'm reading no lifesigns. I cannot get a clear reading regarding their base of origin.'

'It doesn't matter,' Wright replied testily. 'Larson, destroy them. Gonzales, keep an eye on that cloaked asteroid.'

'There's a ship emerging,' she cried and entered a sequence of commands. 'It's adjusting course, heading relative to us on a bearing of 226 mark 121, out of the system.'

'Tractor beam.'

'We're too far,' she replied. 'Mahtani, do the SPRA probes have tractor beams?'

'Sure, they were designed for a multitude of purposes.'

Wright headed for his chair. 'Pursuit course. Deploy the probes. As soon as we're in range, engage the tractor. I don't want them getting away.'

'Aye sir,' Larson replied as he manoeuvred the ship out of the planet's gravity well. 'Going to three quarters impulse.'

'Full impulse,' Wright ordered. 'Ignore the regulations.'

Larson glanced at Gonzales who inclined her head barely. 'Aye sir.'

The *Pytheas* surged forward, the inertial dampers whining slightly as Larson compensated. Another one of the major differences between this ship and all the *Intrepid*-class vessels before it was the new impulse drive, the first radical redesign for more than two hundred years. Even the *Sovereign*-class ships were only capable of impulse speeds up to point-three-seven of light-speed, the *Pytheas* was capable of point-four-eight of light-speed without moving at relativistic speeds. It was this extra push that Wright used in order to prevent the small freighter from getting away.

'Now less than one hundred million kilometres away,' Gonzales called out.

'Can we get any more from the engines?'

'Xeris says you've got more than you should,' Gonzales snapped back. 'Eighty million kilometres.'

'Target their engines and fire a low yield phaser burst,' Wright suggested.

'That might destroy the ship. It's not exactly in optimal condition.'

'That was an order, Commander.'

'Aye sir, firing,' Gonzales replied. 'Their warp engines are off-line, but impulse is still active.'

'Fire again.'

'Sir, their shields were seriously weakened by that shot. I recommend against firing again,' Gonzales said, looking at Wright and holding his gaze.

'Distance?' Wright asked.

'Fifty million kilometres.'

'Commander, look!' Larson said as the freighter vanished before their eyes.

'Slow to half impulse and hold us ten million kilometres from their last position.'

'Aye sir, slowing to one half impulse.'

'Sensors?'

'Sir, our sensors show nothing there. The freighter just vanished.'

Chapter Twelve

Fahira Freighter

Eeroth System

Stardate 55374.2 (May 17, 2378)

Shortly after Teliz entered the null-space region, he released his prisoner and let her roam the ship. Teliz looked rather handsome now that he had washed out the grime of rebellion. His chiselled jaw line almost made the woman wish that something would happen, but the hard gaze in the eyes made that an impossibility. The rebel leader sat in the pilot's chair and called up some information. He had been doing the same thing every few minutes for the last twelve hours.

'What exactly are you looking for?' the woman asked.

'We are safe from the Federation ship,' he answered, 'but we are not safe from the Cha'lav.'

Her eyes widened and she was suddenly alert, all trace of the meek religious cleric/slave gone. 'Where are we, exactly?'

'We're in a staging ground for the Cha'lav. They would create a rift and bring a dozen vessels into this nothingness, then emerge into normal space and attack our ships. We had no idea where they came from. A Dahreki fighter discovered this place and because we were working together, we were able to defeat the Cha'lav by booby-trapping this place.'

'Why hasn't everyone come looking for us?'

'Because the Fahira rebellion killed the Dahreki that knew about it and removed those Fahira who knew. The only people that know are in my cell, and you.'

'And the Federation ship,' she reminded him.

'They don't know what is happening, only that one second they were chasing us and the next, we vanished.'

She nodded. 'How long can we stay here? I'm sure this bucket of bolts isn't exactly brimming with supplies.'

Teliz shrugged. 'You're right, it's not. But I have a plan, you see. The Cha'lav were not so stupid as to have one of these null-space bubbles in our territory, they had several and no chance to remove them before they were forced to flee. We can go to any of the bubbles and escape.'

The woman sighed. 'So why have we been sitting here for the last twelve hours?'

Teliz let out an even more audible sigh. 'Don't you see. We're not leaving in this ship, we're waiting for a rendezvous.'

'I see.'

'And that transmitter of yours, aboard this ship, will act as a decoy while we make our escape.'

She narrowed her eyes. 'What transmitter?'

'The one you're carrying which allowed the aliens to track us.'

'They tracked us because you left the cloaking envelope of the asteroid,' she shot back.

'And how did they know how to find it?'

'Because they do this kind of thing for a living. Rashal has done nothing but talk about them since he got back. He's studied their history. Their technology is constantly improving and they have crews from over a hundred different worlds.'

'Perhaps I am wrong and you will submit to a scan?'

'Of course.'

Teliz was taken aback, but covered well. He expected to be rebuffed, thereby proving that a transmitter was present. His bluff had been called and she had to hope that Rashal's engineering team were as good as they said they were.

'Alright then,' the rebel said and waved a bizarre-looking instrument across her arms, chest and legs.

The device emitted no sound.

'Satisfied?'

'I suppose,' Teliz sounded disappointed. 'Our rendezvous should be within the next few hours. Feel free to eat some of what little we have here.'

'Thanks,' she replied and headed aft.

'Don't touch the spicy stuff. That's mine.'

She rooted around for a few minutes and then shouted her reply. 'So I get the ration packs?'

'You gave up sins a long time ago, remember,' he smirked. 'Simple food has no sin attached to it.'

She sighed. 'Will you at least tell me who we're meeting with, and why you kidnapped me?'

Teliz shrugged. 'Not really, and as to why I kidnapped you, that's easy. I wanted you for my own plans.'

'Meaning?' she questioned. Her options were becoming more and more limited every moment.

'I know how much you like the Dahreki, so I thought you would enjoy getting to know them a little better.'

She slumped. 'You sold me?'

'The Dahreki do not have any prophets and since you were the one who counselled our great leader, I figured you would fetch the highest price. I was right.'

'I see,' she glanced around wondering whether she would be able to overpower the rebel leader.

An alarm sounded and Teliz leaned across to see what was going on. 'Ah, your ride is here.'

'Great,' the cleric/slave replied as another alarm sounded.

'Damn!'

'Let me guess, the Federation figured out your little hideaway.'

Teliz shot her a hard look. 'What type of ship is that?'

She looked at the design and shrugged. 'I have no idea. It looks like a fast-response fighter. According to your own sensors, it is capable of medium-warp flight, weapons equally a match to any of our warships and...'

'All right, it's a nasty piece of technology, can we outrun it at sublight speeds?'

'I have no idea,' she replied. 'You can always try, this is your show after all. Ask the Dahreki for help.'

'You're still so sure of them as friends, maybe you're right. But I have no intention of sullying my people's memory by allying with the Dahreki. I am here solely to get some money for you and then I will continue backing the Fahira against the Cha'lav, and killing Dahreki in the process.'

Before she could answer, a voice came through the comm system. *'This is Commander Sheena Gonzales of the shuttle Onizuka. Stand down and prepare to be boarded. If you do not comply you will be crippled.'*

'So polite,' Teliz replied sarcastically, activating the comm. 'This is an internal Eeroth matter. Leave and you will not be destroyed.'

'This is your final warning, shut down your engines and prepare to be boarded.'

'I don't like them,' the rebel replied, and fired.

Chapter Thirteen

Shuttlecraft *Onizuka*

Null-space bubble 47

Stardate 55375.9 (May 18, 2378)

Lieutenant Commander Sheena Gonzales held on to her console as the shuttle took the impact of the plasma charge from the Eeroth rebel ship. She muttered a Betazoid curse as she backed off and moved a few degrees to starboard. Two security officers were along for the ride and both winced as the charge hit the unprotected hull. Shields didn't work in the null-space bubble and weapons were severely limited as well, making both shuttles even. Gonzales didn't want to fire, since the rebels had previously done nothing to harm Federation interests, but she had her orders and intended to follow them. The fact that the rebel ship had now fired meant that she could now retaliate, within reason and abiding by her questionable orders.

'Fire phasers at their engines and weapons,' she ordered.

'Aye sir, firing,' Cadet Snowcroft replied under the watchful eye of the more senior Andorian security officer, chief petty officer Reshakella zh'Velan.

The low-yield phaser beam impacted the rebel's hull and scorched it, but did little else. 'No damage,' zh'Velan replied.

'We need to do something, I'm not letting them get away,' Gonzales muttered as the first rebel ship moved away. Whatever Wright has planned is going to cause trouble for everyone concerned and it's my job to make sure that doesn't happen.'

'Commander, Captain Wright's got all the sensor capabilities we have looking for the other bubbles. He can't go far,' Snowcroft added, following protocol by naming Wright as her commanding officer with the correct title. 'We could try routing the phaser beam through the deflector dish. It would make it stronger and the beam won't weaken as much before hitting the other ship.'

'But we'd only get one chance at it before burning out the dish.'

'Three, actually,' Snowcroft replied.

'This is Commander Gonzales, stand down. This is your final warning,' she said over the comm and turned to the others. 'I don't expect a response.'

The shuttle shuddered.

'I guess that's it then,' Gonzales replied with a smirk. 'Fire when ready.'

The flyer's deflector dish glowed and then released a quarter-metre-thick beam of intense phaser fire at the rebel ship which paused in its flight. 'Their engines have been disabled.'

'Excellent. Will the transporters work?'

'No sir,' zh'Velan answered with a wry smile. 'We'll have to dock with them. And the other rebel ship has decided to do a runner, apparently their stomachs weren't up for a little fight.'

'All right then, let's go.'

She manoeuvred the flyer toward the other ship and latched on to the conversation she'd had with Wright regarding this very mission.

'Commander, we need to make sure that the Eeroth are able to repatriate all of their people, including the rebels,' Wright had informed her. 'To do that, we need to find and talk to the rebels. Allow them to air their grievances and get President Rashal to listen.'

