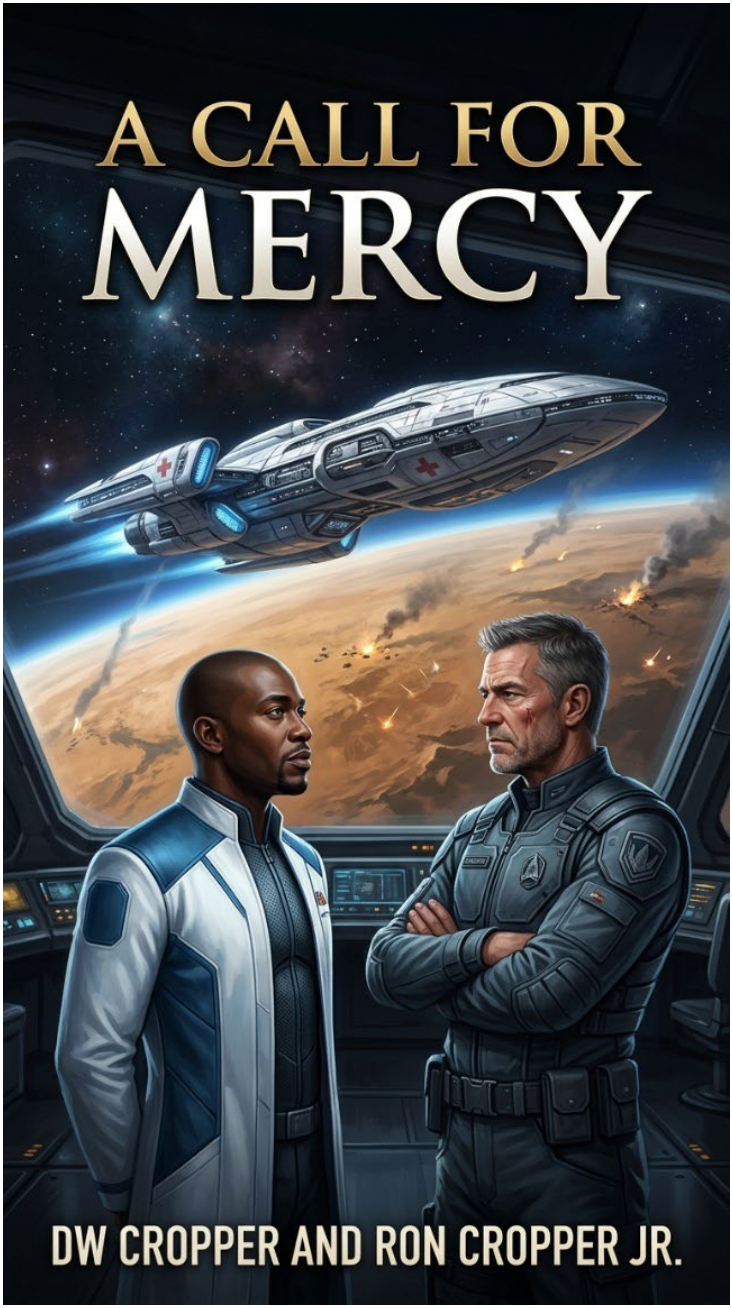

A CALL FOR
MERCY
DW CROPPER AND RON CROPPER JR.

Star Trek: The Quality of Mercy

Book One:

A Call for Mercy

By

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Prologue

They enter orbit and rocket around the Eastern Hemisphere like nocturnal raptors fleeing before the rising sun. But the three battle cruisers flee from nothing, as dictated by the oath each crew has sworn to the glorious leader.

As always the colonel's ship is in the vanguard. One day he will command a mighty armada, and bring the Federation to its knees, yet today the conquest will be as simple as to hardly warrant the effort. The colonel has reminded his shock troops that the greatest wars must begin in mere skirmishes, and if young bekks are to become mighty warriors they must bloody their bat leths on something . . . even if the resistance amounts to little more than a herd of common bovids.

