



Regions of the Dark

By Brother Benny

Prologue

Poseidon City

New Atlantis

Stardate 54690.3

Captain T'Mur stood on the roof of the Federation embassy and watched the city burn. The smell of burning flesh, polymers and metal was most unpleasant but it was omnipresent and would stay in the city until the storm came through in a few days. The storm would bring a welcome relief from the smell but it would severely hinder the rescue attempts that continued.

New Atlantis was a protectorate of the Federation and was in the process of becoming a member, at least until last week when the civil war broke out. T'Mur wondered why the rebellion had chosen to attack the government headquarters on the same day that the *Nietzsche* had arrived in orbit to bring a diplomatic envoy.

'Captain, as I've repeatedly told you, it was only a matter of time,' the liaison told him as they stood on the rooftop.

'Stating the same erroneous fact numerous times will not make it truthful,' T'Mur replied. 'I have studied every report on the rebellion from my people and yours, and I am convinced that the rebellion did not have the capacity to wage this kind of battle. They had outside help.'

The liaison officer shook his head vociferously. 'The Free Atlantis movement would never accept any help from non-Humans.'

'Precisely,' T'Mur agreed. 'Therefore, a human group must have aided them. My security chief has been checking the global communication network to see who may have been contacted by the rebels.'

'Has he found anything?'

T'Mur nodded. 'He has found a great deal of information, which is quite troubling. Hidden within numerous personal communiqués were messages intended for a human weapons dealer. A Starfleet vessel has been dispatched to arrest him in accordance with Federation law and we will know everything within a few days.'

'Governor Reggorf will be overjoyed to hear that, Captain.'

'I have already informed him of the situation,' T'Mur replied. 'What I require from you are the names of the traitors on my ship who assisted you to smuggle the weapons here?'

'I have nothing to do with the rebellion,' the liaison countered.

T'Mur turned to him for the first time. 'I know you have been in contact with members of my crew, just as I am aware of the fact that Admiral Emerald Phillips arranged for the weapons to be delivered to your warehouse on the waterfront as soon as the *Nietzsche* was in transporter range.'

The New Atlantean said nothing as two Poseidon City Militiamen stepped out of the shadows to take him into custody.

'Give me the names of the traitors on my crew, please?' T'Mur asked again.

'Free Atlantis lives!' the liaison said and clamped his mouth shut.

The explosion caused the roof to collapse and the two militiamen were killed instantly by falling debris. T'Mur was knocked off the building by the force of the explosion and landed outside the front entrance to the embassy as people came running out. His head faced the doors and he saw his executive officer staring at him. He tried to speak but he could not say anything, nor could he use a mind meld to impart the sensitive information to her as his arms were both broken. He saw her tap her combadge but he blacked out without hearing what it was.

Commander Nara Q'Rel stood by the surgical bed and watched as the man she idolized slipped away second by second. According to Doctor Tym, the physical damage was too severe to be repaired and there was excessive neural damage as well, making a recovery almost impossible. Tym had acceded to T'Mur's recorded wishes that Nara be present in his final moments, but both women had no understanding as to why.

All of the readings flatlined and T'Mur's body relaxed in death. Nara was about to leave when the lights in the small sickbay suddenly dimmed. She heard the unmistakable sound of a forcefield being erected and looked around for the source. A monitor to her left came to life and Captain T'Mur appeared. He was in his quarters but still in his uniform and she could see little else behind him.

'Commander Nara Q'Rel, if you are watching this recording, I have died before giving you sensitive information. Sickbay has been secured against listening devices of all kinds for the duration of this message.' T'Mur's image disappeared to be replaced by that of an older dark-skinned man with admiral bars. She recognized him as Terence Glover.

'Several months ago, Starfleet Command began construction on a starbase far from any shipping lanes and trade routes for the express purpose of amassing a fleet in secret. Over thirty vessels are being pulled from their normal duties across the Federation to arrive at Starbase Bastion within the next two or three weeks. Captain T'Mur, along with dozens of senior captains in Starfleet, was given a list of names from which to pick from. Your name was selected by several, including Picard, DeSoto, Benteen and Drake. Admiral Covey and I have discussed your record and we believe you are a suitable candidate for Task Force Vanguard.'

'You will be more fully briefed when you arrive at Starbase Bastion, but for now I will give you a brief overview. Some decades or centuries ago, something happened deep in the Delta Quadrant that forced dozens of alien races to flee their homes in whatever ships they could. As they travelled, they displaced other races and so on. This domino effect will soon reach the Nyberrite Alliance if it hasn't already, and Starfleet needs to prepare. Vanguard is the opening thrust of that endeavor, to reach the advancing nomads and establish relations with them before the Klingons, Romulans, Tholians, Breen or Cardassians learn of them.'

'The Nietzsche does not fit the mission profile for Task Force Vanguard and I

have been given the authority by Admiral Brandies to offer you a promotion. Please report to the Charis Shipyards in orbit of Vulcan as soon as time permits. You will be given further instructions once you arrive.'

T'Mur reappeared on the screen. *'The activation of this message caused a signal to be sent along with our most recent log entries. You will be contacted within twelve hours. Live long and prosper, Commander Nara Q'Rel.'*

Tears filled Nara's eyes at the farewell but she wiped them away just as the forcefield fell and two security officers entered with Doctor Tym.

'Are you all right, Commander?'

'I will be. Prepare the captain's body for stasis. We'll return him to Vulcan as soon as possible.'

'You can go now,' Tym told the security officers and then turned back to Nara. 'Aren't we staying here to help with the clean-up? Isn't that what the captain ordered?'

'Doctor, please don't ask any more questions,' Nara told her. 'I can't tell you what's going on.'

Tym looked at her with a baleful glaze. 'Fine, but I'll be reporting this usurping of my sickbay to Starfleet Medical.'

'Go ahead,' Nara replied and walked out of sickbay, leaving her captain's body behind.

Her thoughts were consumed with grief, anger and curiosity. What ship was she going to command?'

Chapter 1

Starfleet Corps of Engineers Headquarters San Francisco, Earth Stardate 54695.6

Commander Emma Bartel stood at the podium in front of three hundred cadets and activated the holographic display between them for the second half of their class on large starships. A single solar system was visible and Bartel zoomed in until the seventh planet was all the class could see.

‘Can anyone tell me what planet this is?’ she asked the class of advanced engineering cadets. ‘Anybody?’

When no one answered, she continued. ‘This is Ixel, once a thriving M-class planet with an advanced culture of over eight billion people. Approximately one million years ago a catastrophic experiment turned their world from this,’ she pointed at the display, which changed, ‘to this.’

‘Ixel is now brown and lifeless lump of rock with a crust irradiated so badly that nothing but the most extreme extremophile will be able to survive on the surface for another three or four million years. Forty years ago a Starfleet survey mission was digging in the ruins when they uncovered something incredible.’

The holographic display changed again to a view of a large vessel with a *Sovereign*-class starship side by side for comparison. ‘As you can see, the Ixellian battle cruiser is orders of magnitude larger than a *Sovereign*-class ship, and proportionately more powerful. Over the last four decades, the best minds in Starfleet Research and Development have been taking this ship apart piece by piece to see how it worked and what it could tell us about the Ixellian people.

‘What we learned concerned us. The Ixellians were a violent race much like the Vulcans had been before the Reformation but they had a starfaring civilization and this ship represented the embodiment of their ideals. We estimate that the ship could hold up to twenty thousand troops in addition to a fleet of *Defiant*-class vessels. According to the logs that we have been able to translate, there was a mutiny aboard the ship and the mutineers fired at the surface. The mutineers hit a dilithium seam which ran throughout most of the planet, and caused the devastation you now see.

'Your homework for next week is to look over the research which have been done up to now, which is available in full, and suggest either a new avenue for research or a deeper look at something already researched. I want your papers to be thorough and remember, what you give me will be taken into full consideration and you may get an offer from the research team. I know you're all hoping for starship duty but someone has to do all the work back here, dismissed.'

As the cadets gathered their pads and left, Bartel noticed a raven-haired woman standing at the back of the auditorium. She looked austere and all business, but she was gorgeous and Bartel entertained a fleeting image of making love to her, but she made it a habit never to fraternize with Starfleet personnel, it could get difficult if there were issues. The woman came forward as Bartel stepped down from the podium and extended her hand.

'Emma, it's been a while,' the woman said.

'Anastasia, I almost didn't recognize you,' Bartel replied as she shook the woman's hand. 'What brings you to the Tucker building?'

'I just heard about your new assignment,' Lieutenant Anastasia Baransky said with a huge smile on her face. 'I wondered when you were going to get back out there.'

Bartel returned the smile. 'When I was approached, I almost turned it down, but who can give up the chance of serving on a ship they designed?'

'Definitely not an engineer,' Baransky answered. 'When do you ship out?'

'There's a shuttle picking me up in a few hours.'

'Good, you have time for a little bite to eat then.'

Bartel's face fell, 'I'm really sorry, Ana, I already have plans.'

'Oh, with who?' Baransky asked.

'My new commanding officer,' Bartel said with a grin.

'Who's that?'

'Emma, you ready?' another woman's voice asked from the auditorium's

entrance and Baransky turned to look.

'Coming,' Bartel shot back. 'You're welcome to join us.'

'Probably not a good idea,' Baransky replied. 'Nara doesn't like me very much.'

Bartel shrugged, 'you did try to kill her.'

Baransky sighed, 'I was possessed by an alien lifeform.'

'So was she.'

This time Baransky shrugged. 'I'll leave you to your lunch.'

'Not so fast,' Captain Nara Q'Rel said and Baransky's face fell. 'I have a proposal for you.'

'What kind of proposal?'

'It will be a long-term mission, at least five years in deep space, where no one has ever been. The rest I can only tell you if you say yes.'

'Why do you want me?' Baransky asked.

'You're a pain in the behind, but you're also the best science officer I've ever worked with.'

'Thanks, I think.'

'Before you make up your mind, let me sweeten the pot. If you agree to the assignment, I'll give you another pip for that collar.'

'I only just made full lieutenant three months ago,' the Russian protested. 'Can you do that?'

'I've been given the authority to pick whomever I want using any means necessary, and Admiral Brandies has given me some extraordinary leeway in doing that,' Nara answered.

'Never heard of him or her, but OK,' Baransky said. 'I'm in.'

'Excellent,' Nara said with a smile. 'Report to Earth Spacedock at nineteen hundred hours.'

'Thank you for the opportunity, Captain.'

'You deserve it, Lieutenant. Just don't try to kill me again.'

Baransky nodded and left the auditorium with a spring in her step while Bartel looked on in confusion. 'Was that true?'

'Every word. Starfleet Command doesn't actually believe that this little endeavor will work but they've given the captains who will be out there every possible advantage.'

'Out where? You still haven't told me where we're going.'

'I will give all of my senior officers a full briefing once I have assembled them. I'm being updated daily on the situation, which seems to be changing almost hourly. Now come on, we have a lot to discuss today.'

'So it's a working lunch?'

'You're my executive officer, Emma. There's no such thing as a social lunch anymore. Besides, you've got to help me pick the rest of the senior officers.'

'I assume that the position of chief engineer has been filled by the third member of the Coven?' Bartel asked, referring to the nickname that the *Enterprise* crew had given to them.

'It has, she'll be joining us at the end of the day.'

'Fantastic, do you realize it will be the first time in four years since we'll have served together?'

'I know, the longest four years of my life.'

Chapter 2

**Starfleet Academy
San Francisco, Earth
Stardate 54768.1**

Elyce Erom stared at the padd in her hand and muttered a Hycleean curse that the universal translator would be unable to parse for the benefit of the other cadets standing nearby. She was going to graduate at the top of her class with the rank of lieutenant and get her pick of assignments. Now, she would be graduating at the rank of Ensign like the rest of the class and assigned wherever she was put, and all because her mother had turned traitor and disgraced the uniform.

'I'm sorry, Elyce, I know how much you wanted this,' her best friend, Reya, tried to console her.

'Yeah well, I'm a pariah now on two worlds. Good to know, huh.'

'What do you mean?' Reya asked.

'Honor is a big deal on Hycleea,' Erom told her friend. 'My mother has brought dishonor to our clan and as her daughter I now bear that dishonor.'

'Wow, I didn't realize you guys were so like the Klingons that way.'

'It gets worse,' Erom confided. 'Unless I can restore my clan's honor within ten Hycleean years, six Earth years, the clan will be dissolved and its people banished from our world. The Erom clan has had a seat on Tribal Council for eleven centuries and now it all comes crashing down because my mother is a traitor.'

'I'm so sorry, but I know you'll fix it,' Reya said. 'You will restore honor to your clan and your people.'

'Thanks, Reya, but I have no idea how.'

'You'll figure it out,' she said as a hush descended on the group.

The young women looked at the end of the corridor as a Vulcan admiral approached. 'Cadet Erom, front and center.'

Erom sighed and began to push through the crowd before she realized that Reya was moving right beside her. 'Cadet Erom reporting as ordered, sir.'

'And you are?' the admiral asked, looking at Reya.

'Cadet Reya, Admiral Derak.'

'You are not required for this meeting, Cadet Reya. Please remain here.'

'Cadet Erom is my friend, Admiral. I request permission to provide moral support,' Reya replied as Erom looked on in astonishment at how brazen her friend was being.

Derak raised an eyebrow. 'Your intentions are admirable, Cadet, but unnecessary. Cadet Erom is not being punished.'

Reya stared Derak in the eye and replied, 'I know.'

'Of course you do,' he replied. 'Come on.'

'What's going on?' Erom whispered to her as they trailed the admiral back to his office.