Gonzales nodded, but knew in her own mind that they wouldn't listen to each other. Physically they might survive but their emotional wounds were far too severe. The Eeroth should be looking for a new leader, but she wasn't going to tell Wright that. 'What do I do when I catch up to the rebels?'

'Do what you have to. You have my authorisation to fire on them first if the need arises. We can't afford to leave this region in the hands of warmongers, not if they want to have a fighting chance when the Cha'lav return.'

'You think they will?'

'They will, while the null-space bubbles are intact, which is why I have the science team working on a way to destroy them. Now, take the *Onizuka*, it's the best chance we have of being intimidating and friendly at the same time.'

'Aye sir.'

'Dismissed.'

She didn't like the way Wright acted as if Astar was going to be incapacitated on a permanent basis and made her feelings known to Parker before she left. Parker seemed to be working on something else besides the captain's attempted murder, but assured her that everything she was working on was linked, somehow. The two women disliked each other but were on the right track when it came to believing something was off about Wright. Gonzales wondered, and not for the first time, if she could access Wright's personnel file without him being aware of it.

'Sir, we're within two metres,' Snowcroft said.

'I see it, Cadet,' Gonzales replied. 'Both of you get ready to board, and be careful. They might have booby-trapped the airlock, or they might be waiting for you.'

'Aye sir,' zh'Velan replied.

'On second thoughts,' she muttered. 'Snowcroft, get back here. Keep on your toes. I'll go with zh'Velan as soon as we've docked. You be ready to get us out of here.'

Snowcroft stood by the pilot's chair as the *Onizuka* made contact with the hull of the other ship. 'Sir, you should go.'

Gonzales nodded. 'Zh'Velan, where's my phaser rifle.'

'Right here, sir,' the Andorian replied as she tossed it to the Betazoid tactical officer. 'Tricorder isn't detecting any booby-traps.'

'We'll have to hope it's accurate. Open her up.'

The hatch in the side of the flyer slid open to reveal a similar hatch in the side of the rebel ship. Zh'Velan used the manual release to open said hatch and then stood back.

Nothing happened.

Both woman cautiously moved into the Eeroth ship and noticed that they had entered in the cargo hold. The Andorian glanced at her tricorder and held up two fingers, then pointed forward. Two people on board, both in the cockpit

of this tramp freighter. Gonzales walked up the stairs first and the doors slid open to reveal a man sitting in the pilot's chair with a weapon aimed at them. In the co-pilot's chair, a woman in a long robe sat just watching.

'Put it down, now,' she ordered.

Zh'Velan moved to Gonzales' side and they shared a look when the man didn't respond. Adjusting their rifles to heavy stun, they fired. Both the man and woman fell to the deck and their weapons cluttered aside.

'That was too easy,' zh'Velan muttered.

'Sirs, I'm picking up an increase in power from the engines over there,' Snowcroft called, her voice tinged with worry.

'We're on our way,' Gonzales replied as they each lifted one of the unconscious rebels and headed for the hatch.

Chapter Fourteen

USS *Pytheas*

Eeroth system

Stardate 55376.0 (May 18, 2378)

Teliz and the unknown woman were both safely ensconced in the brig and President Rashal had been informed. He would shortly be making arrangements to travel to the ship soon. To top it all off, Lieutenant Parker had a homicidal maniac in command of a starship with no proof to remove him. The padd which Mahtani had given her contained directions to open a spatial rift to somewhere; and the poison with which the Astar symbiont had been poisoned was difficult to replicate, but not impossible. There was still enough in the device to run a full spectrum of tests on it, and it was discovered to be from a plant native to Trill which only affected the symbionts.

Wright had supposedly never been to Trill and if he was going to get the poison it would have to be weaponised. There was no way he could have purchased it prior to the kidnapping mission, since he had no idea who his commanding officer would be, so he must have created it on board. The biochemical composition of the poison itself couldn't be replicated per Starfleet regulations, so it must have been grown from the seeds which did not contain the poison and therefore would not have triggered the bio-filters on board. Parker knew that Wright wouldn't be stupid enough to keep the plant in his quarters which meant it would be kept in the hydroponics or airponics bays.

'Computer,' she called, 'show me all information on the Tenaran Ice Orchid.'

A lilac-coloured plant with seven petals appeared on her screen. It was beautiful and had actually been used for medicinal purposes in ancient times before Joining was fully understood. Parker read the available information on the plant and realised the hydroponics bay would be the best place to find the plant. She decided to remove it from the ship and Wright would make a mistake.

'Computer, where is Doctor Maxx?'

'Doctor Maxx is in sickbay.'

'Doctor Maxx, meet in the hydroponics bay, immediately,' she said, tapping

her combadge.

'Acknowledged.'

The young Bolian was there first, and Parker could see that the shallow ridge bisecting his face was pale, indicating that he was tired and probably stressed as well.

'Do you have something?' he asked.

'I do, have you ever been to the Tenaran Ice Cliffs on Trill?'

He nodded. 'They're beautiful.'

'So are the orchids found in that region,' she replied as they entered.

'I picked a few for her quarters on Trill,' he replied and then slapped his forehead. 'The sap is deadly to the symbionts. Why didn't I think of that before. I'll go and replicate the antidote now.'

'Replicate it, but don't give it to the captain yet.'

'Lieutenant?' The Bolian asked in a warning tone.

'We need to know what is going on before we wake her up.'

'I suppose it can't hurt,' Maxx replied sourly. 'The stasis chamber will prevent any further damage to the symbiont.'

Parker nodded. 'Thank you, Doctor.'

'Go find what that bastard is doing,' he replied and walked out.

'Computer, display activity logs over the last three months for the hydroponics bay and download.'

'Acknowledged, download complete.'

Parker was on her way to engineering to find out where the poisoning device had come from when the ship shuddered violently.

'Red alert. All personnel report to battle stations,' Gonzales' voice spoke across

the ship. *'Lieutenant Parker report to the bridge.'*

She tapped her combadge. 'On my way.'

When she got to the bridge she glanced at the viewscreen and saw something that she did not expect to see. The Cha'lav were back and the Eeroth were clearly badly placed to launch an attack. But there was an added wrinkle. These ships belonged to the Cha'lav-Aquatics, not the Primates, Insectoids or Reptilians who were usually attacking this galaxy and she said as much.

'What does that mean?' Wright asked.

'Different factions of the Cha'lav are attacking different regions of our galaxy, they're definitely planning an widespread invasion, but this isn't the way they normally do things,' Parker replied.

'Explain!'

'The Cha'lav have a strict hierarchy of their respective phenotypes. The Aquatics are high-up and generally don't do the dirty work like this. The humanoid phenotypes do this kind of work which means that this was not sanctioned by the ruling body.'

'So we've got rogue Cha'lav?' Gonzales asked with a sigh. 'How big is the empire anyway?'

'It's all right, Lieutenant, we might not know where you got the information from, but we know you have it,' Wright added.

'About two hundred and sixty thousand galaxies, give or take.'
Gonzales blinked. 'Two hundred and sixty thousand galaxies?'

'Yes sir, this empire is millions of years old.'

'We're being hailed,' Gonzales said. 'It's the Cha'lav.'

'On screen,' Wright ordered.

A wall of water appeared on the viewscreen and a whale-like lifeform swam toward them from the distance. *'We have no quarrel with you, Starfleet. Leave us be.'*

'You attacked this world, I'm not kindly disposed toward you at the moment.'

'We did not attack this planet, nor any other in this galaxy. We work for a group who...wish for the current expansionist regime to end,' the Cha'lav-Aquatic replied. 'I suggest you order all the Eerothian vessels to withdraw to at least one hundred million kilometres from their planet.'

'What are you planning to do.'

'Repair the damage wrought by our brethren.'

'How?' Mahtani asked, interrupting before Wright could.

'Our technology is not to be shared.'

'We can do the same without causing any collateral damage. The shockwave from whatever you plan will likely destroy their moon.'

The Cha'lav-Aquatic paused. *'How soon can you be ready to implement your technology?'*

'We're ready now,' Mahtani answered, hoping that his team were in fact ready.

'Very well, proceed.'

'Thank you,' Wright replied and the screen blanked. He turned to Mahtani. 'Lieutenant?'

'Five minutes, sir. We're loading the torpedo tubes now.'

'Okay,' Wright replied as he settled into his chair. 'Let's see what happens.'

Chapter Fifteen

USS *Pytheas*

Eeroth IV orbit

Stardate 55376.1 (May 18, 2378)

'Are we ready?' Wright asked eleven minutes later.

Mahtani looked up and grinned. 'Yes sir, just running another simulation.'

'Launch the SPRA probes,' Wright ordered. 'Low orbit, I want to get as much telemetry on this as possible.'

'Probes away,' Gonzales replied.

Wright noticed Parker in the corner of the bridge eyeing the image of the Cha'lav vessel on the bottom right of the viewscreen, looking at the tactical data.

'Mister Mahtani?' Wright prompted.

'Ready sir,' the chief science officer replied.

'Fire torpedo.'

'Atmospheric torpedo away, detonation in eleven seconds, receiving active telemetry from all probes,' Gonzales informed them all.

'Torpedo on target,' Mahtani added. 'Detonation in seven...six...five...'

'Commander, back us off, now!' Parker said.

'Two...one...detonation,' Mahtani said, ignoring her, as the torpedo detonated and seeded the atmosphere with scrubbing chemicals.

The effects were immediate, as the dark ash-covered air dissolved into clear purple. Wright was not watching the viewscreen and the incredible vista which was becoming apparent, but the expression on Parker's face. He watched her eyes narrow, and her brows knit together, then her whole face darken as she moved faster than he would have given her credit for and pushed Gonzales from her console. Parker made several adjustments to the shields as Wright moved to her side, joining Gonzales as she watched over the

half-Klingon security chief.

'It's unbelievable, the data we're getting,' Mahtani muttered aloud.

'Retrieve the probes. Ensign, back us off, nice and slow.'

'Aye sir,' Larson replied.

'But sir, the information we're receiving is beyond anything we could have imagined,' Mahtani pressed.

'Lieutenant, retrieve the probes, now!' Wright replied forcefully and then turned to Parker. 'You'd better have a good reason for this.'