The wide winged ships land on the outskirts of a city comprised of stone and wood dwellings. This primitive planet has nothing to compare to the majesty of Qo'noS, but the Klingon capital is filled with old men who fear to tread upon Federation territory. Colonel Krow has heard rumors of vast quantities of precious dilithium on Cainus. The warriors will lay waste to this world, crack open its very mantle and remove the crystals that shall fuel The Final Uprising.

The bekks are the first to disembark. They make much hue and cry and stomp about waving their bat leths above their heads. The more seasoned warriors must prevent them from rushing into the city. There is no urgency, no call for unseemly haste. Let the pitiful resistance mount. So called civil authorities occupy the lowest stations in Klingon society.

Representatives and guardians of the city begin to emerge at last. They see the Klingons brandishing their weapons, and those city dwellers that are unarmed beat a hasty retreat. The others are carrying firearms. They are a tall and bony species with ashen skin, but the sinewy muscle mass of their long limbs indicates some measure of physical strength. They adopt a defensive formation common to squadrons of primitive riflemen, with those in front kneeling and those in back standing, but with all rifles aimed at this unknown enemy.

The Klingons do not draw their disruptors, nor do they waver, as Krow calls out. “Warriors, advance and break that line.”

The commander of the defense force shouts an order, and the aliens fire their rifles in one echoing volley of smoke and cordite. The bullets plink and bounce off Klingon armor. Only one bekk stumbles, but quickly rights himself, not deigning to attend to the wound where a bullet has found its way through a chink in his armor. The defenders prove their mettle, as only a few of them shrink before the advancing conquerors. The Klingon warriors begin to hack and mow them down, as the desperate aliens repeatedly fire their rifles. When even point blank range avails them little, the defenders use their firearms as clubs, but what good are clubs against bat leth blades. When half his force has fallen, and but two invaders lay upon the field, the alien commander orders a retreat into the city.

“Now it begins,” Krow shouts. He signals the advance. “Stay close upon their heels, but remain in formation.”

The city’s defenders have rushed inside through a narrow gate, which they are attempting to close in the face of the Klingon onslaught. Krow’s chief lieutenant draws his disruptor and fires. The gate explodes with eldritch flames, and is reduced to a pile of burning embers beneath the stomping boots of the warriors. In spite of this demonstration of superior weaponry the alien defenders make another stand. This time they appear determined not to waste bullets and take careful aim at the more vulnerable places in the Klingon armor. They hold their fire and wait for the invaders to draw near.

In spite of Krow’s last order, the youngest and most impetuous of the bekks breaks formation and rushes into the alien ranks. Several defenders fall beneath his chopping bat leth, but soon others surround him and begin to fire their rifles between the chinks of his armor. Purple blood sprays forth and spackles his breastplate and grieves. This bekk begins to howl in pain and rage, yet he continues to goad the aliens with shouts of “More, more! Come forth so that I might kill another score of you!” He breaks his bat leth upon a bony skull and continues to kill with his bare hands, snapping necks and smashing faces.

The other warriors indicate through gestures that they want to surge forward in an attempt to save their comrade. Krow holds them back. The bekk may be a fool, yet he deserves an honorable death. And it is a death that will serve to stoke an unquenchable bloodlust in the hearts of the others.

With a final war cry the bekk seizes one of his attackers about the throat, and the trio at his back succeeds in wedging the barrels of their rifles deep beneath his armor. All three fire as one and the purple begins to bubble and overflow. The bekk is upon his knees now, with the alien still in his clutches, and as he collapses forward this unfortunate final victim is lost beneath his bulk.