'Your chance to restore honor,' Reya replied enigmatically.

Admiral Derak's office was located on the eleventh floor of the main Academy building, adjacent to that of the Commandant's office. Erom realized that she was about to be given her official assignment when she saw the lettering on the door, Chief of Operations, Starfleet Academy. He gestured them both inside and closed the door before he strode to his desk and sat down.

'Cadet Erom, you appear to have friends in high places.'

'Sir?'

'I sent the information to your padd this morning, detailing your post-graduation assignment. However, mere minutes after I did so, I was contacted by Admiral Brandies requesting the assignment be changed. Do you know Admiral Brandies?'

'No sir,' Erom replied.

'Do you know Captain Nara?'

'Yes sir, she was my mother's commanding officer.'

'I see,' Derak replied and made a notation on his padd.

'After I spoke with Admiral Brandies, Captain Nara contacted me and asked that you be assigned to her command so you have a chance to regain the honor your mother lost. Does this make sense to you, Cadet?'

'Yes sir, it does.'

'Very well,' Derak replied and turned to Reya. 'Cadet Reya, are you satisfied that your friend's wellbeing is secured?'

'I am, Admiral.'

'In that case, you are dismissed.'

'Aye sir,' Reya replied and stood to leave.

She had reached the door when it opened and Derak's aide stepped in. 'Admiral, Captain Nara is here.'

Reya saw Derak's expression change for a microsecond before he nodded. 'Send her in.'

An imposing Canopus Planet woman entered the room and stopped when she saw Reya. 'You are Cadet Reya, El Aurian-Betazoid parentage, correct?'

'Yes ma'am,' Reya answered, shocked that the woman who had rescued her friend knew who she was.

'Excellent, it appears I will not have to stay long,' she said and turned to Derak. 'Admiral, have you received the latest update from Admiral Brandies?'

Derak's padd chirped for his attention and he looked down, then he looked at Reya. 'I have.'

'Please inform the cadets of the contents of that update.'

Derak raised his eyebrow again, higher than before. 'This is highly peculiar,

Captain. Would you mind telling me what is going on?’

‘Need to know, sir,’ Nara replied.

‘I see,’ Derak said and then read from the padd.

“To Admiral Derak, Chief of Operations, Starfleet Academy, from Admiral Brandies, Starfleet Operations, you are hereby required to advance the graduation of Cadets Elyce Erom and Reya to Stardate 54698 and provide them with the rank of Lieutenant junior grade with all of the rights and privileges granted therein. Additionally, said cadets are required to Captain Nara Q’Rel for assignment. End message.”

Derak looked up, ‘Lieutenant Erom, Lieutenant Reya, congratulations on your graduation.’

‘Thank you, sir,’ they chorused.

‘This way, ladies,’ Nara gestured toward the door. ‘We are on a tight schedule here. Your uniforms and belongings will be in your quarters by the time we reach our destination.’

‘Captain, may I ask a question?’ Reya asked

‘Of course, Lieutenant.’

‘What is our assignment?’

Nara paused midstride. ‘Elyce, I know what your mother did and unlike some people here at the Academy, I do not believe that the sins of the parent should be visited on the child, though I am aware of your cultural mandate. I am giving you an opportunity to bring honor back to your clan by making you the chief of flight operations on my ship.’

‘Thank you, ma’am,’ Erom replied, barely able to speak.

‘Reya, I have looked over your Academy transcript and I saw that you completed degrees in both psychology and political science during your time here, in addition to your regular classes. That is an incredible achievement. As such, I have asked for you to join my crew as an assistant counselor and aide to the ship’s diplomatic contingent.’

Reya grinned. 'Thank you, ma'am, I just have one more question.'

Nara nodded.

'Why is there a diplomatic contingent aboard?'

'You'll find out in a couple of days, once the remaining senior staff has been assembled.'

Chapter 3

Shuttlecraft *Augustus*

Vulcan system

Stardate 54774.3

Commander Emma Bartel craned her neck for the first look at the prototype starship she had helped design years earlier. The *Xu Fu* had been designed around an unusual propulsion system that used silane, a silicon-based fossil fuel, as a fuel source. It was theorized by the *Enterprise's* sociology team that the Korr were a silicon-based lifeform unlike anything ever seen before and their propulsion drive had been both a blessing and a curse to their people. Their planet had been strip-mined of all silicon deposits as had their asteroid field and other planetary bodies in the system but in the years since that discovery, no other evidence of their advanced technology had been found anywhere near their homeworld.

As the *Augustus* passed the curve of T'Khut, Vulcan's sister planet, the Charis Shipyards came into view. The shipyard was small by Starfleet standards; capable of handling only twenty or so vessels at any one time, but it was the primary shipbuilding facility for the special projects division of the Advanced Starship Design Bureau. Nestled in the caring embrace of one of the dry dock facilities, the USS *Xu Fu* was still being repaired from the initial test run of the new propulsion system. Thirty eight people had been killed when the ship emerged from the subspace slipstream corridor and was torn asunder by the incredible forces, all of them engineers.

Bartel, along with her former *Enterprise* shipmates Nara and Robinson, had been pouring over the telemetry for days and they had, just that morning, come up with a reason that Starfleet's propulsion specialists had missed. Nara had taken their findings to Captain Montgomery Scott, the head of Starfleet's Corps of Engineers, to get his voice before she took them to ASDB.

'Don't bother, lassie,' Scott told her. 'The Bureau doesn't care what happens once the design's been approved. They pass the headaches onto me and I pass them onto the engineers. Now you know what's wrong, you and your engineers get to fix it before you launch.'

Nara had been disappointed but heartened at the same time as it meant that she could hand off picking the senior staff while she got her hands dirty. As the executive officer, Bartel got to find the remaining people Nara wanted to fill out the roster which had delayed her getting to see the ship until now. The

Xu Fu was cylindrical in shape with a flattened ventral hull to enable landing on planetary surfaces and its most striking feature, in Bartel's opinion, was the fully retractable nacelles. The nacelles emerged from the secondary hull in the standard warp field geometric configuration but would retract when the ship engaged the subspace slipstream.

'So what happened?' Lieutenant Elyce Erom asked as she piloted the shuttle toward the dry dock facility.

'What none of us considered,' Bartel answered as she automatically switched into lecture mode, 'was that the energy buildup from the wake in the slipstream emerged ahead of the ship when an exit aperture was opened. The energy build-up from a slipstream corridor large enough to hold the *Xu Fu* is huge and lasts for approximately one point seven seconds. The ship has to emerge into normal space at least two seconds after the aperture is opened.'

'Isn't the speed within the corridor constant?' Erom asked.

'Yes, it is. We need to be able to open an aperture from a greater distance than was used in the test run, and I have no idea how to do that. We can't divert more power to the deflector dish because it would destabilize the corridor and tear us apart.'

'What if we reconfigured a probe or torpedo to act as a deflector dish and send out the pulse to open the aperture?' Lieutenant Commander Anastasia Baransky asked. 'It can be configured to send the pulse out far enough ahead of the ship that the energies will have dissipated by the time the ship reaches the aperture.'

Bartel turned her head to look at the chief science officer with a grin on her face. 'That's a great idea, Ana. Sometimes we engineering folk miss the forest while looking at the trees.'

'There she is,' Erom said as the shuttle came into full view of the *Xu Fu*.

Bartel's first glimpse of the ship was marred by the fact that the starboard side was exposed to space. Dozens of EVA-suited figures welded hull sections together while others were reconnecting the starboard nacelle to the strut and more still were visible inside making repairs.

'Whose idea was it to run the test?' she asked with an eye toward tossing them out of an airlock.

'Captain th'Daran,' Baransky answered with a smirk, knowing the two had issues with each other.

Bartel whirled on her friend. 'That bastard banged up my ship? I'm going to rip his antennae from his head and make him eat them.'

'Although that might make you feel better,' a deep baritone voice said from the rear of the shuttle, 'I doubt very much the assault of a superior officer will go unchallenged, even for such a mission as this.'

Bartel spared a glance toward the diminutive Naseiri and wondered, not for the first time, how such a deep voice came from such a small man. 'Ambassador, I have no intention of actually assaulting that moronic Andorian, but surely you can understand that giving vent to one's frustration is healthy.'

'Provided it is done in private,' he replied.

Naseir Prime was a high gravity world and although its people were short in stature they made up for it with their personalities, which were generally loud and gregarious. Thid'rem Yarg was unlike any Naseiri she knew. His simple attire and outwardly passive demeanor caused many to underestimate his diplomatic skills, which they later learned to regret.

'Quite so, I apologize for my behavior,' Bartel acceded.

'It is of no consequence,' Yarg replied. 'The vessel is being repaired and although the lives of the engineers can never be regained, their memories will live on in the hearts and minds of their families; and you have made sure that their deaths were not in vain. Much has been learned since, correct?'

'It has,' Bartel replied.

'*Augustus to Xu Fu, request permission to dock,*' Erom said to the beta shift flight control officer, Hussein Abadi.

'*Permission granted, Augustus,*' Abadi replied. '*Commander Bartel, Captain Nara would like to see you as soon as you board.*'

Bartel sighed, 'no rest for the wicked,' she muttered before adding, 'Hussein, beam me to the bridge will you?'

'Unfortunately, that's not possible at this time. The main computer has crashed and we're routing all communications through Charis Control.'

Bartel sighed again, 'all right, I'll be there as soon as I can, *Augustus* out.'

'Do we have a saboteur on board?' Baransky asked. 'First it was the library, then the holographic systems, and now the main computer.'

'I think at this point it is something we have to consider,' Bartel conceded. 'I want you to head to engineering and try to help Robinson figure out what's going on. Elyce, escort the ambassador to his quarters and then join me on the bridge.'

'Yes ma'am,' Erom replied as the shuttle touched down in the main shuttlebay.

Chapter 4

USS *Xu Fu*

Charis Shipyards

Stardate 54774.3

Captain Nara Q'Rel stood at the window in her ready room and stared past the stars to a distant place in her mind. She saw her captain's death in vivid detail and watched the light of life fade from his eyes. The explosion took away her mentor, destroyed the reputation of a starship's crew, damaged the image of Starfleet and the Federation, and changed Nara's view on the universe forever. Those eleven seconds were the worst of her life and she had no intention of reliving them, but her decision weighed heavily on her mind. The chime of the door pulled her from her reverie.

'Come,' she called out and the door opened to reveal Commander Bartel.

'Captain, you wanted to see me?'

'Commander, what can you tell me about Rash Ufiri?'

'Do you want my personal or professional opinion of the man?'

Nara smiled, 'give me both.'

'Professionally, he's a top notch tactician. He prefers to make up maneuvers on the fly, creating them to suit the situation instead of relying on tried and tested ones that the enemy knows and can react to or predict. He drills his people hard and trains them in multiple disciplines.'

'What do you mean by multiple disciplines?'

'He trains them to speak different languages and not to rely too heavily on the universal translator, to use multiple forms of both hand-to-hand and close combat techniques, and cross trains them in engineering, navigation, and so on.'

'I see,' she said and made a few notes on her padd. 'What about your personal opinion of him?'

'He's a jackass,' Bartel replied. 'I served with him on the *Beijing* and I can tell you that he has an ego the size of a Dyson Sphere. He thinks he's the best

tactical officer in the fleet and lets you know about it at every opportunity. Please tell me you're not thinking of assigning him to the *Xu Fu*?

'Do you know of Fwee Sendi?'

'I've never heard of him before,' Bartel answered. 'Who is he?'

'He's the first Querian in Starfleet,' Nara told her. 'Querius became a protectorate three years ago after a Starfleet ship discovered an entire continent rich in crystallized dilithium, enough to power all of our ships for a decade. Sendi was apparently a Captain in the Querian Imperial Guard and he agreed to participate in an exchange program with Starfleet. This will be his first assignment.'

'What position will he hold?' Bartel asked.

'I am considering him for a security chief.'

'I thought you were considering Ufiri for security chief?'

'I'm splitting the role,' Nara told her. 'It seems to be all the rage.'

'Ufiri won't like being a tactical officer, he'd much prefer to be security chief, I can assure you. If you're seriously considering him as a candidate, I would recommend Ufiri as tactical officer and chief of security, and give Sendi the deputy chief of security position.'

Nara made a few more notes on her padd. 'Consider it done. Who do we have left?'

'Our counselor,' Bartel replied. 'I thought you and Robinson were working on the Korr engine?'

'We are,' Nara replied. 'Baransky has been helping us run simulations. You didn't tell me she had engineering experience.'

Bartel replied with a smirk, 'you never asked.'

'Baransky's idea, good though it was, won't work. If we launch anything from the torpedo tube, the small amount of energy will still cause a destabilization in the slipstream corridor.'

'Let's go old-school,' Bartel suggested.

'Old-school in what way?' Nara asked.

'We can use a winch,' the executive officer answered. 'Spool out a carbon neutronium cable with the aperture emitter at the end, and it can be winched in afterward.'

'I'll have Robinson and Baransky run simulations,' Nara said. 'In the meantime, you and I have another issue to deal with.'

'What now?' Bartel asked.

'Admiral Brandies commandeered a team at Starfleet Tactical to work on a secret project for this endeavor and the results are now en route to be delivered to us shortly.'

'What did they build?'

'Officially, they are single-pilot tactical escorts,' Nara answered disdainfully. 'Unofficially, they're fighters, and we're taking a full squadron on board.'

'How many is a full squadron?'

'Twelve,' Nara said, 'and they'll be stored on deck sixteen in a specially-designed hangar bay.'