Before Parker could reply, the Cha'lav-Aquatic vessel fired what appeared to be streams of energy at the atmosphere. The purple surface they had seen moments ago suddenly became a dark mauve and swirled into circular patterns which could only mean one thing.

'Hail them!' Wright ordered as he moved back to the centre of the bridge.

'*Can we help you?*' the Aquatic asked nonchalantly.

'What are you doing to the surface?'

'*Exactly what we said we would, solve its problem. You see, we don't want this world if it is ecologically unsound, but once the water level has risen significantly, it will be suitable for colonisation.*'

Wright's eyes widened. 'Gonzales, target that weapon and fire.'

The Aquatic's "voice" rose by two octaves. '*You would do well not to antagonise us, Starfleet. Our vessel is more than a match for yours.*'

Parker stepped forward, standing just in front of Wright. 'We live our lives by ideals that guarantee the right to exist for all sentient lifeforms. You already exist but these people won't if you continue your actions. Find an uninhabited planet.'

'*What do you think we feed on?*' the Aquatic asked before the screen blanked.

'Gonzales,' Wright said through clenched teeth. 'Fire.'

The Aquatic vessel absorbed the phaser fire easily, and kept up the energy stream.

'What kind of energy is that and how can we stop it?' Wright asked, looking around the bridge.

'It appears to be some kind of visible sound wave,' Mahtani answered as his fingers danced across the control panel. 'I'm searching the library for anything similar.'

'What makes you think we've come across anything similar?' Wright asked.

'He's searching through the *Enterprise* mission logs,' Gonzales muttered.

'Of course, if any ship found something like this, it would be that one.'

'Got it, and many of us should know this. The Whale Probe attack in 2286.'

'I'm not up on my Terran history,' Wright replied and Parker sighed, knowing that the man grew up on the moon.

'In 2286, an alien probe came to Earth to find out what had happened to the humpback whales who'd become extinct two centuries earlier. It nearly destroyed Earth trying to contact them, turning our world into a class-O instead of class-M. It was Admiral Kirk who saved Earth, just before being demoted to Captain,' Gonzales informed them.

'We're not likely to find any humpback whales, so see if you can find the audio frequency and jam it,' Wright offered, wondering why people had to bring up the obscure missions of the *Enterprise* crew every time they encountered something unusual. It was bizarre.

'Aye sir,' Mahtani replied and increased the sensor gain.

'Sir, we're receiving a hail through the Eeroth communications array.'

'On screen.'

'*Commander Wright, you are holding two of our people prisoners,*' President Rashal told him. '*I suggest you return them to us to face a fair trial.*'

'I'm more interested in saving your world,' Wright replied.

'*We can do that,*' he replied and turned to face someone off screen. '*Watch,*' he added and the screen reverted to the familiar view of the worsening conditions on the surface.

'Sir, some of the communications satellites are adjusting their orbital paths,' Gonzales called out.

'Tactical plot,' he ordered.

Sure enough, more than thirty of the satellites were adjusting their orbit and ended up facing the Aquatic vessel. Seconds passed before a thin stream of orange-hued energy appeared at the confluence of several satellites. The stream grew as more satellites adjusted their orbit and the Aquatic vessel tried to move away but it was too slow. The energy coalesced as it impacted the alien ship which began to compact itself. Decks collapsed into one another and the energy streams it was emitting stopped. For the Cha'lav-Aquatics it was too late as their ship imploded.

'Sir, the satellites are aligning themselves toward us.'

'Hail Rashal,' Wright ordered.

Rashal appeared on the screen again. '*Have you reconsidered?*'

'You can take Teliz and his accomplice, for whatever good it will do you. Just promise me you won't be executing them.'

He leaned forward. '*Thank you, Commander. Your presence is no longer required here. You are free to leave at your earliest convenience.*'

'Mister President, what exactly are you planning to do?' Wright asked.

'*I have fortified this system against attack. If you don't leave so in a timely manner, I'll have no choice but to make sure that the Cha'lav cannot take you prisoner.*'

Wright sighed. 'Gonzales, launch the SPRA probes into a standard orbital pattern around the ship.'

'*What are you doing?*'

'Nothing, are you going to use your little toys on us or what?' he asked, smiling and broke the connection.

Chapter Sixteen

USS Pytheas

Eeroth IV orbit

Stardate 55376.2 (May 18, 2378)

Lieutenant Talen ignored the tension that caused his antennae to stand tall and concentrated on the operations console in front of him. The SPRA network, when deployed, were nominally within his jurisdiction except when used by the science or tactical departments. Talen thought that Wright was using them for a tactical purpose but he decided to take control of them himself anyway, with the ship at red alert, all other operational concerns were relegated to his deputies.

'Sir, the probes are in a standard orbital formation,' he told Wright.

Wright turned and glanced at him, as if only now realising that he was there. 'Align them so that their micro-deflectors are facing outward and link them into our own deflector dish. Deflector shields at maximum.'

'Aye sir, realigning now.'

'An excellent tactic, sir,' Mahtani replied. 'The deflection capabilities will turn their own energy against them.'

'How many of their satellites' energy can we safely absorb and distribute?'

'Unknown,' the science chief said. 'I haven't been able to get a definite read of the energy type.'

'Well, we're about to get a taste of it ourselves,' Wright replied and returned to the captain's chair, tapping a pad on the arm. 'All hands, brace for impact.'

'He's releasing the energy,' Gonzales said.

The orange-hued energy swarmed around the ship but with the deflectors operating at maximum, and augmented by the probes, much of it drifted harmlessly into space. The remainder, however, caused a multitude of problems.

'Shields are being drained,' Gonzales called out as the lighting dimmed.

'We're losing main power,' Talen added.

'Go to auxiliary,' Wright ordered.

The ship shuddered.

'Shields are gone, ablative armour is holding,' Gonzales informed Wright. 'We need to get out of here. The Eeroth have asked us to leave. If we remain, we'll be violating the Prime Directive by involving ourselves in internal matters.'

'For how long?' Wright asked without turning. 'Ensign, turn us around and get us out of here, we'll make repairs and come back.'

'Impulse and warp engines are off-line,' Larson replied as his console went dark.

'Weapons are down,' Gonzales added.

'Main power is down, auxiliary now being drained,' Talen informed them.

'Hail him, signal our surrender.'

'I can't,' Gonzales replied after a moment. 'My station's down.'

Mahtani moved from the rear of the bridge to the main science station and engaged a preset sequence.

'Sir, the probes are moving out of position,' Gonzales called. 'They're attacking the nearest satellites.'

'Mahtani, stand down.'

'No sir, this is the only way we're going to get out of this. The fewer satellites they have, the less damage they can do. As soon as we're out of immediate danger, the probes will return to the ship and we'll be able to leave the system. If you want to court-martial me then fine, but you'll have to explain why you didn't give the order,' the science officer stood his ground.

'Three satellites down, the energy output from the others is falling.'

'How far does it have to drop before we're safe?'

'It needs to drop below eighty percent, which will mean a loss of eleven satellites, a sixth of their total number.'

Wright sighed. He knew he should have given the order but his wish for revenge and retaliation had blinded him to it. As more satellites went offline, he realised that at least some of the crew were becoming suspicious of his actions.

'Seventy-eight percent of normal output,' Talen intoned plainly. 'Probes are returning to the ship.'

'Back us off with the thrusters. As soon as we have impulse engines, get us out of here.'

'Aye sir,' Larson replied from the helm.

'Mister Mahtani, you're relieved of duty until further notice. Have Lieutenant Malling take over. You will be confined to your quarters until I come by later. Dismissed.'

Mahtani nodded, glanced at Gonzales and left the bridge.

'Larson, find us a planet where we can set down and make repairs. Gonzales, coordinate with Parker and make sure that all systems are secure. Talen, I want a full report on all damage on my desk within the hour.'

'Aye sir,' the crew chorused.

'Gonzales, you have the bridge,' he added and entered his ready room.

'Commander,' Talen beckoned the tactical officer over.

'What is it, Lieutenant?' she asked.

'I've been getting odd feelings from the Commander the last few days,' he answered, scratching at the base of his antennae. 'So I ran some scans on him using a tricorder.'

Gonzales glanced at the door to the ready room. 'And?'

'*Parker to Gonzales,*' the security chief called over the comm.

'We'll pick this up later,' Gonzales said and tapped her combadge. 'Go ahead.'

'Teliz and his accomplice are dead, it looks like the President them them killed during the attack.'

Gonzales sighed. 'Send the bodies to Doctor Maxx for autopsy.'

'Aye sir,' Parker replied.

'I need it in an hour, Gonzales out.'

The Andorian was about to speak when Larson interjected. 'Sir, I've found a planet two light-years away. Class-O, appears uninhabited.'

'Set a course and engage at warp six.'

'The best we can manage is warp three, sir.'

'That will have to do.'

'Aye sir.'

'Sorry, Lieutenant, duty calls.'

Aye sir,' Talen replied as his beta-shift replacement arrived.

By the time he had transferred his station, Gonzales was gone. He decided to go to sickbay and see if his tricorder results could be verified but as he reached for it he noticed that it had been scorched by the damaged conduit behind his station during the attack and was functionally useless. Maybe the doctor would be able to verify the results using previous scans, he thought, and headed that way. There had to be something they could do to deal with this man, because as long as he was giving orders, they were in serious danger. His Aenar senses were telling him that because the man was hiding something, something bad.

Chapter Seventeen

The Reliquary

Ynelav IV

Stardate 55379.1 (May 19, 2378)

Jonek, still eschewing the title of Seer, had been in the reliquary for the last five days, studying the ancient scrolls which told of his return to Ynelav. One of the rarest aspects of Ynelavii religion was a vision of a past life, and it was simply because in the last five centuries, only one person had ever been proved to have one. That man had gone on to lead the world out of despair and into a new era. Even so, the tales of the Seer were more allegorical than factual, and quite secular compared to the vast majority of Ynelavii religious literature. To Jonek, this was a definite sign of its authenticity, that it didn't need to wrap itself in dogma to be what it was meant to be.