Krow gives the order now and his warriors move forward, quickly dispatching this contingent of defenders who are marveling over the remains of their pyrrhic victory. As his men withdraw steel from the fallen and still squirming corpses, Krow notices the fallen bekk's last opponent trying desperately to free himself. This alien is badly wounded—the bekk stabbed him before the loss of the bat leth—and near the point of unconsciousness. The colonel might easily put the alien out of its misery, but he stays his hand. It is more honorable to leave the dead bekk in possession of what will be his final kill.

The invaders advance to the center of the city, and the resistance melts away. Soon only a few snipers bedevil the Klingons as they march down the middle of a wide avenue. A large building crowned with a dome looms before them. It is both the city's largest and most ornate structure. The warriors meet no opposition as they climb its high, wide steps and enter a large vestibule. The space is empty save for a diminutive alien who is quite unlike the city's would be defenders. This being is covered in coarse fur, and Krow does not know if it speaks any language, let alone a dialect that has been programmed into the universal translator. It is clearly of a separate species. But the creature is squatting next to a bucket of soapy grey water, and the colonel cannot resist the temptation to make this pathetic servant the spokesman for its entire planet, if only for a short time. "Do you understand me, targ?"

The alien stares up in abject terror, but just as Krow begins to grow impatient, it answers him. “I understand, my lord.”

Krow glances at his lieutenant and grins down at the alien. “Ring the bells.”

The alien is mystified and makes circular motions with its open hands to indicate its confusion.

“The bells,” Krow repeats. “Bong. Bong. Bonnngggg.”

One of the Bekks is amused by the glorious leader’s imitation of a bell, but a look from the colonel quickly silences him.

Krow turns back to the alien servant. “The bells or the gong or whatever constitutes a cursed alarm in this fetid backwater of the galaxy. Ring it or bang it or sound it with the power of your own flatulent wind for all I care. Simply summon your politicians or at least those among them with the fortitude to stand before me.” Krow would just assume dispense with all negotiations, level the planet and strip it of dilithium. But his burgeoning uprising is in need of slave labor.

The servant bows and backs toward a winding stairwell. The warriors spread out in the open space of the vestibule to reconnoiter their surroundings. A painted mural covers the ceiling of the dome, wherein several figures of the tall and sinewy species are depicted, with a still larger figure towering above the others. This being is similar in anatomy, yet its skin is glowing white and rays of light radiate outward from its broad chest. “Superstition is a blessing,” Krow says. “It invariably makes for more obedient slaves.”

Soon a great clangor erupts high above even the apex of the dome and reverberates throughout the city. “I knew it would be bells,” Krow whispers.

They creep forth like Denivian slime devils, displaying the palms of their hands in what must be a gesture of supplication. Most are representatives of the taller and more dominant species. According to the universal translator, they are known as Drackhans. They have a multitude of impertinent questions, which the colonel answers by slamming the back of his gauntleted hand against the head of the nearest alien. The creature lands in a heap of robes and limbs, toppling three of his fellows. “Two of my warriors lay wounded and dying

outside the walls of your city," Krow announces. "A third was killed just inside the gate. This is proof that there are more than mere weaklings among you, and it is the reason I have chosen to decapitate only one tenth of your city's populace, as opposed to putting every last wretch to the bat leth."

The assemblage stares blankly, perhaps recognizing Krow for a madman.

"Well, don't stand there and gawp," the colonel says. "Take to your knees and sing the praises of my mercy."

The Drackhan representatives soon discover that Krow is not being facetious, as Klingon warriors force each of them to kneel before the colonel in turn.

Krow is all but spitting on the aliens as he continues to taunt them. "You will learn that the crystals which shine through your very soil are worth more than your pitiful lives. You'll be privileged to toil for the glory of the Final

Uprising. Rejoice! Rejoice, damn you!"

The most bloodthirsty of the colonel's lieutenants becomes uneasy when the glorious commander erupts with such manic rage. Lately these periods of seeming irrationality have been occurring with greater frequency, but the warriors remind one another that only a zealous conqueror can overcome the combined forces of the

Federation. Even the High Command fears the mighty Krow, and do not the great instill fear in the hearts of all others?