'So the engineers now have something else to retrofit,' Bartel muttered. 'How is this hangar bay designed?'

'The fighters will be stored on deck sixteen and can either be raised on platforms to exit through the auxiliary shuttlebay on deck fifteen, or they can be lowered to deck seventeen and dropped like mines out of a bomb-bay door.'

Bartel calculated the space requirements in her head. 'So we'll lose cargo bays twelve and fourteen and the auxiliary aeroponics bay?'

'I wasn't happy either, but I've given the engineers their orders. This is going to delay our launch by at least a week.'

'When does the task force depart?' Bartel asked.

'I'm not sure, but sometime within the two or three days.'

'What did Admiral Brandies think about that?'

'She ordered me not to rush the launch, but if the Korr engine is working, we are to use it to catch up to the fleet.'

'Everyone else is going to be in stasis, right?'

'Except us, because someone needs to make sure that nothing intercepts the fleet and destroys it en route.'

'We get all the easy jobs.'

'Bridge to Captain Nara,' Erom said from the helm.

'Go ahead, Lieutenant,' Nara replied.

'Captain, three freighters have arrived and are requesting permission to make a transfer.'

'Grant them permission, we'll be there shortly.'

'Aye sir, Erom out.'

'Are we getting pilots too?' Bartel asked as they made their way to their bridge.

'Yes, something I need to let the lieutenant know about.'

Bartel nodded, 'probably a good idea.'

Lieutenant Erom was seated in the captain's chair and stood as she entered the bridge from the ready room. 'Captain, the freighters are transferring the vessels now.'

'Join us, Lieutenant, there's something I need to tell you about these vessels.'

'Yes ma'am,' Erom replied and joined them at the turbolift as Abadi took over the bridge.

'Deck fifteen,' Nara ordered and as the turbolift began to descend she turned to Erom. 'Lieutenant, I'm about to give you a lot more responsibility, and I hope you'll be able to manage it. Starfleet Tactical has given us twelve tactical escorts to use over the course of the mission and you will be responsible for them as chief flight operations officer. The pilots have already been assigned and the lead pilot will report to you on a daily basis.'

Erom said nothing as she digested the news that her responsibilities had increased from being in operational control of the helm officers and all shuttlebay operations, to also being responsible for twelve more pilots and their vessels, which she was shortly going to take a look at.

'I'm up for the challenge, Captain.'

'I hope so,' Nara said and the turbolift doors opened to deck sixteen.

There was a single corridor that ran the length of deck fifteen with three corridors running the width of the deck. Decks sixteen and seventeen were laid out in a similar way. The three women walked down about a hundred and fifty meters and entered the auxiliary shuttlebay where the fighters would be stored until the hangar deck one deck below could be built.

'Wow,' Erom said when she saw the fighters.

They were small, single-seat vessels that bristled with weaponry and each one had a single impulse engine and warp nacelle at the rear. The fighters had stubby wings which would allow them to operate safely within a planet's atmosphere and they looked like graceful machines.

'Wow indeed,' Bartel agreed.

'They're not what I expected,' Nara said.

Erom pulled herself up to her full height and looked to the captain, 'where are the pilots?'

'Right here,' an Andorian woman said and Erom looked up.

And up.

And up.

Chapter 5

USS *Xu Fu*

Charis Shipyards

Stardate 54774.4

'I am Lieutenant Tanistana zh'Chare,' the tall Andorian woman said. 'I am the commander of Archangel Squadron.'

'Lieutenant zh'Chare, I am Lieutenant Elyce Erom, chief of flight operations. I will be reviewing your service records over the next few hours and will then devise a training regimen tailored to the mission we are about to undertake. I'm sure your pilots are the best in the fleet but that doesn't mean there is no room for improvement, am I correct?'

'Yes sir,' zh'Chare responded coolly.

'You will report to me at zero seven thirty daily where I will give you your training schedule for the day, which will take place in the holodeck or in the classroom. You will train alongside the ship's regular security forces and Marine Corps personnel in their classroom training.'

'Classroom training?' zh'Chare asked, confused.

'The *Xu Fu*'s security chief wants all of the people under his nominal command to be familiar with practical applications in the fields of engineering, emergency medicine, linguistics, navigation, and so on. While you are technically under my command as pilots, you are security personnel and as such be reporting to him for daily classes. Is that understood?'

Zh'Chare looked at the captain and first officer for guidance and then asked, 'permission to speak freely, Lieutenant?'

'Granted,' Erom replied.

'What is the likelihood that my pilots are going to need anything like that?'

Erom smiled, 'you might crash land on a planet and need to repair your vessel, send out a distress call in the right direction, assist any people injured in the crash, speak with the natives, need I go on?'

'No sir.'

'Excellent, I will see you at zero seven thirty tomorrow morning in my office.'

'Aye sir,' zh'Chare replied and walked off, toward her waiting pilots.

'Nicely handled, Lieutenant,' Nara said with a smile. 'Were you going to tell the security chief about that?'

Erom looked at the captain and asked, 'didn't he already request that the pilots be included in the training?'

Nara furrowed her brow, 'how did you know about that? You knew about the pilots already, didn't you?'

'No ma'am, I did not. I did know that Lieutenant Ufiri had requested that some "additional personnel" should be included in the training and when you told me about the pilots I figured it was the logical conclusion.'

'She's after your job,' Bartel said.

'Not for a few years yet,' Erom countered with a smile of her own.

'Commander, is everyone aboard?' Nara asked as she walked back out into the corridor and toward the turbolift.

'Except our counselor,' Bartel said after consulting her padd. 'According to the latest report, he's been delayed en route from Tellar by a force eight ion storm. He won't be here for another week.'

Nara sighed, 'we'll have to catch him up later. How are the repairs coming?'

'The repairs to the outer hull are complete and the nacelles are in place. All engineering teams are now working around the clock to make the repairs to the crew quarters, science labs and other areas damaged or destroyed in the accident,' Bartel answered as they reached the turbolift.

'Deck one,' Nara ordered. 'How long before we're spaceworthy?'

Bartel consulted the padd, 'six days as a conservative estimate.'

'Can we get any more teams assigned?'

‘No, and even if we could, they’d be in the way. Most of the work that needs to be done is the retrofitting for the fighters and the special crew quarters.’

Nara nodded and tapped her combadge, ‘All senior officers, report to the situation room. I repeat, all senior officers, report to the situation room.’

‘What’s going on?’ Bartel asked.

‘There are a few updates that you need to be aware of,’ Nara answered. ‘From now until launch, there will be mission briefings every twelve hours.’

The turbolift doors opened to an empty bridge and Nara entered first, only to find that it was not so empty after all. A Vulcan of advanced years stood from the command chair and turned toward her. He wore the robes of an Adept from Mount Seleya and his face was eerily familiar.

‘Captain,’ he said in a gravelly voice she recognized from years of serving with her late mentor.

‘Adept Senar, what brings you here?’ she asked in a meek tone.

‘I have recently concluded an extended meditative session and learned of my son’s death. I understand that you were with him in his final moments?’

‘Yes sir, I was. He tried to mind meld with me, presumably so that I could bear his katra back home, but he was too badly injured. I regret that I could not save him.’

Senar shook his head. ‘That you attempted to do so speaks volumes. I understand that you will shortly be going on an extended mission into deep space.’

Nara frowned, wondering at how he had come by that information but deemed it irrelevant. Senar was an accomplished diplomat, a former adviser to several presidents, and a former Starfleet officer. ‘I am, though I cannot go into details.’

‘No need, Captain, I have been apprised of the relevant details. I have resigned my position as an Adept and re-enlisted in Starfleet. I would like to request assignment on board your vessel.’

Nara was stunned and took several seconds to process the comment. She

turned to Bartel and said, 'inform Admiral Brandies that we have a last minute replacement as counselor.'

Bartel nodded mutely and pushed Erom toward the situation room.

'Thank you, Captain. I will endeavor to see that your crew's mental health is exceptional.'

'Thank you, Senar.'

'Captain, my son spoke extremely highly of you and I am gratified to be able to serve with you.'

'Sir, your son was a good friend and mentor and I would be grateful if you would consent to do the same.'

'Of course,' the Vulcan replied and lifted his hand in a salute. 'Live long and prosper.'

'Peace and long life.'

Chapter 6

USS *Xu Fu*

Charis Shipyards

Stardate 54774.6 (October 10, 2377)

Ambassador Thid'rem Yarg stood on the bridge of the prototype vessel and considered the new information presented moments ago. The Task Force Vanguard fleet would be departing from Starbase Bastion in a little over two days and the *Xu Fu* would not be ready to leave for at least another five, even with every spare body working around the clock. The Naseiri Emperor had already been in contact with him and warned him under penalty of death not to tell the Federation about their people's abilities, and while Yarg would never disobey the Emperor, he disagreed about the humans' reaction to the news were it known.

He could see several possible futures but as each hour passed, the number of positive futures diminished exponentially. He felt sure that by the time they launched, only three futures would remain likely, and they were all unpleasant to varying degrees. Three centuries of involvement in alien affairs had taught him how and when to interfere to get the best futures. The Korr engine worked, that much he knew, and in every future but one it failed at a critical moment. In the one future where it didn't fail, the ship was destroyed with all hands, and he could not let that happen. He felt certain that this crew would go on to do great things in the coming years.

'Ambassador,' Lieutenant Reya, his Starfleet liaison, called out to him.

'Yes, Lieutenant?' he responded to the summons.

'There's a priority message for you from Starbase Bastion,' she told him. 'It's on a diplomatic channel.'

'I'll take it in my quarters, thank you,' he replied and on the short turbolift ride to deck three where his quarters were located, he wondered what was wanted with him by the enigmatic Starfleet officers that had requested his presence on board this particular vessel.

'How are you getting on with the lighter gravity?' Admiral Brandies asked.

'I have a spring in my step,' Yarg responded in the pre-arranged code.

'I assume that the captain has informed you of the launch date?'

'She also mentioned the attacks on the Nyberrite Alliance worlds, the seed ships, and a number of other seemingly unrelated incidents.'

'What is your opinion on those incidents?' Brandies asked.

'I think you were right,' Yarg said enigmatically. 'I read the report from Starfleet Tactical forwarded by the Nyberrite Alliance. The mythology from these nomadic groups is too similar to be mere happenstance. There must be some grain of truth to it, but finding that truth is likely to be extremely difficult unless one or more of these groups is willing to talk to us.'

'That will be up to you, Ambassador,' Brandies told him. *'I would suggest informing Captain Nara when the time is right since she doesn't strike me as the type of person who likes being kept in the dark. For now, this aspect of the mission will stay classified under Project Arrowhead.'*

'Understood, Admiral, I won't reveal any more than is necessary.'

'What I need you to do is keep that in mind when you interact with any alien species out there. They might be able to provide some details of what started the Great Exodus and we need all of the information we can get.'

'Do you have diplomatic officers or ambassadors on all ships in the fleet?'

'As many as I could,' Brandies admitted. *'But they haven't all been read in to this aspect of the mission.'*

'I see,' Yarg said.

'I'll be in touch, Brandies out.'

Yarg stared at the blank screen for several minutes and wondered, not for the first time that day, if he was doing the right thing by keeping everything from everyone. He was practiced at it but he didn't like doing it, not when so much was on the line. The task force was being sent to a specific sector and from there they would shed the warp sleds, proceed at maximum warp to their destination and intercept dozens of alien vessels to try and get them to settle on a Federation world or go elsewhere in the galaxy.

He stood up, tugged on his ambassadorial tunic, and stretched before he

exited his quarters. Although he wouldn't be needed until the ship encountered one of those alien races, he wanted to be in engineering to assist them. On Naseir, everyone assisted everybody else, even if it was just handing them tools so they didn't need to crawl out from under whatever vehicle or console they were working on.

Yarg arrived in engineering to see Commander Bronwen Gail "BG" Robinson standing at the upper railing of the three-deck area. She was watching forty people make repairs to various systems or run maintenance checks. She turned to face him and her face scrunched up.

'Ambassador, what are you doing here? This is a secure area.'

'I'm only here to help, Commander,' he replied. 'My father was a mechanic at the Naseir City Spaceport when I was child and I assisted him with repairs to vessels from dozens of worlds.'

'I'll take all of the help I can get,' she said as he hoped she would. 'Come with me and we'll find you something to fix.'

'Thank you, I don't like sitting idle when there's so much work to be done,' he added as they took the turbolift to the lower engineering deck.

'How are you with a welding torch?' Robinson asked as she led him toward a Jeffries tube.

'Very experienced,' he told her. 'I built my own atmospheric hopper as a teenager.'

Her eyes widened in surprise. 'All right then, I'll have someone bring a torch to you. Ten meters into that Jeffries tube is a housing that needs to be welded shut. It might not be something major, but it needs to be done and it's a low priority with everything else on my list.'

'Commander, give me a list of what you want done and have a security officer trail me if you want to be on the safe side, but let me be helpful.'

She clamped a hand on his shoulder, 'thank you, Ambassador, I appreciate that.'

Chapter 7

USS *Xu Fu*

Charis Shipyards

Stardate 54777.1 (October 11, 2377)

'Ambassador Yarg is a hard worker,' Robinson told Nara and Bartel as they ate in the captain's quarters. 'I had a security officer on him at all times since he was in and out of sensitive areas, but he dealt with the majority of the minor items on my list in a day and a half, freeing up the engineers to get the majority of the urgent repairs done.'

'Where do we stand?' Nara asked.

'The only thing left is the retrofit for the fighters on decks fifteen through seventeen,' Robinson reported. 'All other repairs are complete.'