Using his heightened senses, he had kept an eye on the Romulans, who for now were content to sit in their ship and inspect every last scrap of their technology that he had given them. The news feeds however, were a different matter. Priests and ordinary people alike were talking about the return of the Seer, the man who will heal the planet's scars and make her new again. He had done so, he'd instantaneously repaired the damage wrought by the nuclear disaster and fixed dams while holding back flood waters. He had cleared the air of damaging pollutants and got people talking.

The only problem is what they were doing. Some were interpreting his wishes and punishing those who were not religious. Others were preparing for the coming of a war between the forces of good and evil which would consume the world if not stopped. Most were content to go about their lives as if nothing had happened and he admired their ignorance, but for his world to be healed completely, he must heal them as well. The High Adept approached and waited to be addressed.

'Yes High Adept Qalas, how may I help you?'

'The Healers are here,' the man replied and backed away a few steps.

The adoration and hesitation was tiresome, and though he had tried to discourage it, there seemed to be nothing that would stop the devout from acting as though he were God.

'Thank you, Qalas. I would like you to observe. Please send them in, and have

the pilgrims ready.'

The High Adept nodded and disappeared. Jonek's workout cave was large and held space for several dozen people comfortably. Today, there would be about twenty of the most experienced Healers from across the planet, all of whom had responded to his summons without hesitation. This was good for it made his job that much easier. After today, he would no longer be the only man to heal people using the power of thought. It would be up to these twenty Healers to teach the next generations the ability. The Healers, men and women, filed in and took standing positions in an approximate semicircle a few metres away from him.

'Healers, I have asked you here to grant you an ability lost for centuries. Many hundreds of years ago, you all had the power to Heal with thought alone. This I give back to you today. I want you to teach those who learn with you how to do this as well. Some will learn faster than others, and some will Heal parts of the body better than others. Only by working together can this work. Are you all prepared?'

With some trepidation, and over almost several minutes, each stepped forward, making the semicircle that much smaller. Jonek approached each one, inquiring after their families and placing a hand on their left shoulder. He grew weaker with each one and by the time the last Healer had been granted the power, he felt extremely tired.

'If you will allow me to rest for a moment, I have some pilgrims who require your newfound abilities. Hear this and hear it well. Any who abuse this will find it no longer works for them and they will not be able to teach it either. You must take great care not to harm others lest you become harmed yourself. Even now, you can see in your mind how to show others to perform the same Healing that you will shortly be doing.'

One of the Healers stepped forward. His long salt and pepper hair looked out of place. 'Healing is no place for such superstitions, child. Perhaps you should go back to school.'

Jonek straightened up, and looked at the cup of water on the carved shelf to his left. He held out an arm and the cup obediently sped across the room and into his open hand, without spilling a drop. He took a long draught and the cup disintegrated. 'Please, continue.'

The rural religious Healer stepped back. 'I apologise for my interruption.'

Jonek nodded. 'You must first sense the illness, then you can decide best how to Heal them. Modern medicines may work on some people, but these methods work on all people. This will revolutionise Healing again.'

'And what of those who make their money selling us the medicines we use?'

'They will soon make their money elsewhere, as many others will. Come, let us Heal the pilgrims who have travelled so far to be with us today.'

High Adept Qalas brought more than a dozen people, of all ages and walks of life, into the cave. A few were carried in on stretchers by acolytes and a few used stylised canes to hobble in on. The Healers, paired up, approached the pilgrims on stretchers and laid their hands on the latter's shoulders. Jonek walked among them offering advice and suggesting other places to put their hands. From a distance, High Adept Qalas watched him and narrowed his eyes, holding his arm where he had been scratched by one of the cripples. Jonek looked up and they locked eyes, then Jonek's vision moved to the arm where a thin line of smudged green blood had been wiped away.

Chapter Eighteen

USS *Pytheas*

Keleera system

Stardate 55384.5 (May 21, 2378)

The *Pytheas* slowed to half impulse as it entered the system at an oblique angle to the sun, aiming for the third planet. According to the sensors, Keleera III was a O-class planet, more than eighty percent of the surface was covered in water, the remaining twenty percent being a string of volcanic islands which stretched across the globe in a giant crescent. Ensign Larson put the ship into a high orbit as ordered by Wright. He then put the thrusters into standby mode and took the impulse engines offline.

'I'm ready, sir,' Larson informed Wright.

'Bridge to engineering; Commander Xeris, take the warp core offline, vent all plasma from the nacelles and standby to engage atmospheric thrusters.'

'Aye sir,' the chief engineer replied.

Gonzales tapped her combadge. 'This is Commander Gonzales, we are preparing to land the ship. Go to blue alert and all personnel go to code blue stations.'

As the bridge lighting changed from white to blue, Wright sat back down in the command chair.

'Descent course plotted, landing zone is the largest island in the northern hemisphere,' Larson said.

'Very good,' Wright replied. 'Continue preparations.'

'Landing mechanisms online, inertial dampers at maximum.'

'All decks report condition blue, Commander,' Gonzales said.

Wright nodded. 'Take her down, Larson, steady as she goes.'

'Aye sir,' Larson replied as the *Pytheas* began its descent.

The *Intrepid*-class starship slipped into the upper atmosphere and descended

on a glide trajectory which would reduce any stresses on the already damaged hull. The ship started to shake as it was buffeted by the high winds of the lower atmosphere but Larson kept the ship on course.

'Status?' Wright asked.

'Altitude, one hundred kilometres; speed, ten thousand kph,' Larson replied with a quick glance at the controls to his right.

'Keep her steady,' Wright said as the ship shuddered.

'Twenty kilometres to the landing zone, speed four thousand kph. We're coming through the cloud cover,' Larson responded coolly.

'Extend landing struts, prepare to release inertial dampers and adjust them to match the planet's gravity.'

Larson tapped out a command sequence with one hand as the other kept the ship steady. From the underside of the engineering section, the landing struts emerged and locked into position.

'Standing by on environmental controls,' Talen added from operations.

Landing a starship was a well-oiled routine, even for those who had never done so before. All it took was for everyone to know what they needed to do and when they needed to do it. The ship levelled out and slowed further, coming in to land on an open plain at the base of a steaming volcano.

'Disengaging engines, securing thruster exhaust, we're down,' Larson said as the *Pytheas*' struts came into contact with solid ground.

'Start organising repair crews,' Wright ordered. 'I don't want us down here too long.'

'Aye sir,' Gonzales replied. 'I'll speak with Xeris about his prioritising the schedule.'

'Good, I'll be in my ready room if you need me. Have Mahtani join me.'

Wright sat behind the desk and pulled out a padd.

'Have you been able to make any preparations on this?' Wright asked when

Mahtani entered.

'Yes sir, I've made the calculations and input them into deflector control. I just need to reconfigure the dish to create the energy pulses.'

'How long will it take you?'

'About two hours, sir.'

'The deflector dish took a little damage in our scuffle with the Cha'lav. Inform Xeris that you'll make the repairs while you make some adjustments. If he asks you exactly what you're doing, I'm sure you'll be able to respond with a plausible lie.'

'Yes sir,' Mahtani muttered.

'Is there a problem, Lieutenant?'

'Permission to speak freely, sir?'

'Granted.'

'I don't know if you're aware of this, but I know exactly what you're planning to do with those modifications.'

'Do you, now?'

'Yes sir. What you're planning is dangerous.'

'What I plan to do with those modifications is no concern of yours, Lieutenant. All you need to know is that if I succeed, it will be better for the crew, for this ship and for Starfleet.'

Mahtani narrowed his eyes. 'Aye sir.'

'Dismissed, and make sure those modifications are complete before we leave this planet.'

'Aye sir,' the science officer replied and left.

Wright continued to sit in the chair and gazed at the contents of the padd. There was something niggling at the back of his mind and he decided to check

it out, wondering if he was being paranoid or not. He stood up and left the ready room, leaving Gonzales in charge still. The hydroponics bay was quiet and he entered without anyone seeing him. Striding to the end of the third row, he paused, noticing that the last tray was empty.

'Computer, who was the last person in here?'

'Lieutenant Commander Sheena Gonzales,' the computer answered.

'Damn you,' he muttered. 'How much more do you know? How much do they all know?'

He was about to leave when he noticed that something had been left in the tray as well, half buried in the soil. A medical tricorder set to constantly record. He picked it up and switched it off, then smashed it against the bulkhead. The clever little doctor knew something as well, but the question was what. That was three of the senior staff so far, four if you included the captain, may she rest on ice forever, he thought to himself.

Wright returned to the bridge, determined to keep tighter rein on his senior officers, lest they decide they can get the better of him. Monitoring their every movement would take up too much time, but he could prevent them from meeting each other during their off-duty hours and knew that when he called the next staff meeting in eleven hours, they would have cause to dislike him. It was time that this ship started to function as a single whole, not distinct parts with officers and their agendas dictating things.

The next one to find out what he was up to would find themselves dead, in an unfortunately fatal accident.

Chapter Nineteen

USS *Pytheas*

Keleera system

Stardate 55386.0 (May 21, 2378)

Doctor Arlon Maxx stood in front of the screen in sickbay with Talen standing beside him. Both were looking at the display from the medical tricorder before it had been smashed. What they had received was more than enough to confirm their suspicions but not enough to do anything about it. They needed Gonzales and Parker as well but Wright had suddenly made extensive shift changes a few hours ago, meaning they wouldn't get to talk at all.

'What can we do?' Maxx asked.

'On our own? Nothing,' Talen replied. 'But I do have an idea.'

'What?'

'I can't tell you yet, but you have to trust me. When I give you the signal, you have to do what I'm about to tell you straight away.'

Maxx nodded. 'What's the signal?'

'If I'm right, you'll know when.'

'What do I have to do?'

As Talen explained his plan, Maxx looked suitably shocked and his face paled. 'Are you crazy?' he asked, backing away.

'You know it's safe, Doctor,' Talen pressed. 'It's the only way we can make sure she's safe!'

Maxx slumped, recognising the truth in that. 'I'll be ready.'