One representative of Cainus will not kneel before the colonel in the end. He is not a Drackhan, but a member of the planets' lesser species. These smallish and hirsute creatures are called Agmorrans.

Krow looms above the diminutive alien. "Are you so eager for pain?" he asks.

"I assure you I am not so brave, sir," the Agmorran says. "If I were representing no other but the weak and unworthy creature you see before you, then I would kneel as quickly as these honorable Drackhans. After many ages of oppression, I am the first of my people invited to attend this chamber. I have come to the Dome of the

Lifegiver to argue for the emancipation of the Agmorran people. I did not come to kneel before you or anyone."

Krow's mouth spreads into a grin of sharpened brown teeth and mottled gums. "On my home world we simply eat the flesh of lesser animals," he says, addressing the entire assembly. "Yet you allow them to speak before your council. Well, I've known lesser targ who are members in good standing of the High Command."

Only the Klingons are amused by these remarks, although the laughter of the warriors is a bit forced. It is difficult to believe that they are all renegades even in the eyes of their own people, and to compare the generals of the High Command to such a low animal as the targ—it is perhaps a reminder that most rebellions end in death for the rebels. Ah, but better a glorious end than the shameridden bed death of an aged weakling. At least Colonel Krow is sure to spare them all that humiliation.

It comes as no surprise when the Agmorran blanches at the Colonel's insults. Naturally it is the accusation that his species is on the level of base animals which upsets him most. This pleases Krow as it was always his intention to goad the alien. "What is your name, targ?" he asks.

Whatever Drackhan animal the universal translator has substituted for the word targ must be even lowlier than the Klingon boar, because the Agmorran appears poised to attack the colonel, who is more than twice his size.

The servant who was dispatched to ring the bells peers around a corner. His elder glances at him and waves the younger Agmorran away. The gesture might as well have been intended for the Klingon colonel. "I have long been the speaker for my people," the Agmorran representative says. "As such I demand respect. I am called Talks-too-much."

At this the colonel erupts into bellowing laughter. "There's a name that suits you. The universal translator has rendered it quite literally, I think, but I prefer targ. Or perhaps Chief Targ is more to your liking?"

Suddenly a voice calls out, “Hold there!” This voice seems to erupt from the very air.

Krow and his men do not react to it. Nor do the aliens of the occupied planet. And then both Klingons and aliens freeze and appear to flicker in and out of existence.

A tall, blue-skinned Andorian male passes right through the holographic bodies of the Klingon warriors in the background and stands before the image of Colonel Krow. The Andorian says, “We come, ladies and gentleman of the jury, to a crucial moment. You will witness the outcome of Colonel Krow’s encounter with the Agmorran called Tu’Talok, whose name does translate loosely into Klingonese as ‘Talks-too-much.’”

The Andorian turns his back on the holo image of Colonel Krow and addresses the actual Krow, who sits in a large witness dock high above the holofield. “These images were reconstructed from your own visual recording of the invasion. Do you wish to deny the accuracy of anything we have witnessed thus far?”

The bull-necked Klingon glares down upon the lithe prosecutor and strains against the green bands of energy that crisscross his chest. “I only wish to rip you from limb to limb, you preposterous Andorian moppet. A wish that

I’d quickly fulfill if not for these restraints.”

The Andorian’s antennae tremble as he glances at the armor-plated and helmeted Federation security personnel who ring the amphitheater. “In that case, Colonel, I’m glad that you are so restrained.”

“Threats are not sufficient answers, Colonel Krow,” booms a commanding voice. The speaker sits atop a towering bench that was carved from volcanic rock some seven centuries before the Federation was founded. “Pray answer the prosecutor’s question. Is this hololog accurate?”

Krow grumbles almost imperceptibly and says, “It is as it was. And seeing it gladdens both my Klingon hearts.”