Bartel chewed thoughtfully on a celery stick and added, 'we still have the problem of the aperture emitter.'

Robinson nodded in agreement, 'the neutronium cable idea was a good one but it won't work. There is just too much energy in the slipstream corridor. The cable would be torn to shreds.'

'We're stuck here until we think of an answer,' Nara said, 'and the task force leaves in less than a day. We need to come up with something.'

'Have you considered asking Captain Sandhurst?' Bartel asked.

Nara laughed, 'are you kidding? The man's a menace and I personally think the only reason he's in the task force is so Command won't have to deal with him for five years. Honestly, the stunts that man has pulled make Kirk seem like a boy scout in comparison. Besides, he's trying to get the *Europa's* engines working in time for the fleet's arrival at the rendezvous coordinates.'

'What about a lightning rod?' Robinson asked.

'Would you mind elaborating on that?' Nara asked in return.

'We could build a lightning rod out of the secondary deflector dish. That would attract the stray energy strikes we'll pick up in flight and stop those hitting the ship, and it return, we can harness that and use it as an emitter.'

'How long would it have to be for us to make a safe exit?'

'Too long to be safe for the ship,' Bartel did the numbers in her head. 'It would need to be over five hundred meters long.'

'I see only one option, then,' Robinson said. 'We use a shuttle. The shuttle goes ahead of us into the corridor and stays five hundred meters ahead. When we need to exit, the shuttle opens the aperture.'

'It would be destroyed and I don't want to lose a shuttle every time we go into subspace.'

Bartel clicked her fingers, 'the hangar bay.'

'Emma, what are you talking about?'

'We can drop a probe like a mine out of the hangar bay on deck seventeen. According to the simulations we've been running, the energy in the subspace corridor has a wake trailing behind us and a kind of forward wash ahead of us. If we drop the probe right, it will be carried ahead of us and we can open an aperture that way.'

'Go and run some simulations on that and I'll inform Admiral Brandies that we won't be leaving too far off schedule,' Nara replied.

'Yes ma'am,' Bartel and Robinson said in unison and rose from the table.

Nara recycled the dishes and was about send a prearranged signal that would route itself to Starbase Bastion when her door chimed.

'Come.'

'Lieutenant Commander Senar reporting for duty,' the elderly Vulcan said, standing as straight as he could.

'Senar, when it's just the two of us there is no need to stand on ceremony. I'm sure you dislike it as much as I do.'

He nodded and sat in the seat Nara gestured him to. 'Thank you, Q'Rel. I was hoping I would be able to ask you a few questions about my son.'

'Of course, anything.'

'Did he speak of me?'

Nara cracked a small smile. 'He spoke of you all the time, though I know that he wanted to be closer to you.'

'I would have liked to be closer to him, and perhaps by serving on board this ship, with those who knew him, I will be.'

Nara raised an eyebrow in an impressively Vulcan fashion. 'That's not a very Kolinahr attitude. Why are you aboard, Senar?'

Senar sighed, 'I have not attained Kolinahr. It has escaped me for many decades and the other Adepts cannot understand why. My son's death has forced me to realize that Kolinahr is not an attainable goal. I have therefore decided that perhaps being in space once again will provide the peace I seek.'

'You honestly believe that a life in Starfleet will bring you peace?'

'I have been in Starfleet before,' Senar countered. 'I found it a rewarding experience. I hope that it will be so again.'

Nara nodded, but she believed he was holding something back and would reveal it in his own time. 'Since you're here, what do you think of the mission?'

'I believe that Admiral Brandies and Glover are holding something back,' Senar answered.

'Of course they are, they'd never tell us everything. It goes against the grain of being Starfleet brass. How else would they laud their superiority over us?'

'That is an illogical attitude.'

'Perhaps, but it is also quite true. When have you ever known an admiral to be completely honest?'

'I have known only one,' Senar answered. 'Admiral McCoy was honest to a fault. It is said that he was promoted because it was easier to deal with him as an equal than force him to be compliant with them as an inferior.'

Nara smiled, remembering the time that McCoy had visited the *Enterprise*. 'Admiral McCoy is inferior to no one.'

'Quite so,' Senar agreed.

'I want to know what you think of the mission itself,' Nara said.

'I think that the mission is far more dangerous than they have let on,' he responded. 'You are likely to face greater challenges than they believe. The Delta Quadrant is home to the Borg and a number of other races that Starfleet has never before encountered. How deep into the Delta Quadrant are we going?'

'As deep as we need to go,' Nara answered. 'We may need to go as far as Borg territory.'

'That is not a pleasant prospect.'

'No, it's not, but we go where we're ordered and you never know, we might even find a way to defeat them when they attack again.'

'You live in eternal hope,' Senar said.

Chapter 8

USS *Xu Fu*

Charis Shipyards

Stardate 54778.1 (October 12, 2377)

'Captain Nara to the bridge,' Commander Emma Bartel called out as she perused the latest classified reports from Starbase Bastion. The last two and a half days had seen the frantic pace aboard the prototype starship increase drastically as the final repairs were hurriedly completed. Less than an hour earlier the last engineering team not assigned to the ship had departed and the crew was preparing for launch, almost four days ahead of schedule.

'Is there something new?' Nara asked as she emerged from the ready room and reached the command chair.

'We just received this from Starbase Bastion,' Bartel handed over the padd. 'Task Force Vanguard has launched. All the warp sleds are operating normally and Captain Sandhurst aboard the *Europa* is apparently remaining awake with his engineers to design, build and install a new warp core before the ship reaches its destination.'

'How are we doing?' she asked.

'We'll be ready to go as soon as the last of the supplies are aboard. I've been assured that it won't be more than an hour.'

'Very good, send a message to Admiral Brandies informing him that we'll be departing within the hour,' Nara replied. 'Now, about that little side project you said you were working on?'

Bartel smiled and looked at the tactical station, 'Rash, are you ready?'

'Yes ma'am,' Lieutenant Ufiri responded.

'Ana, you have the bridge,' Nara told the science officer who was third in command. 'We'll be back shortly.'

'Aye ma'am,' Baransky replied and stepped out of the science alcove to take the center seat.

'Where are we going?' Nara asked as the three of them reached the turbolift.

Ufiri was the last one in the turbolift and said, 'deck seven.'

'That's the stellar cartography lab, isn't it?' Nara asked.

'You'll see,' Bartel replied.

They rode the rest of the way in silence and when the doors opened on deck seven, Nara noticed the lack of activity. 'Shouldn't there be someone on duty in this area?'

'I think a couple of crewmen are in holodeck three and the science labs are probably in use,' Ufiri said nonchalantly as he led them toward what should have been the stellar cartography lab.

'What are we waiting for?' she asked when Ufiri stood and waited outside the room.

'Ladies first,' he gestured.

Nara took a step toward the door and it opened to reveal nothing but darkness. Once all three were inside, the lights all came on, dimly at first, but brightening to full intensity within a few seconds. It was a sight she did not expect to see outside of San Francisco or Paris. 'What is this place?'

'Stellar cartography has been relocated to deck eight,' Ufiri responded. 'This is the Task Force Operations Center. All information from Starbase Bastion will be routed here and then distributed where necessary. There will be three personnel assigned to this room during each shift, a science officer and two security officers. In addition to them, only five other people have access to this room, the three of us, Commander Baransky, and Ambassador Yarg.'

'This is impressive, Lieutenant,' Nara said as she looked around.

The room was rectangular and it was obvious that a bulkhead separating two rooms had been removed. Large viewing screens dominated the rear wall and three free-standing work stations stood in the approximate center of the large space, with additional bulkhead-mounted stations on the side walls. The viewscreens currently showed the positions of all vessels within Task Force Vanguard in blue, regardless of their locations in the galaxy, and their distant destinations with the approaching waves of vessels in red, updated by the Hubble Array hourly.

'Thank you, Captain. I wanted to make sure that we were able to get as much detail as possible about the mission centralized to one location.'

'Baransky to Commander Bartel,' the science officer said over the comm.

'Go ahead, Commander,' Bartel responded.

'The last of the supplies are now on board and all decks report ready to depart.'

'We'll be there momentarily, Bartel out.'

Nara stood taller and straightened her uniform tunic, 'time to go, people. Let's not keep the fleet waiting.'

Bartel kept her thoughts to herself as the trio returned to the bridge. There was something nagging at her subconscious but the more she tried to pinpoint it, the more elusive it became. The computer virus that had plagued the ship for more than a week had been removed from the systems it had infected but there was something that just didn't sit quite right with her about the way it was found. It felt like it allowed itself to be caught once it was done doing whatever it had been programmed to do, but that would make it sentient on the Soong AI scale, and she didn't want to think about what that kind of program could do to the ship if it was malignant.

'All hands, prepare for departure,' Nara called out as she entered the bridge and moved toward her chair, which Baransky quickly vacated. 'Retract docking clamps and clear all moorings; request departure clearance from Charis Control.'

'Clamps have been retracted, moorings are clear,' Lieutenant Erom said from the helm.

'Charis Control has cleared us,' Lieutenant junior grade Vil'Kinn Tyrr added and snorted through his stunted trunk.

'Is there a problem, Lieutenant?' Bartel asked.

'No sir,' the elephant-like operations officer responded. 'The air just seems to be a little too humid for me.'

'Do you need to see the doctor?' Nara asked, concerned.

'No ma'am, but thank you. I have something in my quarters that will cure the problem. It can wait till the end of shift.'

'Very well then, let's get this show on the road. Lieutenant Erom, thrusters until we clear the docking structure, then accelerate slowly to full impulse. We'll go to conventional warp once we clear the Vulcan system.'

'Course is laid in and speed is set,' Erom replied.

'Take us out, aft viewer on.'

Nara and the other bridge officers watched as the docking structure shrank into the distance.

'ETA to Vulcan heliopause is forty-three minutes, eleven seconds,' Erom informed them.

Chapter 9

USS Xu Fu

Stameris System

Stardate 54792.0 (October 17, 2377)

'Are there any starships nearby?' Nara asked her tactical officer as the starship dropped out of warp in the uninhabited system.

Two hundred years earlier there had been a thriving slave camp in the system but with the arrival of the Federation and Starfleet in the 2160s it was quickly disbanded and the system had lain dormant ever since. There wasn't even a colony on either of the two habitable worlds in the system.

'None, Captain,' Ufiri answered. 'There is no evidence of anything in this sector; no ships, no subspace traffic, nothing.'

'Excellent,' she replied and turned to her tactical officer, Rash Ufiri. 'Lieutenant, open an encrypted channel to Starbase Bastion. I'll take it in my ready room.'

'Aye, Captain,' Ufiri replied as Nara headed that way.

'Bartel, you have the conn.'

By the time Nara entered her ready room and sat at the desk, the active signal light was blinking, so she entered her authorization code and waited. Admiral Terence Glover's visage appeared on screen and he did not look happy to see her.

'You're five days late,' he admonished her.

Nara bit back her insubordinate reply and responded civilly, 'the repairs took longer than expected, Admiral, but we have arrived in the Stameris system.'

'What of it?' the admiral asked.

Nara sighed, 'we're ready to conduct the first trial of the Korr subspace slipstream engine before we attempt to catch up to Interceptor Group Four.'

'There is no time,' Glover responded. *'The Sitak's warp sled had a field imbalance and they are now making their way at regular speed. You're being*

retasked to IG-3. I'm feeding you the coordinates now. I expect to receive a report within the month that you have caught up to them.'

'Admiral, I'm not going to engage this drive for a long duration without a trial run first, regardless of the time constraints.'

Glover's eye began to twitch imperceptibly and he leaned forward. *'Do not question my orders, Captain. Proceed as directed, Glover out.'*

'Asshole,' Nara muttered before squaring her shoulders and returning to the bridge.

'Is everything all right?' Bartel asked in a whisper as Nara took her place in the center chair.

'Apparently there have been some issues with the *Sitak* and we're being retasked to Sandhurst's group,' Nara responded just as quietly. 'Glover ordered us to proceed without the initial trial.'

'Is he crazy?' she asked.

'Probably, but we have our orders,' she said and turned toward Lieutenant Vil'Kinn Tyrr, her operations officer. 'Set condition orange throughout the ship.'

The lighting across the ship changed hue to reflect the new order and bulkheads closed over all external windows, sealing the most vulnerable areas of the ship.

'All decks report condition orange, Captain,' Tyrr responded.

'Take the warp core offline, vent all drive plasma, power up the Korr slipstream drive, and retract the nacelles.'

'Plasma is venting and slipstream drive is powering up, estimate three minutes to full power.'

'All hands, this is the Captain. Some vessels within the task force have suffered minor setbacks and as a result we have to proceed with a long duration run of the experimental engine at the heart of this mighty vessel. We don't know what will happen so we will be at red alert until we emerge from the slipstream corridor. That is all.'

'All drive plasma has been vented, Captain, and the nacelles have been retracted,' Tyrr told her. 'We are secured for slipstream velocity. The Korr engine will be at full power in thirty seconds.'

'Open an aperture into subspace,' she ordered. 'Do you have the new rendezvous coordinates?'

'Deflector controls are a little sluggish, Captain,' Erom replied from the helm. 'An aperture is opening though. The new rendezvous coordinates have been programmed into the navigational computer. They're much further than the last coordinates.'

Nara and Bartel shared a worried look. The deflector control system had been one of those affected by that bizarre computer virus and although both of them were experts, neither had been able to figure out where that virus had come from or who it had been designed by.

'How wide is the opening, Lieutenant?'

'The aperture is ninety meters wide and widening.'

'How long will it be before the ship can safely enter slipstream?'