Talen nodded. 'I'll bring Gonzales and Parker in, and Mahtani too, I think he knows more than we do about what's going on.'

'Be careful, Wright suspects Mahtani, remember.'

'I know,' the Andorian replied as he left sickbay.

Maxx decided to go to the crew lounge, hoping to find something to occupy his time with. His shift was over and he didn't feel like going to his quarters and reading the latest Starfleet medical journals. Before he left, he entered the morgue and looked at Captain Astar's stasis chamber. He engaged a security seal on the drawer, something he had never done before, and then he gave strict instructions to the computer which locked out any possibility of them being countermanded.

'Doctor Maxx, please report to engineering,' Xeris suddenly called.

'On my way,' he replied, grabbing his medical kit as he headed that way. 'What's the problem?'

'One of my fool engineers cracked his skull open and he's in a shielded section, no way to transport him out.'

'Acknowledged,' the Bolian replied. 'Maxx to Kornilov and Swha, meet me in engineering with a stretcher, code two.'

'On our way,' technician Kornilov replied.

When Maxx reached engineering, he saw that the situation was far more serious than it originally seemed. The engineer in question was a Gallamite, and his brain was extremely delicate, hence the reason they had evolved with transparent skulls, so any abnormality would show up straight away in the discolouration of their cerebral fluid.

'Damn, I'm going to need more than what's in here for him,' Maxx cursed but knelt beside the dying engineer and checked him over with the tricorder. His fears were confirmed. 'His brain has been damaged. Without the exact composition of the fluid to regulate his brain, it will start to shut down in the next few minutes.'

'What can we do?' Xeris asked.

'I need someone to get a osteo-regenerator so I can seal the skull. Then I need to find out the composition of the cerebral fluid.'

'Can't the tricorder tell you that?'

'For any other species, yes, because there are only a few hundred

neurotransmitters. Gallamites have several thousand, and if there's an imbalance, they can die. Did you see the colour of his fluid when he hit his head?'

'It went a kind of mustard colour and then went clear again.'

Maxx nodded. 'That's a good sign, it means that his brain cleared itself of a dangerous imbalance.'

'The osteo-regenerator's coming, Doc.'

'He'll need to be moved to sickbay as soon as he's stable so I can monitor the neurotransmitter balance.'

'How long before I can get him back? He's the best warp specialist I have,' Xeris asked.

'At least two days, I won't release him from sickbay until he's recovered.'

Xeris nodded. 'Fine, if you'll excuse me, I have to fix my engines.'

As the Romulan walked away, Maxx noticed someone duck into a Jeffries tube, someone in a red uniform. He frowned, wondering if they would reappear but they didn't and the osteo-regenerator arrived so he concentrated on his patient. Within minutes, the tricorder had stopped its frantic bleeping as the engineer's lifesigns started to stabilise. An extensive scan with the tricorder on the leaked cerebral fluid had given him at least an idea of the balance of neurotransmitters.

'You can move him,' he said to Kornilov. 'But be careful. I want him put on these neurotransmitters as soon as he's in sickbay,' he added, passing across the medical tricorder.

Kornilov handed his tricorder to Maxx and nodded, helping Swha to move the Gallamite onto the antigrav stretcher. Maxx picked up his medical kit, intending to return to sickbay when another frantic call was received, this time by Lieutenant Parker.

'Medical emergency, Doctor Maxx report to holodeck one immediately.'

'On my way,' he acknowledged, sprinting for the turbolift to take him to deck fourteen. 'What's the problem?'

'Just get down here!'

It took less than two minutes for him to reach holodeck one and as soon as the doors opened, he understood the emergency, and the reason Parker refused to elaborate. Lying on the deck was the unconscious form of the ship's chief science officer, Lieutenant Jamal Mahtani. Maxx knelt beside him and checked him over with the tricorder.

'Lieutenant, he's dead.'

'Computer, run program Mahtani-37 with safeties engaged,' Parker instructed.

Immediately, the holodeck came to life, the scene was jungle assault course, and the safeties included just a net in the lower canopy.

'What is this?'

'This is a jungle survival course from the Nasat homeworld. Mahtani has run this program every week since the ship left Spacedock. Today he took the safeties off.'

'You and I both know that's not what happened.'

Parker nodded. 'Wright asked him to do something, and he's done it. He wasn't needed anymore.'

Maxx agreed. 'We have no evidence, but we have to report this to him anyway.'

Parker's shoulders slumped. 'Come on, let's get this out of the way. I'll seal the room. Come and have your technicians take a look and collect evidence, not that I think we'll find any.'

'He disengaged the safeties, maybe the computer recorded the tampering,' Maxx offered.

'Maybe,' Parker replied, taking another glance at Mahtani's broken body before leaving the holodeck.

Chapter Twenty

USS Pytheas

Keleera system

Stardate 55388.9 (May 22, 2378)

With the repairs now complete, as best they could be without a starbase, the *Pytheas* was back in space and ready to head to the Eeroth system to finish what they started. Lieutenant Commander Xeris had checked every repair personally, and while he was sure something about the calibration of the deflector dish was off, everything checked out and he had given Wright the all clear to proceed. As the ship jumped to warp, Xeris noticed a message light blinking on the terminal in his office. Someone was trying to contact him and be discreet about it. He sat down and watched the message appear on the monitor. It disappeared after precisely eleven seconds and a second message appeared, remaining on screen for the same period of time. The terminal went blank and Xeris stood up.

Now he knew exactly what was wrong with the deflector dish and also that there was nothing he could do without it showing up on Wright's console on the bridge. The man was thoroughly devious, and as a Romulan he could respect the man for that. But as a Starfleet officer, he wanted to space the bastard. Sabotaging the dish would be suicide for the crew, but allowing Wright to go through with his plan wasn't going to leave them much better off, but they would have a chance. Xeris decided on using his own methods of counter-terrorism and left engineering in the capable hands of Lieutenant Queran, the Xindi-Arboreal assistant chief engineer.

'I didn't think you'd be long,' Gonzales said as Xeris entered his quarters.

'I thought you were on the bridge,' the chief engineer replied.

'I am, I recorded this earlier, so Wright couldn't trace it back to me. You know what he's planning and what it means for us. Talen has already got Maxx sorted out, and Parker is just about ready to vaporise him. We can't risk bringing Larson in, we'll just have to hope that he stays out of the way.'

'I can't see that happening,' Xeris muttered and was surprised when the hologram replied.

'Neither can I, but we'll deal with that when the time comes.'

Xeris nodded. 'How long do you think we have?'

'He'll wait until the Eeroth crisis has been resolved and we're heading back to Kursican space before attempting his manoeuvre.'

'Then we have to be ready to take back the ship as soon as possible.'

'Maxx knows what he has to do, and I know what I have to do. Talen has thought of everything it would seem. Here's what you need to do.'

'Can we trust the Andorian?' Xeris interrupted.

'We have to, but to answer your next question, yes he is trustworthy.'

'Good enough for me,' the Romulan replied. 'What do you need from me?'

'Wright will need an extraordinary amount of energy to power the deflector dish. When you get the signal, and you'll know what it is, you have to take the warp core offline.'

'I can't do that on a whim.'

'We both know you're capable of doing what needs to be done. This is the only way we're going to be able to stop him.'

Xeris nodded, Gonzales smiled and the hologram vanished. 'Accursed technology.'

'*Bridge to Xeris,*' Wright called over the comm.

'Xeris here.'

'*Why aren't you in engineering, Commander?*'

Xeris scowled. 'I needed something from my quarters, Commander.'

'*You will address me as Captain, or you will be relieved of duty.*'

'Aye sir,' Xeris retorted.

'*Try again, Commander. No more tricks. You're skirting insubordination as it is.*'

The smug tone rubbed the Romulan engineer the wrong way. 'You don't deserve to be called, Captain, whatever the regulations say.'

'You're relieved. I suggest you stay in your quarters unless you want security to babysit you.'

'I'll stay in my quarters,' Xeris replied. A smile formed on his face, but it didn't reach his eyes. Instead they cooled a burning rage into a cold fury, one that would be eminently useful whether they succeeded in stopping Wright, or not.

Opening a cabinet in his bedroom, Xeris dragged out a box and entered a code that only he knew. Inside the box was a collection of weaponry unrivalled in the Federation, and all of it was in perfect working order. This was usually the first item he had brought aboard any new posting because of all the security checks it went through. It was made from pure kelbonite which made it impossible to transport and he had so far managed to convince the chief of security on every ship he'd served on that it was innocuous.

That was going to change now as both Parker and Gonzales were going to learn what was inside. Since he was stuck in his quarters for the foreseeable future, he decided to clean the weapons so they were ready for use. He'd neglected their care of late and it was starting to show on some of the older ones. He had the feeling that he was going to need them. Of course, shutting down the ship was important, perhaps the most important, but he had plenty of time to write a neat little program to help him with that.

Xeris continued to clean his weapons and as he did so, he wondered what his lover had done, or convinced Wright of, to have that little head to head. He admired her tenacity, as well as her lithe figure, and her cunning ways almost matched his own. In his opinion, however, it was Talen who was the weak link. He was the one who was organising everything, and trying to stay one or two steps ahead of Wright, but Xeris wasn't sure that the Andorian was up to the task, hence the reason for the array of weapons he was currently dealing with.

'I want that devious bastard to pay for Mahtani's death and I know just the weapon to use,' Xeris muttered to himself as he picked up a curved blade from his weapons cache. 'Poetic justice.'

Chapter Twenty-One

USS Pytheas

En route to Eeroth IV

Stardate 55389.0 (May 22, 2378)

Lieutenant Talen ignored the twitching of his antennae whenever he thought of Mahtani's death and the fact that Commander Wright had not performed any kind of funeral, instead having the body placed in stasis. There would be time later for such issues to be dealt with, the Eeroth were currently the top priority. It had been eight hours since they arrived and this time President Rashal had neither contacted them or done anything to remove them. In fact, there had been no contact with anyone either on the planet, the moons, or any vessels in that time.

'Sensors?' Wright asked for the tenth time. 'Show me that there is someone still alive.'