“Of that I have no doubt,” the Andorian says. Then he raises his face to the sky and calls, “Resume, please.”

The jury, a mix of aliens from across the galaxy, leans forward in rapt attention, as the holo images redefine themselves and spring to life once more. The Andorian draws back, becoming only a shadow witness to the events about to unfold.

The image of Colonel Krow moves closer to that of the Agmorran leader known as Tu'Talok. "Well, Chief Targ, are you ready to kneel before your new master?" Tu'Talok is visibly trembling, yet he remains defiant, and indicates that he will not comply with a downward motion of his small hand.

Krow shakes his head and turns his back on the alien.

"Do with me what you will, sir," Tu'Talok says. "But my people will not return to slavery. We have suffered long at the hands of the Drackhans. We risked annihilation fighting for our freedom. We will do so again if we must."

"Very well,"Krow says. "You are a brave creature. So let us begin the annihilation with you."

The colonel spins on his heel, draws his disruptor and fires the weapon for the first time.

The resultant beam of searing energy strikes Tu'Talok full in the chest, driving the diminutive alien back so hard that he flies into the air even as he begins to disintegrate. His torso and limbs dissolve first so that only his howling, disembodied head remains an instant longer until it too is no more.

But the howling continues and grows in intensity. The servant who crouches half concealed in a doorframe has taken it up. The Klingon warriors glance furtively about. They realize the howling is not coming from the ghost of Tu'Talok, nor merely from the Agmorran servant, but from all across the city and from the very hills in the distance.

"Enough!" cries the voice of the Andorian prosecutor. "End it there." He looks once more toward the witness dock. "Well, what say you, Colonel? Is this the act of a judicious conqueror, restructuring a malformed civilization, as the counsel for the defense would lead us to believe?"

Colonel Krow raises his chin. “When conquering judiciously, I find it best to make a clean breast of things by killing the politicians and the prophets and most especially all of the lawyers.”

A barely audible sigh passes between the pursed lips of the defense attorney.

“You dare to make a jest of your own atrocities!” the Andorian shouts. “You who managed within twenty minutes of landing on the planet’s surface to perpetrate a murder that even the Drackhans were not so short-sighted as to commit. The civil war had reached its conclusion after decades of bloodshed. Then you made a martyr of the very Agmorran messiah and stoked the conflagration anew. And still the Drackhans might have quelled it without much more violence if you hadn’t smashed their civil defense forces. Even now Federation ambassadors struggle to bring the two sides to the negotiating table, so that relief supplies may reach the displaced and suffering masses.”

In an extraordinary show of strength, Krow rises in spite of the glowing restraints, which strain and sizzle. He roars in pain and anger as his flesh burns. “Do not speak to me of the Federation, blue worm! If the High Command wasn’t lousy with cowards, the Empire would spread from Terra Nova to the Andromeda Galaxy. I am a warrior, and prisoners do naught but infect their captors with weakness.”

The court bursts into an uproar. The Andorian flees clear across the holofield, and the security personnel have all drawn their weapons. The robed jury is on its collective feet as well—all of the members shuffling and speaking at once.

One word, spoken from above, is enough to quiet this chaotic scene. “Silence!”

Everyone’s attention is suddenly fixed not on Colonel Krow, but on the small, stooped figure atop the bench. Even the colonel, who has become exhausted in his attempt to break the energy restraints, cannot help but look up at this majestic figure. She stares down at him, and both of his hearts seem to shrivel in his broad chest. His shoulders slump as he comes to realize that he will never again set foot on the Klingon home world, nor gaze upon the vivid moon of Praxis. And surely he will not live to see the fall of the Federation. Mighty though

he may be, Colonel Krow cannot but falter under the intense scrutiny of those black and condemning eyes. For the Federation bastards outdid themselves in deviltry when they appointed T'Pau, high priestess of this terrible planet called Vulcan, as the unrelenting judge of all his unpardonable crimes.