'Thirty seconds, ma'am,' Erom replied.

Nara watched as the turbulent energies of subspace began to affect normal space and muttered a Canopian curse. 'If we don't enter soon, we'll have to try somewhere else.'

'It's barely wide enough now, Captain.'

Nara took a step toward the helm console and rested a hand on Erom's shoulder, 'go now, Lieutenant, full impulse.'

The *Xu Fu* entered the slipstream corridor at the relatively leisurely speed that full impulse provided but as soon as the bow hit subspace, the ship was accelerated to something close to infinite velocity as recorded on the warp scale.

'How are we doing?' Nara asked as the ship began to shudder violently.

'Inertial dampeners are having trouble with the speed we're traveling at, Captain,' Baransky said. 'The telemetry we're receiving from the primary sensors is giving us new parameters. It'll take me a moment to compensate.'

'The structural integrity field is down to eighty percent,' Ufiri reported from the tactical station. 'I'm reading microfractures forming on the outer hull, deck six, sections fifteen through nineteen, trying to reroute power to compensate.'

The shuddering subsided and Nara breathed a small sigh of relief. 'How's the structural integrity now?'

'Holding steady at ninety seven percent,' Ufiri responded with a slight smile.

'All right people, I want hourly updates from every department for the next twenty four hours and we'll see how we go. I want everyone to be on full alert. This is a completely untested engine and there have been no trials.'

'Captain,' Erom said, 'I think there's a problem with the navigation computer.'

'What's the problem?'

'Those coordinates you sent, they're not what the computer now shows as programmed in.'

Nara peered over her shoulder and noticed the discrepancy. 'Do you see that?'

'Yes ma'am, the third and fourth numbers in each of the coordinates has been transposed, that wasn't my doing.'

'Emma, Ana, what can we do about this?'

'Adjust course,' Bartel suggested.

Baransky shook her head. 'We can't, we'd have to drop back into normal space before we can enter a course correction. Whoever was responsible knew about the engine and knew how it worked, just as well as we do.'

'How far off course will we be if we continue on this trajectory?' Nara asked.

Erom did a quick calculation in her head, 'about forty light years, give or take.'

'Two entire sectors, that's a fair distance,' Bartel said.

'But not an insurmountable problem,' Nara responded. 'Now that we're in the subspace slipstream, I don't want to rock the boat, as it were.'

'So we'll see where we end up?' Bartel asked.

'Exactly,' Nara confirmed.

Chapter 10

USS Xu Fu

Somewhere in the Delta Quadrant

Stardate 54985.4 (December 26, 2377)

Commander Bronwen Gail Robinson, B.G. to her friends, stared at the readouts on her padd for a fifth time and sighed. The numbers weren't looking any better and although the fuel for the Korr engine was replicable, there would come a point when it was inefficient to keep doing so. She believed that point was rapidly approaching but she could not figure out why the engine had such poor fuel efficiency. All of the thousands of simulations her people had run with the science teams had shown the engine to have an efficiency rating of ninety-three percent, well above Starfleet's recommended eighty-five percent.

'What exactly are you trying to say?' Lieutenant Ufiri asked her from his seat across from her in the ship's situation room.

'We're burning through a lot more silane than we should be, and I can't find a cause for it,' she answered.

'What did you say silane was?' Erom asked.

'A silicon-based fossil fuel roughly akin to a hydrocarbon used on Earth in the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries,' Robinson answered.

'Why don't we just replicate more?'

'We could, but at some point it will become inefficient to keep doing so. What I would like to do is bring us into normal space, check over every component and rebuild it from the ground up if necessary.'

'That isn't going to happen, not just yet anyway,' Nara said and turned to Erom. 'Lieutenant, how long before we reach the closest point to the rendezvous coordinates?'

'We're two thirds of the way there, Captain. It will still be another five or six weeks before we enter the region Federation cartographers have named the Norma Expanse, which is where Intercept Group Three is located.'

'Where are we now?' Nara asked.

The helmswoman tapped a sequence of keys and a holographic representation of the galaxy appeared on the table in front of them. She zoomed in to one area and highlighted it. 'We're here, in an area known as the 3-Kiloparsec-Norma Bridge and in three weeks we'll cross into the Norma Arm proper.'

'We don't have enough silane to get us that far,' Robinson said. 'We'll have to replicate more or drop into normal space to replenish our supply.'

'How long before we run out?' Nara asked.

'We have about ten days of fuel left,' the chief engineer answered. 'If we run out of fuel we'll be torn apart when we're thrown into normal space.'

'Replicate more and we'll look at the engine when we go to conventional warp,' Nara ordered. 'If there's nothing else, you're dismissed.'

Baransky was the first to rise from her chair and as a result she was the first to be tossed across the situation room when the ship bucked wildly, knocking out the artificial gravity for a second. The others managed to stay in their seats, barely.

'Nara to bridge, what happened?'

'I've got no idea, Captain,' Ensign Abadi, the beta shift helm officer replied. *'We're losing structural integrity and the helm is sluggish.'*

'We'll be right out,' Nara responded and looked at Robinson.

Robinson tapped her combadge, 'engineering, report!'

'The slipstream is collapsing around us, Commander,' one of her engineers answered. *'That jolt you felt was from subspace as the ship was knocked against the wall of the slipstream corridor as it started to collapse.'*

The ship bucked again but not as wildly.

'Captain, we have to drop into normal space now,' Robinson said. 'We'll be lucky to survive if we wait any longer.'

'All right, stations everyone,' Nara said. 'Stand by for transition to normal

space.'

Robinson headed down to engineering as the others took their places on the bridge.

'Captain, the slipstream corridor is destabilizing ahead of us and narrowing behind us,' Erom said as she took the helm. 'Estimate one minute until total collapse.'

'Open an aperture.'

The final solution to the problem was to create an energy dampening field around the deflector dish so that the subspace energies did not interact with the beam used to open the aperture. It had worked in the simulations, but unfortunately they had been unable to test it in real life, until now.

'Aperture opening,' Erom said.

'No energy interaction,' Baransky added as she peered at the readouts scrolling across her screen. 'It worked.'

As the aperture widened, Nara could see stars and something else that she could quite make out. 'What is that?'

'It's a ship,' Ufiri said as the magnitude of the problem hit him. 'They're too close to the aperture.'

'Open a channel,' Nara said as the aperture opened wide enough for them to see the ship. 'Warn them off.'

'We can't, there's too much interference.'

'Lieutenant, cut the beam.'

'I can't, the failsafes aren't responding.'

Nara watched in horror as the energy from the subspace corridor rushed out into normal space like water flowing from a broken dam and washed over the piscine-shaped vessel. The alien vessel seemed to weather the torrent at first but all of a sudden it just crumpled and then exploded, fragments flying in every direction, including into the open aperture to subspace. As normal matter interacted with the subspace eddies, it became excited and Lieutenant

Erom had no chance to tell the captain what was about to happen as the *Xu Fu* was thrown from the subspace slipstream corridor like a large piece of spatial emesis.

The ship tumbled on every axis for several hundred kilometers before Erom was able to reinitialize the thruster system and bring the ship under control. The bridge was in almost total darkness save for the emergency lights and the viewscreen showed nothing but static as Nara crawled back to her chair. She wiped a smear of blood from her face and the viewscreen image quickly cleared to show a number of other piscine-shaped vessels of various designs moving away from them as fast as possible, all except one, which was in fact moving closer. It resembled a Terran Hammerhead Shark and the ends of the hammerhead were glowing, which boded ill for her unprotected ship.

Erom halted the ship's erratic tumbling and main power returned as Nara found the wherewithal to speak, 'shields!'

Chapter 11

USS *Xu Fu*

3-Kiloparsec-Norma Bridge, Delta Quadrant

Stardate 54985.5 (December 26, 2377)

Twin balls of energy were unleashed from the alien vessel and they impacted the ship dead on, but instead of a fiery death before being exposed to vacuum from a hull breach, the *Xu Fu* shook violently. Nara didn't feel anything that could be described as her ship's death throws and she risked a glance at the tactical station to see Ufiri nodding at her. He'd been able to get the shields up in time.

The alien ship fired again but this time Erom avoided a direct hit as she began evasive maneuvers. 'Captain, that ship is more maneuverable than we are.'

'Its weapons are on a par with Federation technology.' Ufiri said.

'Do we have the latest reports from those smart drones?' Nara asked her tactical officer.

'I'm trying to locate the nearest secure signal buoy, Captain.'

'You might want to search faster,' Bartel added from the operations console. 'Sickbay is reporting three fatalities and seventeen injuries, none serious. Tyrr is unconscious but he'll be fine. Damage control teams are responding.'

'I have it and I'm uploading the data now, give me three minutes.'

'Never mind that, just search for this species as it comes in,' Nara said, a hint of frustration creeping into her voice.

'Yes ma'am, searching now.'

'Emma, contact engineering and have the Korr engine dismantled. I don't want it put back together until we know what happened.'

'Aye, ma'am,' Bartel responded.

'Ufiri, give me some answers.'

'According to the information I've got in so far,' Ufiri replied as the ship

shuddered from a partial impact, 'they are the Serrasa. We have a full linguistic database on them and tactical specifications on all of their vessels.'

'Let's make use of them, then. Return fire, weapon emplacements only, and open a channel.'

'Aye ma'am, channel open.'

'This is Captain Nara Q'Rel of the Federation starship *Xu Fu*,' she said. 'We would like to apologize for the destruction of your vessel and offer our condolences to those lives lost. If there is any way we can be of service, please allow us to assist.'

The image of the shark ship disappeared and that of a piscine humanoid took its place. It was covered in scales with colors varying from white to light pink, sharp teeth and a predatory glint in its eye. Nara also noticed that the aliens were actually immersed in water, just like the crew of the *Pacifica*, crewed entirely by the natives of that eponymous world. Under any other circumstances she would have enjoyed this first contact situation. The Selkies transitioned from air-breathers to water-breathers during their life cycle but the Serrasa were water-breathers through and through. She wondered how they had evolved and on what planet, and what they were doing out here, but unless she could open a dialogue with them, that wasn't going to happen.

'I am General Pacus of the warship Mokarran. You are responsible for the deaths of the Nine Lords of Serrasa and for that the punishment is death. What do you say to that, air-breather?'

Nara inwardly sighed but tried to project an air of authority. 'General, please understand that we were testing a new form of propulsion that went horribly wrong. We deeply regret the loss of your leaders. If there is anything we can do to redress the balance, we will do it.'

'I already told you what you can do, die!' Pacus said and the screen blanked, replaced by the view of the glowing hammerhead.

Erom veered away from another volley of alien fire and Nara whipped her head around toward Ufiri, 'fire!'

Ufiri stabbed at the controls and the *Xu Fu*'s phaser beams slammed against the Serrasa vessel's shields. 'No damage, Captain, their shields are inordinately strong. I recommend we use photon torpedoes.'

'Isn't that overkill, Lieutenant?'

'Not if we can't penetrate their shields with phasers,' he replied as he fired again, just as futilely.

'Three torpedoes only,' Nara relented.

'Firing now.'

Three torpedoes flew from the *Xu Fu* and impacted the alien ship's shields, which promptly collapsed.

'Their shields are down, Captain,' Ufiri reported.

'Open a channel again,' Nara ordered.

General Pacus reappeared on the screen and did not look too happy about it. *'Why will you not die?'*

Instead of responding to his threats, Nara tried a different tack. 'Let us help you rebuild your government.'

Pacus laughed. *'You cannot simply rebuild our government. The Nine Lords are hereditary leaders with lineages stretching back ten thousand years. We will need to delve deep into our records to find their blood relatives and decide their suitability based on our traditions. It is a long process, Captain Nara Q'Rel.'*

'We have technology that will shorten your search for their relatives,' Nara responded. 'We owe you at least that much for all the devastation we have caused you and your people.'

Pacus leaned closer to the screen. *'You are a strange person, Captain Nara. I am willing to allow your assistance, but there will be opposition.'*

'I am sure a man of your position can deal with that.'

'Indeed I can,' he laughed again. *'We'll speak again soon.'*

'That went well,' Bartel said when the screen returned to a view of the hammerhead ship.

Nara nodded and turned to Ufiri, 'send our logs to the *Galaxy* and *Starbase Bastion*. Let them know what happened and inform them that we'll be assisting the Serrasa in rebuilding their government.'

'Aye, Captain.'

'Captain, we may have a problem,' Erom said.

Nara turned toward the viewscreen to see a number of other piscine-looking vessels approaching their position. She could detect five distinct groups of ships, all bearing markings she assumed to be names of some kind.

'Can you translate that, Lieutenant?'

'I'm working on it now, Captain,' Ufiri answered.

'Commander, I want a damage report ASAP.'

'On it, Captain,' Bartel replied.

'Ma'am, I've got some preliminary answers regarding the hull markings.'

'Go ahead.'

'Serrasa society is divided into five ruling Houses. Each group of ships represents one House, and if I'm reading the markings on the *Mokarran* correctly, General Pacus is now the de facto leader of Serrasa until the Nine Lords are replaced.'

'So we created a military dictatorship?' Bartel asked.

'There's no evidence, yet, to suggest that the General would be a dictator. We do not yet know how their society works in enough detail to make any conclusions,' Ufiri countered.

'That's enough, you two. I want you to pull everything you can from the task force database regarding the Serrasa. We'll meet in the situation room in one hour.'

'Aye, ma'am.'

'Commander, how long will it be before *Galaxy* and *Bastion* receive our

message?’