'Sensors show no living being on the surface, sir,' Gonzales replied. 'But there are still power generation plants operating.'

'Time to send an away team,' Wright said, looking at the tactical and acting first officer. 'Go to one of the power plants and see if you find anyone left alive. I want to know what happened while we were gone.'

'Aye sir,' Gonzales said. 'Talen, you're with me. I'll have a security team meet us in the transporter room.'

Talen stood up and caught Wright's gaze as he entered the turbolift. It was not something he wanted to experience again. The man looked at him as if he was not going to be returning to the ship, and the fact that it didn't matter. As soon as the turbolift doors closed, he slumped.

'Gonzales to security, have a team meet me in transporter room one.'

'*Acknowledged*,' Parker replied.

'He thinks this is a suicide mission,' Talen stated.

'I know,' Gonzales replied. 'But the only way for us to know what happened down there is to see it for ourselves. The Cha'lav-Aquatic ship was destroyed before it could do any permanent damage, and unless the rebels were able to

repair and replace their damaged satellites, then there shouldn't be anything in this system capable of killing everyone.'

'The Cha'lav?'

'We'd see some evidence of their return.'

Talen nodded. 'Then something more catastrophic happened to them.'

'It would seem so, but we won't know for certain until we get down there.'

'Should we take a shuttle instead?'

'Sensors show a normal M-class atmosphere, nothing unusual at all, except for the fact that a population of a few hundred million has just vanished.'

The turbolift doors opened and Ensign Hoya stood waiting. Standing next to the Benzite was Cadet Jenak, and chief petty officer D'rass, a Caitian. The five of them proceeded into the transporter room and the transporter chief nodded to them.

'Coordinates are set,' he said.

'What coordinates? Gonzales asked, checking them over. 'These are nowhere near any power plants. Transporter room to bridge, where are supposed to be going, Commander?'

'We've just picked up a single humanoid lifesign. That's where you're going,' Wright said and cut the channel.

'Everybody ready?' she asked her team as she joined them on the transporter pad.

They nodded.

'Energise.'

The first thing the Andorian noticed as he materialised on the surface was that it was dryer than he had been to believe. Initial scans had shown the Eeroth homeworld to be a verdant paradise, and the recent attack shown have caused extensive rainfall, not a desertification. The three members of the security team fanned out, phasers in hand, and Gonzales took out her

tricorder.

'I'm not picking up any lifeforms here at all, and the level of power being generated from the nearest plant is negligible, as if it was in the process of being shut down.'

'Commander, over here,' Cadet Jenak called.

Gonzales and Talen ran over to the cadet's position and saw the child she held in her arms. He was no more than ten years old and was clearly in trouble.

'There's a cave system over there,' Jenak pointed. 'He ran out and collapsed.'

'Cadet, go with him directly to sickbay and inform Commander Wright of the situation. We'll investigate the caves.'

'Be careful, sir.'

'Always, Cadet,' Gonzales replied and ran for the caves. Talen followed her and the two remaining security officers brought up the rear. Jenak disappeared in a pillar of light and they made it to the caves just as the ground rumbled.

'What was that?' D'rass asked.

'It wasn't a ground tremor,' the Andorian answered, consulting his tricorder. 'It came from orbit.'

'What did?' Gonzales asked.

'A neutron torpedo.'

'What?'

'That's why there are no people here, Commander. The neutron torpedoes have wiped out almost every living thing, from the Eeroth to the plants to the micro-organisms.'

'Who launched those torpedoes?'

'One of the satellites in orbit,' he replied. 'There's nothing else within range.'

'There may still be some people living in the caves,' D'rass added. 'We should find out.'

'We will, but we need to contact Wright first, and have him destroy that satellite.'

'Aye sir,' Talen said and tapped his combadge. 'Away team to *Pytheas*.'

'*Go ahead, Lieutenant*,' Wright answered.

'The satellite above our position is launching neutron torpedoes at the surface. Almost every living thing has been obliterated, leaving what's left of the cities intact for someone else to occupy.'

'*Like the rebels?*' Wright asked, sounding angry.

'Possibly, sir, but we haven't seen them either.'

'*Send the coordinates of the satellite to the tactical station, Lieutenant. What is the situation down there?*'

'We're going to investigate a cave system that may contain survivors, sir.'

'*Proceed, and keep me informed.*'

'Aye sir, away team out.'

'Let's go, hopefully we'll find survivors and answers.'

As the group descended further into the cave system, Talen became worried. He knew that Wright would destroy the satellite, but could not shake the feeling that the rampaging human would not do something to kill another member of the crew, or two, if given the opportunity.

'My tricorder's picking up lifesigns ahead, dozens of them,' Gonzales said.

'Thank the Great Cats,' D'rass muttered. 'We can take them back to the surface, let them know it's safe.'

'If they trust us.'

'They have to,' Talen said. 'We're they're only hope.'

Chapter Twenty-Two

Guest Quarters

Starbase 535

Stardate 55390.1 (May 23, 2378)

Lieutenant Commander Miles Murdoch stared out of the window of his private quarters aboard the starbase and considered all the colonies in the nearby star systems who were now heavily armed. Like his Academy friend, Tom Paris, the first officer of *Voyager*, he had an interest in the twentieth century and often spent a lot of time researching the period. One thing that bothered him about that time was the proliferation of small arms and the number of deaths that resulted from their unregulated use. He didn't think people today were as likely to use phasers against their neighbours for imagined slights but he knew that when fear took hold, all bets were off. Once Admiral Ranar learned of Logan's order, he countermanded it but allowed those colonies who already had the weapons to keep them, provided they were used against the enemy and kept locked up otherwise.

Murdoch's conscience also bothered him about one other thing. He had reported everything to Admiral Nechayev, and that included Linnis and her impressive abilities. Normally they would have asked that he return for a thorough debriefing, but this time they asked him to keep the girl close and make sure she was safe. They knew something more than they were telling him and he didn't like that, especially where she was concerned. The only problem was that he had no one he could talk to about the situation, no one to ask for advice—well, almost no one.

'Computer, open a channel to Lieutenant Paul Marshall, chief of security, USS *Everest*.'

'*Stand by*,' the computer answered.

Murdoch hated the fact that he had been separated from Paul for one of Nechayev's urgent missions but there was nothing untoward in the two of them communicating. Especially since the freighter cover had been blown a few days ago and they were now both back in uniform permanently. Murdoch considered his options and realised that there was very little he could do. With all the resources at their disposal, Starfleet Intelligence could easily find him, no matter where he went, but he had to get Linnis to a place of impenetrable safety. He had a feeling that she was going to be needed for something important.

'Miles, you look lost,' Lieutenant Marshall said from the screen.

'That's not far off my current state of mind,' the Intelligence operative replied. 'I have a little problem and I need a solution. I was hoping that you'd be able to help.'

'What do you need me to do?' Marshall asked, not even questioning his lover.

Murdoch explained his plan without revealing to anyone who might be listening in.

'I'll see what I can do and let you in a day or two,' Marshall replied.

'Thank you, and I'm sorry I have to do this.'

'You're welcome, Marshall out.'

Murdoch considered the option and went in search of his charge. She should have been sleeping but wasn't there. He thought he'd find her in the long-range shuttle Nechayev had appropriated for his use. Ynelav IV was only a few hours away at warp, so there should be no problem in getting there before anyone realised he had gone.

'Commander,' a voice said and Murdoch turned to see Commander Madden.

'Sir?'

'Logan issued a recall order a few hours ago. The Cha'lav have destroyed one of the Resoto refugee worlds. They've found the others as well. Command has ordered him not to intervene so he's called everyone back.'

'Because they'll be coming here next,' Murdoch said.

'That's what we thought too. The *Independence* and the *Ditagh* are also docked, waiting for the fight.'

'We're going to need more than that if we have any hope of sending the Cha'lav a message they won't forget.'

'True,' he replied. 'Here's hoping that we're able to gain some more allies.'

Murdoch nodded. 'If you'll excuse me, I have a little girl waiting for me.'

'I wanted to see if you'd like to come out for dinner with a group of us. We need to unwind.'

'Thanks, but I can't. I need to talk to someone about Linnis. There's only one person who knows what she's likely to go through.'

Madden stared at him, looking for any sign of falsehood. 'All right, maybe next time?'

'Sure,' he replied and headed for the freighter at a brisk jog.

When he reached the docking bay, he saw Linnis walking round the outside of it and poking her fingers around.

'Hi Mister Murdoch,' she said without turning round. 'I'm just looking around at your ship. It's new isn't it?'

'Call me Miles,' he said and knelt down beside her. 'Yes it is quite new. I know someone we can go to who can help you control your powers. Do you want to take a ride?'

'Yes please,' she replied and then put her hands on her hips and looked at him with a glint in her eye. 'You won't take me somewhere I'm not going to like are you?'

'No, we're going to see the spiritual leader of a people called Ynelavii.'

'Ynelavii,' she said, as if tasting the word. 'That sounds funny.'

He grinned. 'I know. Come on, let's go now and I'll buy you a souvenir.'

'Okay,' she replied and followed Murdoch up the ramp.

She paused, turned around with a slight frown on her face, then smiled and ran into the shuttle.

Murdoch ran through the preflight checks and after receiving permission to depart from Operations, took the *Lowell* from its docking berth into space. Linnis sat beside him in the co-pilot's chair, her favourite spot, and watched as they left the Kursican system. As soon as they jumped to warp, she turned

to him.

'We're not coming back, you do know that, don't you?'

Murdoch turned to her. 'What do you mean?'

'We won't see the starbase again, we're going on an adventure.'

'I hope it's a good one,' he replied and then stared straight ahead looking worried.'

'It will be, you have me to guide you. Are you going to miss your friend?'

Murdoch sighed, wondering what he had got himself into. 'I will, very much. Are we going to make it to Ynelav IV, or does the adventure begin after that?'

'After,' the Ocampan answered sincerely. 'We'll be picking up a couple of people first.'

'Alright, do I need some more supplies?'

'We'll pick up what we need, don't worry.'

Chapter Twenty-Three

Starfleet Resettlement Camp

Eeroth IV

Stardate 55393.3 (May 24, 2378)

After almost two days, the crew had found every Eeroth remaining alive on the planet's surface. Lieutenant Commander Gonzales looked at them and sighed. From a population of hundreds of millions, they had been reduced to less than nine thousand, and there was no sign of the rebels or the Presidential staff. Wright had ordered a complete search of every moon in the system and every asteroid over a certain size and they had still come up empty. Rashal had set in motion a sequence of events which had devastated his people. As they huddled together, Fahira and Dahreki together, it seemed as though they had finally left their cultural biases behind them. Doctor Maxx and his medical teams were still checking everyone out and making sure they were healthy, but he had expressed a grave concern when he looked at the numbers and did a genetic analysis. She remembered the look on every face around the table.

'Are you sure the numbers aren't wrong?' she had asked, aware of the implication.

He sighed. 'I've checked them five times, and I've had the EMH triple check them. Nine thousand two hundred and eleven people, even with the genetic diversity they have, is not enough to sustain the population. They would need three times that if they want to live beyond three or four generations.'

'What about genetic manipulation or engineering?' Wright asked and Parker shot him a look. It was as if she knew something.

'That's illegal in Federation space, Commander,' Maxx said as if speaking to a simpleton.

'We're not in Federation space, Doctor, and it might be their only hope if you can devise a way to introduce a random genetic mutation into their DNA.'

Maxx frowned. 'Other doctors have found ways of doing it, but I will not sacrifice my principles to save these people. It isn't right.'

'Neither is letting them die,' Larson said. 'Whether we like it or not, we are their only hope of survival. We owe it to them to help.'

'No, we don't,' Gonzales replied. 'The Cha'lav are the ones responsible for all this, and we're just here to pick up the pieces and help them get back to something resembling a normal life. Not even a fleet of counsellors can help them deal with the fact that they have just lost more than ninety-nine percent of their entire race. We need to find Rashal.'

'Why?' Wright's question shocked everyone. 'He was responsible for this atrocity.'

'I think he was used by the Cha'lav,' Parker said. 'And we need to find him and reintegrate his staff to these people to provide them a better chance of survival.'

'A few hundred people won't make any difference,' Maxx replied, 'except for a decimal place or something.'

'It's still something,' Parker shot back. 'We're Starfleet officers. We're supposed to do whatever it takes to help others. Isn't that what we're about?'

'Not at the moment,' Wright replied quietly. 'We're here to stop the Cha'lav, but instead we've doomed another race to near-extinction.'

'No we haven't,' Parker strode up to him and yelled. 'The Cha'lav have, and not going to stand by while you all wallow in self pity. I'm going down to the surface to get these people ready for a fight.'

'Hold it right there, Lieutenant,' Wright said. 'You don't have the authority to do that.'

'And you don't have the balls. Whatever agenda you're playing here has nothing to do with these people, and quite frankly I don't think it has anything to do with us either. We came to return a man to his people and found them in need of help. We were asked for help and now, when they are in their darkest hour, we're turning our backs on them? That's not what I signed up for.'

'You're relieved,' he said simply.

'Well done, Commander. Are you going to relieve your entire senior staff, or just murder them.'

'That's enough!' Wright yelled. 'One more comment and you'll be sent to the

brig instead of your quarters.'

Parker stormed out of the conference room barely missing the door.

'Doctor, investigate the possibility of a genetic solution, one that doesn't break the law. Gonzales, head down to the surface and see what condition these people are in. If they are able to fight, then let's arm them with ships and weapons. If not, we'll just concentrate on getting them healthy. The rest of you, dismissed.'

Gonzales felt a hand on her shoulder and blinked, remembering she was on the surface. 'You all right?' Maxx asked.

'I'm fine, how are they?'

'Physically they're fine, and emotionally well in some cases. I think it's collective shock, and we'll have a problem when it does sink in. In the meantime, I just have to get these latest blood samples up to the ship to run some more tests.'

'What are you hoping to find?'

'Something that will prevent me from using the genetic option. Has Wright contacted Command at all?'

'He says he has, but I'd need to check the logs. Why do you ask?'

'He's planning something. Talen and I figured something out about him, and I didn't get a chance to tell Parker.'

'Does it impact his ability to command the crew at this very moment?'

'No, but it does tell why he's been acting the way he has. Commander, this is important.'

'I'm sure it is, and I'm not trying to make light of the fact that he's a dangerous individual. But if what you found was legally useful in any way, you'd have used it, wouldn't you?'

Maxx nodded. 'It just goes to pattern of behaviour and may provide an explanation of what he's up to. With Parker and Xeris under guard, and the rest of us being watched, we're losing our ability to stop him.'

'There's a plan, Doctor. Just stick to it.'

Maxx nodded, walked to the beam-in site and requested transport. Gonzales looked around at the security guards as they moved through the camp, breaking up fights and just talking to people.

Chapter Twenty-Four

USS *Pytheas*

Eeroth IV orbit

Stardate 55393.4 (May 24, 2378)

'Mister President, I hope you'll reconsider,' Wright almost pleaded with the new Eeroth leader.

'Unfortunately, the will of the people prevents me from doing so, Commander Wright. So far, your help has been effective only at damaging this world more than the Cha'lav did. Please leave this system. Return to your space station and leave us in peace.'

'What if the Cha'lav come to finish the job?'

'Then we'll die on our own terms. Please leave this system, we'll attend to the rebels ourselves, they are our people after all.'

The screen blanked and Wright sighed. Around him, the bridge crew clearly felt that they could have done more for the Eeroth but things had not gone well. Less than an hour ago, Rashal and the presidential staff had arrived in orbit and been handed over to the new leader. The rebels had also recently appeared from an asteroid and given up, unable to bear responsibility for allowing the Cha'lav to use their weapon against them.

'Ensign Larson, set a course for *Starbase 535*, warp six.'

'Sir? We can't just leave them.'

Gonzales interjected. 'They asked us to leave, Ensign. Staying now would violate the Prime Directive.'

'Aye sir, course and speed laid in.'

'Let's go,' Wright said and the *Pytheas* jumped to warp. 'Gonzales, you have the conn, I'll be in my quarters.'

'Aye sir.'

Wright entered the turbolift and willed his heart rate down to normal. 'Deflector control,' he ordered.

As the turbolift descended, Wright considered his options. His plan was suicidal at warp so he needed a convincing excuse to slow to impulse. An explosive decompression would automatically trigger alarms and a warp core shutdown, but he would need to be careful not to get caught, his command crew didn't trust him as it was. The doors opened and Wright found his path blocked by Lieutenant Commander Xeris and Lieutenant Parker.

'Aren't you two supposed to be confined to quarters?'

'Aren't you supposed to be leading this crew instead of whatever agenda you have?' Xeris shot back. 'I've countered the modifications you had Jamal make before you killed him.'

Wright smiled. 'Computer, initiate program Wright-1-1-4.'

'Unable to comply, secondary deflector system has been disengaged.'

Wright kept his composure as the two officers approached him. 'Initiate programs Wright 1-1-5 and 1-1-6.'

'Acknowledged,' the computer replied and Wright dematerialised.

He reappeared on deck six in the control room for the secondary deflector dish and started the program to charge the secondary deflector. That done, he made his way through Jeffries tubes to the captain's mess and proceeded to overload the bioneural gel packs and cause an explosion which he hoped would blow out the deck, and therefore slow the ship. After several moments and no warnings, he muttered a curse and realised that they were tracking his movements.

'Computer, activate all remaining Wright-1 programs, cascade effect.'

It was a last-ditch attempt to slow the ship and put his plan into motion.

'Commander, Wright's heading down to deflector control,' Talen said.

Larson turned round. 'What's going on?'

'Gonzales to Xeris, he's heading your way.'

'Acknowledged.'

'Commander?' Larson asked again.

'Ensign, please concentrate on your console.'

'I don't know if you've noticed, but I wasn't included in your plans to mutiny.'

'This isn't a mutiny,' Talen replied. 'We 're retaking the ship from a dangerous killer.'

'Jamal?'

'Yes, Wright killed him, we found his tampering buried in the program Mahtani used.'

'Right then,' Larson replied and returned his gaze to the helm console.

'Xeris to bridge, he's gone. He beamed out somewhere.'

'Get to the secondary deflector room, he'll try to use the tertiary system.'

'On our way, Xeris out.'

Talen waited as long as he could but it was taking too long to catch him. 'He's in the captain's mess, trying to blow out the section.'

'Lock him out!'

'I'm trying, but he's just activated a whole slew of programs to stop me.'

'Can you stop him?'

The Andorian looked up. 'I'm not sure, but as long as we stay at warp he can't activate the deflector.'

'Gonzales to Xeris, get back down to engineering. We have to stay at warp.'

'Right, Parker's on her way to the mess.'

'He'll be long gone.'

'Internal sensors put him there.'

'He dumped his combadge, scanning for his lifesigns...his quarters, hurry.'

'Commander, we should activate all the forcefields on the ship,' Larson said.
'It'll slow him down.'

'We can't afford to alert anyone else, we don't know if he's working with anyone on board.'

'What else can we do?'

'I'm not sure; Talen, how's it coming?'

'I've shut down two of the programs but there're still two more.'

Gonzales slammed her fist on the console. 'Damn him.'

'Is it time?'

Gonzales nodded. 'Bridge to sickbay.'

'*Maxx here.*'

'It's time.'

'*Aye sir, sickbay out.*'

'We've lost his biosignature,' Talen muttered. 'What the hell is he doing?'

'I've had enough of this,' Gonzales said and tapped a few keys. The red alert klaxon sounded. 'This is Commander Gonzales to all hands. Commander Wright has killed Lieutenant Jamal Mahtani and is currently loose on board this ship with technology to mask his biosigns. He is to be considered extremely dangerous and if any crewman spots him, call for security immediately. All non-essential personnel please report to your quarters and remain there until this situation has been resolved, that is all.'

'We can do more,' Larson said.

'Not yet, I want to give our people time to reach their quarters. Then I'll seal

them all in and activate all the forcefields. We'll have him trapped.'