‘At our current distance, the *Galaxy* will probably receive our message in three or four days,’ Bartel answered. ‘We’ll get a response from them three or four after that, unless Project Pathfinder was able to get a signal out here. It will take *Bastion* about three weeks to receive our message if the subspace relay system isn’t in place. If it is, then the lag time will be about eight days.’

Chapter 12

USS *Xu Fu*

3-Kiloparsec-Norma Bridge, Delta Quadrant

Stardate 54986.8 (December 27, 2377)

Lieutenant Commander Senar watched the woman seated opposite and waited for her to speak. He understood that her actions led to the deaths of an entire government and although the military leader had agreed to her assistance, nothing more had been forthcoming in twelve hours.

'I'm worried that something is going to happen that I will be powerless to stop,' she finally said twenty-three minutes after sitting down.

Senar raised his left eyebrow. 'Has that not already occurred?'

Nara looked at him questioningly before the truth dawned on her. 'I suppose so. General Pacus is being far too nice for someone in his position and I don't trust him.'

'What do you mean by "far too nice"?'

'His leaders have been killed by an alien vessel, his weapons, which are now repaired, are able to destroy us, but he has allowed us to assist with rebuilding the government. It was something he agreed to a little too quickly. I didn't think anything of it at the time as I was too busy concentrating on saving my crew.'

'A laudable goal,' Senar replied. 'Why do you think he spared you?'

'We don't know enough about Serrasa society to make any judgment call on that.'

'Why do you *think* he spared you,' Senar asked again, adding emphasis.

'Because he wants something from me,' Nara answered.

'What does he want?'

'That I don't know, and I cannot think of anything he could want from me.'

Before Senar could respond, Lieutenant Ufiri's voice interrupted. '*Captain,*

we're being hailed by one of the other vessels.'

'I'll be right up, Lieutenant. Have Ambassador Yarg join us please.'

'Aye, Captain, Ufiri out.'

'We'll finish this later,' Nara said and left Senar's office feeling that she'd just had a therapy session more than a mentoring one.

By the time she reached the bridge, Yarg was already seated to the left of the command chair. 'What do we have?'

'House Pygo would like to discuss the current situation with you, Captain,' Ufiri said.

'Do you know anything more about them?'

'House Pygo and three of the other four Houses each provide two Lords to the ruling body of the Nine Lords. House Serrasa provides one, the deciding vote.'

'What does House Pygo wish to discuss?'

'I didn't ask, Captain. That's your job.'

'I'll take it in my ready room,' she replied. 'Ambassador, please join me. Commander Bartel, you have the bridge.'

'I have the bridge,' Bartel answered as Nara and Yarg disappeared into the ready room.

Nara sat behind her desk and Yarg took up a standing position to her left. Nara activated the monitor which rose from within the desk and the Federation logo was replaced by that of another piscine lifeform. This one had scales that were much darker in color than General Pacus and there were smaller and closer together.

'How can I help you?' Nara asked.

'I am Colonel Charac of House Pygo,' the alien said. 'You have done us a great service by eliminating the Nine Lords. I would like to ask you to further your good deed by wiping out the rest of House Serrasa. They have kept us under their fins for too many years now. It is time for a more even leadership.'

‘Colonel, we are not in the habit of assisting in coups. What happened to the Nine Lords was an accident, one which we have no intention of deliberately repeating. What we will do is assist in helping to replace the Nine Lords.’

Charac leaned forward menacingly. *‘We do not want a return to the Nine Lords. If you will not help us, you stand against us.’*

‘Colonel, our Prime Directive prevents our interference in the affairs of other species. We committed a grave mistake when our ship destroyed the Nine Lords and we are trying to correct that.’

‘You have made an enemy of my House, Captain. It will not go unanswered.’

‘You could have handled that better, Captain,’ Yarg said.

‘You could have said something,’ Nara snapped. ‘But I will not be a party to a coup d’état.’

‘Did you ask why they want to stage a coup? Perhaps the regime of the Nine Lords is not something they should return to.’

‘That’s not for us to decide.’

‘Perhaps, and then again perhaps not,’ Yarg responded. ‘You should learn as much as you can about them before you assist them in appointing new leaders.’

‘Ufiri and Baransky are going through everything from the drones to see what we have on the Serrasa. I should be getting a report within the hour.’

‘Captain, I know that you want to help these people but do you have that right? As you yourself mentioned, it does go against the letter of the Prime Directive.’

‘But not the spirit,’ Nara countered. ‘I would not feel comfortable in leaving these people in the lurch, especially not that there seems to be a civil war in the making.’

‘You should not get involved in that.’

‘Like it or not, Ambassador, we are involved. What I want from you is a way to

nip the civil war in the bud before it develops into something that will kill a lot of people. There are forty vessels surrounding us and I would hazard a guess that they represent the last remaining people of this species. Fourteen thousand people are all they have left, and a civil war may well deplete that number to the point where they can no longer reproduce. It is our duty to stop that from happening.'

'I see that you take a more liberal view of the Prime Directive than many of your colleagues,' Yarg said distastefully.

'If I see an asteroid heading toward a populated planet I am not going to stand by when I can do something about it,' Nara countered, using the oft-repeated Academy lesson.

'What if they have sensor technology of some kind that sees your ship and what it does?'

'I'll give you the same answer I gave my Academy professors and every captain that has asked me that question. If they have that technology then it's probably in the hands of the governments who will likely cover up the existence of alien life if they have not yet encountered it. Another possibility is that a group of scientists see it and they will endlessly debate it before it's covered up by the government. I could go on but the point is that if I have the ability to save a species from existence, I will. They could go on to develop a cure for a deadly disease.'

'They could also start a spacefaring empire that enslaves billions,' Yarg said.

'We'll agree to disagree on that. Like I said before, all I want from you is a way to stop a civil war before it starts. That's why we have diplomatic officers aboard these ships.'

'I will be in my quarters,' Yarg said and left the ready room.

Nara sighed and tapped her combadge, 'Nara to Bartel.'

'Bartel here, go ahead, Captain.'

'Emma, how long will it be before the *Galaxy* gets our message?'

'I was checking on that a few minutes ago,' Bartel replied. 'The Galaxy and the rest of the Vanguard fleet are still in cryosleep. We could send the message to

the Europa and ask them to pass it along when the Galaxy's crew wakes up.'

'Good idea, get on that,' Nara ordered. 'What about Starbase Bastion?'

'We're looking at three weeks before they receive our message. It will be six weeks before we get a reply. That's too long for it to make a difference.'

Chapter 13

USS *Xu Fu*

3-Kiloparsec-Norma Bridge, Delta Quadrant

Stardate 54987.4 (December 27, 2377)

A full shift had passed with no further contact from the *Serrasa* and Nara watched her crew go about their daily routine as if nothing was wrong. They had inadvertently destroyed the leadership of a previously-undiscovered species almost two days earlier and the ship's engineering staff had spent the better part of the intervening period dismantling the drive and securing it in a cargo bay that was then sealed under her own orders. Bartel and Robinson stood in front of her as she read the padd that contained their official report on the incident. All three of them had a hand in reverse-engineering the drive system from the Korr vessel they had discovered the ruins of more than a decade earlier and Starfleet Command was going to be asking some uncomfortable questions they needed to be able to answer. The official report would go a long way toward that.

'You've triple-checked everything?' Nara asked her chief engineer.

'Yes ma'am,' Robinson answered. 'I've gone over everything the *Enterprise* cryptographers were able to translate in addition to the thousands of tests and simulations we've run since then. The truth is, this ship should never have been built. Starfleet Command rushed into this without actually looking at the big picture. This engine comes from a civilization several thousand years more advanced than we are at our current stage of development. There's no way we could have realistically expected this drive to work. The fact that it did, for the most part, is a miracle, but until we have a better way of opening the terminal aperture and even protecting anything that might be on the other side of it, we should not be utilizing this technology.'

'Maybe the archaeological team permanently stationed on Korr has had more luck translating some new documentation,' Bartel offered.

'Then we should contact them, through *Bastion*, asking for whatever they have,' Robinson countered. 'In the meantime, I don't want anyone near that engine.'

'They'll need my authorization code to get into the cargo bay,' Nara told her, 'and I have no intention of handing it over.'

'Captain, you're needed on the bridge,' Ufiri's voice sounded over the comm. system. 'We're being hailed by General Pacus.'

'I'll be right there, Lieutenant.'

Nara entered the bridge a moment later, followed quickly by Bartel and Robinson, and stood in front of her chair. She signaled for Ufiri to respond to the general and waited to hear from the de facto leader of the Serrasa.

'Captain Nara, I have consulted with my advisors and we have found a suitable way for you to assist us in naming our new leaders.'

'What do you require of us, General?'

'Your vessel,' Pacus responded. 'You and your crew will show us how to pilot your vessel and some will remain on board to maintain it. The remainder of your people will be assigned to other ships as slaves.'

Nara narrowed her eyes at the general. *'That is unacceptable. We will destroy this ship before we let you take it.'*

'I doubt it,' Pacus replied before cutting the signal.

'Red alert,' Nara ordered. 'Raise shields, arm all weapons and pass out phasers. I want security heavily at all access points and secure areas.'

'Shields are up, weapons armed, security personnel are moving into position,' Ufiri responded.

Nara toggled the intraship comm. system, *'this is the captain to all hands. The Serrasa intend to take this vessel by force. If we cannot stop them from doing so, I will destroy the ship. Fight harder than you have ever fought before, Nara out.'*

Erom entered a command on the helm console, *'all pilots to your fighters. Prepare for combat. I repeat; all pilots to your fighters. Prepare for combat.'*

'All departments report ready,' Ufiri told her.

'Don't fire until they do, Lieutenant. This is a fight to the death so aim for their engines.'

‘Yes ma’am.’

Nara sat down in her chair and Bartel did likewise to her right. Robinson returned to engineering and the rest of the bridge crew watched as the Mokarran bore down on them. Its twin weapon ports glowed red and a torrent of energy pulses battered the shields unendingly.

‘Captain, you’re not going to believe this,’ Ufiri said as the ship shuddered around him and he let loose with a barrage of phaser fire, ‘but those pulses are draining our shields of power. Our phasers are having no effect.’

‘Target their weapons.’

‘Shields down to seventy percent and falling,’ Ufiri responded. ‘The pulses are creating a rise in ambient radiation. The sensors can’t penetrate it for a target lock.’

‘Do it manually!’ Nara practically yelled at him.

Ufiri responded by firing at the Mokarran using his eyes and he crowed in triumph as two beams hit home, ‘port weapons array damaged.’

‘Archangel Squadron deployed, Captain,’ Erom said. ‘What are your orders?’

A small smile creased Nara’s face. ‘Tell them to take out the starboard weapons array and the engines. Ufiri, as soon as the radiation clears I want you to take them out.’

‘Captain, we have a major problem,’ Tyrr said from the operations console. ‘I’m reading fluctuations in the shield grid. Engineering is trying to compensate.’

‘What kind of fluctuations?’

‘The radiation from the pulses is preventing the shield emitters from shoring up the shields,’ he answered. ‘We’ll be dead in space in less than three minutes unless we move away from here now.’

‘Erom, back us off as fast as you can.’

‘Aye ma’am, reversing course,’ Erom responded as she kept an eye on the fighters. ‘Archangel One reports starboard weapons array destroyed. The

Mokarran's shields are down but their engines are still protected.'

'Erom, recall the fighters; Ufiri, fire torpedoes; let's get out of here.'

Ufiri fired a volley of torpedoes which got close to the *Mokarran* before going dead.

'Lieutenant, what happened?'

'It must be the radiation, something our torpedoes aren't shielded against.'

An alarm sounded and Nara muttered a Klingon curse, 'now what?'

'Intruder alert,' Ufiri said quietly. 'I'm reading sixty Serrasa life forms spread out on all decks.'

Nara slammed her palm down on the intraship comm. 'Intruder alert, all hands repel boarders. Do not let them take this ship.'

Chapter 14

Archaeology Site Gamma-3

Korr Homeworld, Alpha Quadrant

Stardate 54987.5 (December 27, 2377)

Commander Simon Marshall waited anxiously as the shuttle descended toward the ruins designated site Gamma-3 by Starfleet Command's original team of experts. The ruins were on the largest of the southern hemisphere's three continents just south of the planet's equatorial region. They were the ruins originally explored by the science and engineering teams sent from the *Enterprise* twelve years earlier, where the alien vessel had been found in almost perfect condition considering that it had been buried for thousands of years. He had been roused from a sound sleep to visit the site so the linguists and archaeologists could tell him some bad news.

'Sir, we'll be landing in a moment,' the pilot said. It's going to be rough. There's a hurricane in the area.'

'So that's why I couldn't just beam in here,' Marshall muttered. 'Damned planet is full of curses.'

The pilot said nothing as he navigated through the intense wind shears and driving rain toward the ground. 'Hang on, sir.'

Marshall sat in the co-pilot's chair and activated the restraints as the shuttle neared the ground, shaking constantly. There had been nothing in the *Enterprise's* initial reports about unusual weather activity and they had left behind a number of orbiting probes to continue gathering data until an official team could be sent out, but since he'd arrived there had been nothing but trouble. Weather patterns became unpredictable and there'd been a rise in the level of background radiation which prevented transporter use at times.

The shuttle hit the ground with a hard bump and Marshall felt his teeth rattle. 'How far are we from the compound?'

'About fifty meters, sir. I couldn't risk landing any closer in this weather.'

'Wonderful,' Marshall muttered as he opened the port hatch of the shuttle and darted into the rain.

Less than a minute later he reached the compound and was met by a woman so old she looked like parchment stretched over bones and vacuum-sealed. 'It's about time you got here. I called you almost an hour ago.'