'Not quite, he can still use the Jeffries tubes.'

'His movements will be limited.'

'Lock out his voice codes,' Talen suggested.

'I did that as soon as he activated those programs, Lieutenant.'

The Andorian nodded. 'We just have to stay one step ahead of him. Where will he go next?'

'Engineering, he'll have to slow us down if he wants to do anything, so that'll give him his best chance of success.'

The *Pytheas* suddenly shook and the rattle was felt by everyone on the bridge.

'Bridge to Xeris, what happened?'

'I'm not sure,' the chief engineer replied with a sigh. *'But we're slowing to impulse.'*

Chapter Twenty-Five

USS Pytheas

En route to Starbase 535

Stardate 55393.5 (May 24, 2378)

As the starship slowed to impulse, Lieutenant K'Tyra Parker cursed the fates which had led her here. Yes, she'd been living on borrowed time in the future, waiting until the Cha'lav succeeded in destroying everything she held dear, but at least she didn't have to contend with problems like this. Everyone was too busy fighting for their very existence on starships that were held together with luck and willpower to try and pull stupid stunts like this. But here, in one version of her distant past, where life was good and all the worst battles of the time were over, one man was trying to cause a boatload of trouble and she only suspected his true motives. A hastily-convened conference between the senior staff had aired all the suspicions and possibilities and they all agreed that the simplest explanation was the right one, the question that burned in all their minds, was why Wright was doing this. She suspected that before the day was out, she would have her answer, and that she wasn't going to like it very much.

Holding a mek'leth in the right hand, Parker slowly crept up on the deflector room, where the tertiary deflector system was located. She was expecting it to be locked and was therefore surprised when the doors slid open at her approach. Aaron Wright strode out and stopped in his tracks as he spotted her. Instead of running, he smirked and walked toward her, seemingly without a care in the world. Parker adjusted her stance, prepared for an attack, but Wright just walked past her and continued down the corridor. She regained her senses quickly and followed, not doing anything to provoke him but watching where he went.

'Parker to bridge, Wright's ignoring me as if I wasn't even here. I'm following him at the moment, release the forcefields on this deck.'

'Lieutenant?'

'Send someone to tertiary deflector control to stop whatever he's doing, and have security standing by.'

'I'm sending Talen, security is standing by on all exit points to deck six. Care to tell me what's going on?' Gonzales asked.

'I have no idea, but I think it's important.'

'Don't do anything rash, and keep this channel open.'

'Aye sir.'

Parker slipped the mek'leth into her trousers at the small of her back, a trick she learned as a child, and let Wright lead her. She kept pace with his unhurried walk as the starship's acting captain led her toward his quarters. She hadn't expected it but nevertheless could not allow him access to anything he had in there.

'Commander, stop,' she called out to him.

Wright turned to face her, the same smirk on his face. 'There's nothing you or this crew can do to stop me, not now.'

'Stop you from doing what?' she asked in a carefully neutral tone.

'Please, Lieutenant, don't insult my intelligence. I'm sure you and the others have consulted with the good doctor about the readings taken in the hydroponics bay.'

'What readings?'

Wright sighed. 'As you well know, my quantum signature does not match yours. All I'm trying to do is get home, the least you could do is allow me that, since you aren't able to return to your home.'

The Klingon hybrid scowled. 'My "home" was corrupted by the Cha'lav. I came here to stop them from doing the same again. There's nothing for me even if I could return. What is so bad about living here?'

'I have a duty to my people and I intend to fulfil it.'

'At what cost?'

'What is that supposed to mean?'

'You've killed one Starfleet officer and if your jacket is to be believed, been responsible for several more deaths. What is to stop me killing you here and now?'

'That would be your sense of duty, Lieutenant. You would never be able to beat me in a fight, your Klingon strength notwithstanding, but you still believe in the Federation and Starfleet and their famed justice system. I've been on both sides of the fence and my side is infinitely more preferable, there's less pretence about being who you really are. Quite frankly, I'm fed up of pretending to be the good Starfleet Commander who does what he's told when the Captain tells him to. I'm going home, and you're all coming along for the ride.'

'Did you get all that, Commander?' Parker asked.

'Loud and clear, and recorded for posterity,' Gonzales answered. 'Commander Aaron Wright, you are hereby relieved of command. I am taking command of the *Pytheas* and if you would please relinquish your lockout on the deflector systems, we can deal with you in short order.'

'Sorry, Commander, I can't do that,' he said and walked into his quarters.
'Now what?' Parker asked.

As if answering her question, the lights suddenly faded into complete darkness.

'Gonzales, can you hear me?'

'Get back up here, there's nothing more we can do.'

'On my way.'

Choosing the safest route, Parker reached the bridge through the Jeffries tubes, a journey of almost fifteen minutes, and stood at the tactical station.

'Report!' Gonzales asked.

'All power systems throughout the ship are being rerouted through the tertiary deflector system. We've just lost the warp engines, shields, weapons and impulse engines,' Parker replied.

'The secondary deflector is powering up. Three minutes until fully charged,' Talen added. 'Do you think Maxx was able to do it?'

'Let's hope so,' Larson replied.

'Life support down to minimum levels,' Parker said.

'Deflector at maximum charge in two minutes.'

The turbolift doors opened and Wright strode onto the bridge. He was no longer wearing his Starfleet uniform, instead favouring an earth-toned tunic. Talen moved to stop him but Gonzales waved him back.

'Satisfied, Mister Wright?'

'Almost.'

'One minute.'

'What happens next?'

'Once I'm home, I'll take a shuttle and you'll be free to do as you please.'

'Time,' Talen whispered.

The *Pytheas* began to shake as the awesome power being channelled through the deflector dish was released in a stream of energy. Four points of energy streamed into one as a spatial rift began to form. Everyone on the bridge watched as the rift grew and the ship moved, imperceptibly at first but the rift increased in strength almost exponentially and pulled the starship in.

'Thirty seconds until rift boundary,' Talen reported as the lights came back on.

'Main power is coming back online,' Parker added. 'Weapons, shields, engines, we've got everything.'

'Yellow alert.'

'You won't need it.'

'We'll see,' a female voice said from the door to the ready room.

Wright turned to face her.

'I'd like my ship back now.'

'It's all yours, Captain.'

Epilogue

USS *Pytheas*

The Spatial Rift

May 24, 2378 (Stardate 55393.6)

The rift enveloped the starship like a glove and a single, blinding flash of light was the only visible sign of transition. As the after-image faded, Captain Leza Astar stepped toward her former first officer and shoved him backwards. He stumbled and fell into his chair, looking up at her with pity in his eyes. She gestured for Parker to stand by him and then turned to face the viewscreen. She sat down and clutched the arms.

'Talen, where are we?'

'Checking, Captain. According to the quantum scans, we're in the mirror universe recorded by Captain Kirk and the crew of *Deep Space Nine*.'

'Where are we? Are there any ships in the area?'

'According to our astrometrics database, we're in the Denorios Belt, Bajoran space,' Talen replied.

Having returned to her post, Gonzales added: 'One vessel in range, I'm reading it as a *Defiant*-class vessel, on an intercept course.'

'Red alert,' Astar ordered.

'All stations report ready.'

'Hail the ship.'

'Captain, I recommend we do not interfere.'

'Recommendation noted, Commander, but the ship is headed our way and I would rather know beforehand what the hell was going on, before they get into weapons range.'

'Aye sir, hailing frequencies open.'

'This is Captain Leza Astar of the Federation starship *Pytheas* to the *Defiant*-class starship. We have no intention of joining the war with the rebellion and

wish only to return home.'

The star field vanished from the viewscreen, replaced by the image of a well-known man. *'General Smiley O'Brien, Terran Rebellion,'* the curly-haired Irishman replied and then noticed Wright. *'Where the hell did he come from?'*

Astar glanced in Wright's direction. 'You know him?'

'Yeah, I do. He's currently a prisoner of the Alliance.'

'A prisoner?'

Wright stood up and Parker stepped forward in warning. 'Eight years ago, I found an ancient device on Earth and figured out how to use it, but it was useless until I found the planet it came from, while surveying for ores for the Alliance. As soon as I landed, I was drawn to a cave system. The next thing I know, the device is burnt to a crisp and I'm stuck in your universe.'

'You were the lucky one,' Smiley snorted and turned to face Astar. *'Your universe's Aaron Wright became a troublemaker and ended up on Terok Nor. He was the favoured slave of the Intendant until Sisko came along. When we took over, he wasn't able to escape and the Alliance took him.'*

'We have to get him back, Captain,' Gonzales said.

Astar nodded. 'I know, somehow.'

'We can help you, but you need to help us first,' Smiley said and held up a hand to forestall an argument. *'I've known enough people from your side to know that you won't help us defeat the Alliance. Right now, we have a bigger problem. When your Major Kira and Doctor Bashir came through the wormhole, they made their presence known to some very powerful creatures.'*

'Go on.'

'These creatures allied themselves with an empire on the other side of the wormhole and they've been trying to exterminate us ever since. The Bajorans have almost completely been wiped out by them.'

'An empire from the other side of the wormhole, that sounds like...'

'Captain, I'm picking up three ships approaching, extreme edge of our sensor

range. Without the astrometrics array we'd never have seen them.'

'Can you tell who they are?' Astar asked.

'From this distance, and their energy signature, if I didn't know any better I would say that it was the Dominion.'

Smiley sighed. *'The Vorta Imperium, the slaves of the Pah Wraiths. We need to leave, now.'*

Astar nodded. 'Lead on, we'll follow. What do you know of the Changelings?'

'Odo's species? The Vorta hunt them down like prey, using their foot soldiers...'

'The Jem'Hadar,' Gonzales muttered. 'I thought we were finally rid of them.'

'You defeated them?' Smiley's eyes widened in shock. *'You have to help us.'*

'We'll see about that, but right now we need to leave.'

'We're heading back to Terok Nor.'

'In orbit of Bajor?'

'Where else?'

'Mister Larson, set a course for Bajor, warp six.'

The *Pytheas* will return in **Fragments of Control**