'There's a hurricane outside, if you hadn't noticed,' Marshall snapped. 'Now what was so damned important?'

'It always rains here,' the woman said. 'Follow me.'

Marshall walked in step with her as they went deeper into the compound. 'How are you powering this compound?'

The woman didn't answer.

Marshall sighed. 'Look, I don't know who you think you are, but I am in command of all of the archaeological teams on this blighted world and when I ask a question, I expected it to be answered.'

The woman stopped and turned to face him. 'My name is Bernadette Daystrom, wife of the late Richard Daystrom and I am in command of this outpost. If you do not do what I say when I say it you'll find yourself out of a career. Is that understood?'

Marshall nodded silently, in awe of the woman who had to be at least a hundred and forty.

'This way.'

'So what powers this place?'

'A fusion reactor, what else?' Daystrom replied and led him into a room which looked like the bridge of a *Galaxy*-class starship and he quickly realized that it was one of the modular outpost control centers that Starfleet had recently designed for just a mission as this.

'William Stark, pleased to meet you,' a young man walked up to him and shook his hand.

'What did you call me about?'

'We called you because of the information we just decrypted from the memory core.'

'You said it was bad.'

'I should have said it could be catastrophic,' Daystrom replied and Marshall got a sinking feeling in his stomach.

'How bad?'

'What is your clearance level, Commander?'

'Obsidian level, why?'

'Is he cleared?' Stark asked.

'Yes, he's cleared,' Daystrom answered and took a deep breath. 'Twelve years ago, three engineers from the *Enterprise* designed a starship around what they thought was a revolutionary engine which created a wormhole in subspace. That starship was eventually built and was supposed to be used as a test bed for that propulsion system in addition to a number of other upgrades Starfleet was planning on incorporating into the next generation of starships.'

'What happened to it?' Marshall asked.

'That is a good question. The last I heard was that the ship was being reassigned to a long-term deep space mission but that was months ago.'

'What's the problem?'

'What those engineers thought was a new propulsion system was actually a devastating subspace weapon.'

'What kind of damage are we talking about here?'

'Pinpoint accurate destructive energy. You could open an aperture to subspace inside an enemy ship and they wouldn't stand a chance. Usage of this weapon goes against the Khitomer Accords.'

'What was the ship's name?'

'*Xu Fu*, named after some ancient explorer.'

Marshall muttered a curse, 'Stark, open a channel to *Starbase One*, priority alpha-one-alpha, and connect me to Admiral Brandies.'

'Aye sir.'

'I'll need you both to clear the room. Neither of you are cleared for this.'

Daystrom looked like she was about to argue but decided against and left the room, closely followed by Stark. It took seven long minutes for the communication to be routed from *Starbase One* through hundreds of other relays until it reached its destination.

'This is Glover.'

'Terrence, this is Simon Marshall, I have some urgent news.'

'The archaeology team on the Korr homeworld found something, didn't they?'

'Yeah, and it's not good.'

Glover grimaced, *'how bad?'*

'Have they left yet?'

'They left over two months ago, Simon. What happened to my starship?'

'You haven't had contact with them?'

'I last heard from them when they left Charis. When I didn't hear from them again I sent a ship to the Stameris system to look for them but all they found was a subspace energy signature and a warp dead zone.'

Marshall shook his head. 'It's not an engine.'

'What do you mean it's not an engine? What the hell is it?'

'Daystrom believes it's a subspace weapon, the most dangerous that could be encountered.'

'If she says it's a weapon, then it's a weapon. Clearly they activated it, or the Stameris system wouldn't be such a mess.'

'What are you going to do?'

'There's nothing I can do until I hear from them or some other ship in the taskforce finds the wreckage,' Glover replied. 'The Klingons and Romulans have massed fleets to send out there and even though they are both technically our allies I don't want them stumbling across that weapon.'

'Weren't they going to contact you when they reached the Stameris system?'

'Yes they were, but I have a suspicion that someone impersonated me and intercepted the signal.'

'What makes you think that?'

'My communications team detected an unauthorized signal to the Stameris system. That's why I sent a ship out there. I'm going to try and contact them from this end. Stay alert and let me know the second you find out anything else, Glover out.'

Chapter 15

USS Xu Fu

3-Kiloparsec-Norma Bridge, Delta Quadrant

Stardate 54987.6 (December 27, 2377)

Lieutenant Fwee Sendi led his security team to main engineering to face off against the Serrasa incursion. The chief engineer had managed to get the shields back up after the intruder alert sounded, so the Serrasa wouldn't be able to call in reinforcements for the time being. The captain had mobilized everyone with security training, from enlisted personnel to the ship's security personnel, the Marine Corps detachment and the fighter pilots. Sendi knew that other teams had been sent to the shuttlebays and bridge, armory and main computer core. All ship's personnel were on the lookout for Serrasa but so far none had been spotted, which was worrisome.

'Sir, I'm detecting an unusual energy signature up ahead. It's coming from main engineering,' Ensign Eugene Clark, one of the ship's science officers, said as he stared at the tricorder in his left hand.

'What kind of energy signature?'

'I'm not sure,' he replied, 'but I'm reading a drop in oxygen levels and a rise in...'

'A rise in what, Ensign?'

'Water,' he said and Sendi blinked.

'Huh?'

'The Serrasa are using some kind of machine to convert our oxygen into water,' Clark said. 'They're flooding the ship. Unless we stop them, this ship will be completely flooded in three hours.'

Sendi sighed and tapped his combadge. 'Captain, we have a problem.'

'Other than the intruders roaming about the ship, you mean?' Nara asked sarcastically.

'They have a machine that converts oxygen into water,' he told her. 'Main engineering is being flooded.'

There was a curse the universal translator didn't bother translating and then a moment of silence before Nara responded. *'We'll beam everyone out and seal the deck. If you can clear main engineering of the intruders and deactivate the machine, do so. If not, we'll jettison the warp core and suck the water out that way. Tyrr has shut off the environmental systems so there won't be any additional oxygen to convert. I'm advising all non-essential personnel to remain in their quarters and seal the doors.'*

'Aye sir, we'll do our best; Sendi out,' he said and turned to his six-person team. 'You heard the lady, let's get in there.'

'Sir, the water level is rising rapidly. If we just open the doors we'll be pushed away when the water comes rushing out,' Clark said.

'Do you have an alternate suggestion, Ensign?'

'Yes sir, I do. We should be able to use the Jeffries tubes to get into engineering above the water level. Then we can pick off the Serrasa one by one from the high ground and set a phaser to overload to take out the machine.'

'That could breach the warp core,' Sendi said.

'The forcefield is still in place, and it's also holding back the water. The concussion waves from the explosion will also knock out the Serrasa.'

'Fine,' Sendi said and pointed to two security officers. 'Fincher, Qisi, take Clark where he wants to go. We'll try to reach engineering a different way.'

'Aye sir,' Lieutenant David Fincher responded and gestured for his colleague to take the rear. 'Where are we going, Ensign?'

'Deck eight, Jeffries tube junction 246-Alpha,' Clark answered.

Fincher took point with his phaser rifle held out ahead of him. Clark kept one hand on his tricorder and one on his phaser while Qisi, an octopus-like species from Argaya, near the Cardassian border, took the rear. He held phaser rifles in four of his tentacles, leaving the other four free to glide along the deck. Fincher pressed the call button for the turbolift and got no response.

'Uh oh,' Clark said and Fincher turned round.

'Ensign?'

'The Serrasa have started flooding the turbolift shafts. The shafts on decks fourteen through seventeen are already flooded and the waters are rising rapidly through the network. They will have flooded the entire network within thirty minutes.'

'Then we'd better hurry. The only route we have left is the Jeffries tube network.'

'We should be able to climb to deck eight before the waters reach us,' Qisi said.

'You can, we'll be too slow.'

'So can you,' Qisi responded. 'It's only three decks, not the entire ship. Open the doors.'

Fincher sighed and forced the doors open using the magnetic door opener retrieved from a nearby access panel and looked down. 'I can see the rising water. We probably have about ten minutes before it reaches us.'

'Then we'd better get moving.'

Fincher climbed onto the ladder first, Clark followed, and Qisi ascended the sheer walls of the shaft with the microscopic suction cups on his tentacles. He reached deck eight first and pried the doors open, waiting for his companions to join him. Fincher looked down once he was safely on deck eight and made a noise in his throat. 'We have got to stop this.'

Clark was already in the Jeffries tube and crawling toward the section he needed to reach engineering. Fincher and Qisi were hot on his heels but for now the ball was in his court. After several minutes, and a dozen turns, Clark stopped crawling and removed several access panels. Engineering was partially submerged and there were several bodies in the water, both Starfleet and Serrasa. Fincher and Qisi immediately began firing at the Serrasa tending the machine, causing them to swim away.

As they picked off the intruders the Starfleet engineers were beamed away, leaving them as the only line of defense.

'What have they done?' Fincher asked as Clark took readings.

'They've tapped into the warp core to give the machine a power source. If I destroy the machine the way I planned, I'll destroy the ship,' Clark said.

'I can do it,' Qisi said and curled into a ball before rolling out of the Jeffries tube.

He dropped into the water and fired several shots toward the Serrasa who were trying to get back to the machine. Qisi swam to the machine faster than the Serrasa and began pulling apart the connectors. Two Serrasa attacked him and he squirted a toxic ink which sent them into spasms. Fincher and Clark kept laying down suppression fire so he could work and once the last connector was pulled, Qisi fired at the machine. It emitted a high-pitched whine and died, leaving the Serrasa without one of their weapons and a large quantity of water.

'Fincher to Sendi.'

'Go ahead, Lieutenant.'

'We've neutralized the Serrasa in engineering and their water-generator has been destroyed.'

'Excellent work. Meet me on deck fourteen, Turbolift Control. There's another weapon here and we're cut off.'

'On our way, Fincher out.'

Chapter 16

USS *Xu Fu*

3-Kiloparsec-Norma Bridge, Delta Quadrant

Stardate 54987.7 (December 27, 2377)

Turbolift Control maintained the ship's network of turbolifts which were absolutely necessary for moving about the ship in a brisk fashion. The area was kept secure through the dual use of forcefields and armed security personnel. Since the ship's arrival in the deep reaches of the Delta Quadrant, Nara had complemented the security force guarding the room with Starfleet Marines.

'They're dead,' Qisi said as he touched the necks of all the security officers and marines to find lifesigns. 'That makes twenty-three personnel.'

Fincher nodded and ground his teeth. He didn't like the fact the Serrasa had been able to board the ship so easily and he hoped that the people on the bridge were working to fix that problem so no one else could do it in the future. 'Is there water in there?'

Clark shook his head. 'No sir. Turbolift Control is dry. However, that room provides access to seven different vertical shafts, all of which are flooded. I can't tell which shaft has the machine in.'

'Let me go up a couple of decks and swim around. I should be able to find out which one it is pretty quickly.'

'I don't want to send you in there alone, Qisi.'

'Then have Oasa reassigned from the security team she's on,' he replied, referring to the furry polar-bear-like crewman assigned to a team securing deck six.

Fincher was torn but it wasn't his call and he was cut off from the rest of his team, including Lieutenant Sendi who would be able to make the decision. 'I can't do that. Just be careful.'

'Wait!' Clark said. 'I think I've got it, but we need to get into the room.'

'How many Serrasa are in there?'

'Three.'

'I can take them all out with one shot,' Qisi told them and held up three tentacles armed with phaser rifles.

Fincher nodded, 'all right let's do it. Computer, unseal Turbolift Control, authorization Fincher-3-Omega-7-Deneva.'

'Authorization confirmed,' the computer responded and Qisi aimed his armed tentacles.

'Go!' Fincher said.

Qisi glided forward and the doors slid open to reveal three surprised Serrasa at workstations. He fired at all three simultaneously and they crumpled to the deck. Fincher and Clark entered the room and while the former bound the prisoners, the latter went to a workstation and began entering commands.

'What are you doing?' Qisi asked.

'I'm sending a turbolift into the shaft with the machine in the hopes that a build-up in pressure will crush the machine.'

'Is that going to work?'

Clark looked at him and shrugged. 'Honestly, I have no idea. The only other way to shut it down is to cut power to the entire turbolift network, drain the shaft and pull the wires out.'

They stood back and watched the monitors as the turbolift descended the shaft. After almost two minutes the turbolift just stopped.

'Well?'

'The pressure's not high enough,' Clark said. 'I'm trying to override the safeties to send the turbolift crashing into the machine.'

'That should work,' Fincher said and tapped his combadge. 'Lieutenant Sendi, what is your situation?'

'Thanks to a little ingenuity, we've taken another three Serrasa hostage. Other teams have also reported success. What is your status?'

The turbolift suddenly dropped right onto the machine, destroying it and sending thousands of gallons of water through the turboshaft network, where it spilled out in places.

'The second machine has been destroyed.'

'This is Captain Nara to all hands,' the captain interrupted them. 'All boarding parties have been contained. Stand down from red alert. All department heads report to your designated bridge officer and provide a full damage report.'

'That was easy,' Qisi said with a grin. 'Want to go again?'

'I want to go back to my lab,' Clark said. 'I need to pick up the machine and see if I can find out how it works. It might give us a heads up next time.'

'There won't be a next time,' Sendi said as he entered the room with his half of the team. 'The chief engineer figured out a way to prevent our shields being attacked that way again.'

'Great,' Fincher replied. 'Where are we going to put all of our guests?'

'The captain is converting cargo bay nine into an aquarium for them, and will negotiate their release to the Serrasa leadership.'

'Well, let's get these guys over there,' Fincher indicated the three insensate figures on the deck.

Sendi tapped his combadge. 'Transporter room one, transport three Serrasa lifesigns from this location to cargo bay nine.'

'Acknowledged,' the transporter operator responded and the Serrasa vanished in pillars of light.

'OK people, let's make sure there are no more surprises in store. Begin a deck by deck search and drain the ship section by section unless the operations or engineering teams come up with a better way.'

'Aye sir, where will you be?'

'Talking to Ufiri about a holographic security force that was supposed to be installed.'

'That would have helped,' Fincher said.

'Yeah, I wouldn't have had to go diving,' Qisi added with a grin.

Chapter 17

USS *Xu Fu*

3-Kiloparsec-Norma Bridge, Delta Quadrant

Stardate 54988.2 (December 27, 2377)

Nara sat at the head of the conference table as she waited for the senior officers to arrive.

She was mad.

It had taken over four hours to drain the ship of the water, converting as much of it as possible into usable materials and letting the rest drift in space. She had also lost twenty-eight officers and crew to that attack and she was not in a forgiving mood. Ambassador Yarg had convinced her not to blow Pacus's ship out of the water, so to speak, but to give him another chance. It was a complete turnaround from his earlier comment suggesting that the *Xu Fu* turn around and leave.

'Why the change of heart?' she had asked.

He sighed before framing a response. 'Having thought about it, I believe that if we can rescue the situation, then when the Serrasa reach Federation space they will be more amenable to the assistance the Bureau of Colonization can provide them.'

'Our mission is to try and get them to settle outside of Federation space if possible; or just inside it otherwise, so as not to burden an already overtaxed fleet with additional patrol routes.'

'I see,' he responded. 'What would you have them do?'

'I would like them to be an ally, and perhaps even join the Federation at some point in the future. They have technology comparable to ours and if we're able to give them a democratically elected government then it's one step in the right direction.'

Yarg looked at her speculatively. 'What would additional steps entail?'

'Eliminating the class distinctions they have, for one.'

'Do you plan to put that in motion?'

'No!' she shot back. 'I have no intention of interfering any more than is absolutely necessary.'

'I'm just trying to make sure you weren't planning on violating the Prime Directive.'

That had been the end of their conversation and she had asked him to leave her office. Then she contacted Pacus and his response was not something she had anticipated. His response was the reason she had called the senior officers together. She wanted a second opinion on what was going on. Bartel, Robinson and Baransky entered first, followed by Ishmael, Ufiri and Erom, and finally Yarg, Tyrr and Senar. They all took their seats and she stood up.

'What you're about to see is the last conversation I had with General Pacus. Needless to say, there has been a disturbing development. I want you all to watch the exchange and then give me your insights. The *Xu Fu* is currently beyond the Mokarran's sensor range, but they are within ours.'

'Captain, I apologize for not getting back to you sooner, but I have had to deal with a few troubling issues.'

'Your assault on my ship failed, General. I am holding your people as prisoners if you wish to retrieve them, and I want you to know that I take the deaths my crew very seriously.'

'They failed, and their lives are forfeit. Do with them as you will.'

'Perhaps one of the other Houses will take them to bolster their own forces?'

'It is of no consequence, as you will soon see.'

'I would still like to assist you in electing your new leadership.'

'That will not be possible, Captain. Those troubling issues I mentioned were meetings with the heads of the other Houses. While I was trying to take control of your vessel, a vote was taken and it was unanimously decided the New Serrasa Republic would become a member of the GeShen Aggregate. A representative from their government has already arrived.'

'We detected no other vessel,' she said. 'Who are the GeShen?'

'*You will learn that soon enough,*' he said. '*Do not go looking for them. They will find you when you are ready. May your travels be swift,*' Pacus said and cut the communication.

'That was weird,' Commander Bartel said after seeing the recording.

'I checked the Serrasa linguistic database,' Nara told them. 'GeShen means darkness in their dominant language, specifically an all-encompassing darkness, like death.'

'He has been possessed,' Lieutenant Commander Senar told them all.

'Counselor, what do you mean by that?' Nara asked.

'In ancient times on Vulcan, prior to the Sundering, there were some Vulcans who possessed extraordinary mental abilities and they invariably became mentally unbalanced. They claimed to have been called by the *Vashau ek Ha'kiv*, the Destroyers of all Life. When questioned they mentioned being called by the *Lo'uk Mu'gel'es*, the Great Darkness. Thousands were killed to prevent the spread of the phenomenon but it should be noted that some Vulcans today still experience this affliction. Our emotional control prevents it from taking hold.'

'Can anything be done?' Nara asked.

'Not that I know of,' he replied.

'Regardless of whatever this is,' Yarg said, 'we have been asked to leave and we should do so now, before he decides to make another attempt to take this ship.'

'He won't,' Senar said. 'The *Vashau ek Ha'kiv* now controls his thoughts and actions. The Darkness has called to their leaders. There is nothing that can be done for them. There is no way to stop them.'

'Nothing in the ancient scrolls has a defense?'

'Nothing,' Senar confirmed.

'We need to determine what to do with the sixty or so prisoners we have in cargo bay nine,' she said and asked Robinson, 'How is the drying out coming?'

'Almost done,' the chief engineer replied. 'Decks nine and ten remain to be dried, but the decks are habitable, if a bit treacherous.'

'Captain, the Serrasa must have some great pain if they are being called by the *Vashau ek Ha'kiv*. It only calls to those who have suffered great loss,' Senar said. 'We must learn more about this.'

'What would you have me do?'

'Talk to them, Captain. Try to get them to open up and reveal something to you,' he said. 'It the belief of many scholars that remnants of those afflicted with the Call of the Darkness were responsible for the Sundering that to the death of Surak and the formation of the Romulan Star Empire.'

'*Captain to the bridge,*' Abadi called from the helm.

'What is it, Ensign?' Nara asked.

'*A subspace fissure is opening up near the Serrasa ships.*'

'Patch it through in here.'

'*Aye sir, Abadi out.*'

The monitors came alive with a view of a large subspace fissure becoming visible in the midst of the Serrasa fleet. The Mokarran entered the fissure first followed by the remainder of the ships from each House until there was nothing but empty space. The fissure closed as quickly as it opened.

'That deals with that then,' Ufiri said. 'What do we do with our prisoners now?'

Chapter 18

USS *Xu Fu*

3-Kiloparsec-Norma Bridge, Delta Quadrant

Stardate 54995.4 (December 30, 2377)

'We're approaching the planet,' Lieutenant Erom announced as the *Xu Fu* dropped out of warp.

'Put it on screen,' Nara ordered and the viewscreen showed a world that was over ninety percent water, with a few dozen islands making up the ten percent of land mass. 'Is that suitable?' she asked her chief science officer, Anastasia Baransky.

'Yes ma'am,' Baransky replied. 'According to the database we downloaded from the *Serrasa*, this world meets all of the requirements for their funeral rites.'

'Good,' Nara said and tapped her combadge. 'Doctor, have you completed your preparations?'

'I have, Captain. The sixty-six *Serrasa* have all been prepared for burial.'

'Excellent, Nara out.' She looked around the bridge and announced. 'Set condition blue and prepare to land the ship.'

Blue lighting replaced the standard white across the bridge and throughout the ship as people hurried to secure all personal belongings not bolted to the floor. Landing the ship was a difficult thing to do even in perfect circumstances and although several classes of ship in the fleet were able to land, most notably the *Intrepid*- and *Nova*-class starships, there were only a handful of pilots who had any experience in doing so.

'Vent all drive plasma and shut down the warp core,' Nara ordered. 'Retract the nacelles and increase inertial dampers to maximum. Lieutenant Ufiri, let me know when all stations report ready.'

'Aye ma'am,' Ufiri responded and watched the status indicators on his board change from red to green as one department after another secured everything. All personal quarters had been secured by those who were off-duty.

'All stations report condition blue,' Ufiri told her.

'The drive plasma has been vented and nacelles retracted,' Erom added.

'Inertial dampers at one hundred thirty percent of maximum,' Tyrr said from the operations console. 'The ship is ready to land.'

'Lieutenant Erom, the show is all yours,' Nara said.

'Aye ma'am,' the helmswoman said the *Xu Fu* began its descent. 'I've chosen a trajectory that will take us to a small island in the temperate northern hemisphere with easy access to the ocean.'

The ship glided into the atmosphere and continued on a steep descent for a few vertical kilometers before leveling off ten kilometers above the surface.

'Speed steady at eight hundred kilometers per hour,' Erom provided a running commentary as dictated by the regulations. 'Distance to landing zone seven hundred kilometers. Light cloud cover.'

'Nice and steady, Lieutenant,' Nara said from the command chair.

'Speed now at six hundred kph, distance to landing zone five hundred and fifty kilometers. Five hundred...four fifty...four hundred...speed now five hundred kph, engaging reverse thrusters. Three hundred fifty kilometers to landing zone...speed at two hundred fifty kph...two hundred kilometers to landing zone...two hundred kph...one fifty to landing zone...one hundred...lowering landing struts.'

'Keep it steady, Lieutenant,' Nara said. 'You're doing a great job.'

'Speed now at fifty kph, landing zone in fifty kilometers...forty hundred...speed at thirty kph...thirty kilometers...twenty...fifteen...ten.'

The ship seemed to plunge down the last few kilometers before landing with a light bump and coming to rest on the island.

'I want the entire crew to assemble on the lake's edge in three hours for the funeral ceremony,' Nara said to the bridge officers. 'Make it happen.'

'Why are we doing this exactly?' Bartel asked quietly.

Nara looked at her. 'Why shouldn't we, Emma? They were left behind by their people and we don't mistreat prisoners of war. According to Doctor Ishmael, at the moment the subspace fissure closed, some kind of neurological pulse was sent that only affected them. The Serrasa killed their people, or the Darkness did it for some reason that we will never understand. I have no intention of carrying sixty plus alien corpses on my ship indefinitely. It seems the humane thing to do to give them a proper burial.'

'Weren't there seventeen different burial practices in the database?'

'Yes, and Anna picked the one that's most common among their peoples, which is essentially the economy version, since it's unlikely any high-born Serrasa would be killed that way. Do you understand now?'

'I do, thank you,' Bartel said sarcastically. 'Let's hope our next adventure in the Delta quadrant doesn't end the same way. Where are we going anyway?'

'In the absence of additional orders, I plan on resuming our course towards Intercept Group Three at standard warp. If I get orders to the contrary, we'll see what happens then.'

'It will still be a while before we get a response from *Starbase Bastion*, three weeks probably, depending on where we are,' Bartel responded. 'If the communication relay buoys are dropped then it should speed up the return time, but since we're so off course, I've no idea if we'll be in range of them.'

'Is there any way to ping the communication buoys, find out if there are any in range?' Nara asked.

'I could, but there's the danger of them being destroyed by any hostile vessel in the area.'

'Do it anyway, I don't want to be blind out here.'

Bartel nodded, 'yes ma'am.'

USS *Xu Fu*
The Norma Expanse, Delta Quadrant
Stardate 55099.5 (February 6, 2378)

'Captain,' Ufiri said animatedly, 'we're receiving a communication from Starbase Bastion.'

'I'll take it in my ready room,' Nara replied and turned to Bartel. 'The bridge is yours, Commander.'

'Yes ma'am.'

Nara was seated behind her desk in the ready room by the time Ufiri had it routed there and Admiral Glover's face appeared on the screen. 'Admiral.'

'I'll make this brief, Captain,' Glover said. 'I received your communications and I'm sorry that I wasn't able to catch you before you left the Stameris system. Someone hijacked the signal you sent for some unknown purpose and we have so far been unable to track them. I deeply regret the loss of life but as I'm sure you're aware, accidents do happen when you're using advanced technology.'

'I've had a few run-ins with advanced technology.'

'I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but that Korr engine is not an engine at all. It is a devastating subspace weapon which falls under the Treaty of Algeron.' Nara's facial expression almost collapsed but Glover went on. *'I have received special dispensation from President Satie for you to do two things. Firstly, I want you and your little band of engineers to fully weaponize the Korr subspace device, and I need you to reconstruct the engine.'*

'For what purpose?'

'I'm turning you around. There's an armada of nigh unstoppable ships headed for Romulan space and nothing we have can even get close. The Kothlis'Ka armada has to be stopped and the Korr weapon is the only thing I believe is powerful enough to do it.'

'Admiral, you're asking me to violate the Treaty of Algeron and commit genocide, both in one set of orders, and I won't do it. There has to be another way.'

Glover's eyes hardened. *'I'm not asking for your approval, Captain. If you won't do it, then I'll get someone who will.'*

'That's your prerogative, Admiral, but I will not budge my stance on this issue.'

'Very well then, please invite Commander Bartel into this conversation.'

Nara nodded and tapped her combadge. 'Commander Bartel, please report to the captain's ready room.'

'Acknowledged.'

Glover waited until Bartel stood behind Nara and then explained the situation. *'Do you have any objections to those orders?'*

'No sir,' Bartel replied after a moment's hesitation and a glance at her commanding officer.

'Excellent,' Glover said. 'Commander Emma Bartel, as of stardate 55099.5, I'm hereby placing you in command of the USS Xu Fu, with all the rights and privileges granted therein. Captain Nara Q'Rel, you are now on inactive status and as such no longer have the requisite security clearance for this mission. Captain Bartel, I recommend you restrict your former commanding officer to quarters for the remainder of this mission. Is that understood?'

'Yes sir,' Bartel replied.

'Good, Glover out.'

The crew of the USS *Xu Fu* will return in "**The Larger Death**"