Part I: Primum Non Nocere

Chapter One

Standing 300,000 meters above Honolulu, Lt. junior grade Simon Walid Levant felt nothing of the euphoria that had made his first visit to Exosphere Station a treasured childhood memory. That fledgling journey into space had seemed nothing short of wondrous with Mom and Dad clasping his four-year-old hands and lifting him into the air so that he might pretend he was crossing the grand concourse in a slow-motion succession of anti-gravitational leaps and bounds.

This was perhaps his one hundredth trip to the station, and he didn't bother to pause, alongside all those neck craning tourists, at the great eastern portal where the sun was spilling its radiance over the face of North America. He had no interest either in watching the massive Vulcan freighter T'Pol dock and disgorge its multitude of passengers, as but one of those passengers was of interest to him and this only in an official capacity.

He was a seventeen year veteran of the fleet, and still he found himself tasked with assignments that might have felt menial to a midshipman. The bubbly holographic letters, emanating from a small device clipped to his collar and hanging above his head like the little raincloud in an old timey cartoon, did nothing to improve his mood. He glanced up and read the name backwards. It had to be Vulcan alright, with that apostrophe between the first and second letters. No doubt some snooty Vulcan scientist was joining the crew of The UHS *Mercy* in order to spend the next five years delivering unending lectures and looking down his long nose at the crew. That commander at his disciplinary hearing had been such a Vulcan, but Levant didn't want to dwell on bad memories.

He understood he was lucky to be an officer at all. You couldn't break a superior's jaw in three places and expect to come crawling out of the hearing with the same number of stripes on your sleeve. It was

a good thing Bob Wesley believed in second chances. But then the commodore was lucky not to have been busted himself after the M-5 debacle, let alone given another shot at command.

Had it really been four years since Dr. Daystrom's berserk AI almost took out half the fleet? The *Lexington* had long since returned to service, with a new captain and a new chief of security. Wesley was grounded after the incident and everyone had assumed he'd never sit in the captain's chair again. Levant was assigned to a remedial duty station once he escaped the motherly embrace of the shrinks at HQ. He was still a lieutenant commander then in spite of the best efforts of the Saurian brandy. It didn't get to the point where he was engaging in barroom brawls until later. The shrinks had tried to assure him that his actions on board the Lex hadn't been anything short of necessary. Wesley took it so far as to put him up for a commendation, but everyone could see he'd left something down in those lowermost decks of the USS *Lexington*.

No one had known what was happening when the *Enterprise* started raining live phaser fire down upon them. No one believed the brass would be so stupid as to let a haywire hunk of machinery take total control of the finest vessel in the fleet. In the chaos the rumors spread. It was the Klingons attacking amidst the distraction of the war games. The *Enterprise* had been hijacked by Orion terrorists. On board the *Excalibur* all hands were lost. Only that last one turned out to be true.

He went down to F deck because he considered it his duty to run in the opposite direction from all the non-coms in their colorful jumpsuits. When he got there he learned that the hull breach had occurred two decks above and E deck was collapsing into environmental control. There were iridescent and doubtlessly radioactive fires burning inside environmental control, but these would be extinguished when the hull breach widened enough to suck all the oxygen into the vacuum of space. He didn't know all the names of the midshipmen who came pouring through the hatch, each of them wearing that same dopey, stunned facial expression. He didn't like to admit it, but in hindsight he was certain they must've seen that same

look mirrored on his face as he yanked them through the door in an effort to keep the perverse conga line moving.

After the last baby face was clear, they all started begging him to seal off the bulkhead. He peered inside and saw only an inferno of purple flames and pink smoke. He shouted but couldn't hear himself over the dozen odd alarms that were skull piercing and oh so helpful in their ever increasing intensity. Above it all the hull breach announced its impending arrival in environmental control with that whale of a groan that only great hunks of twisting metal can produce.

The middies were panic-stricken and made desperate signs to him that there was no one left in environmental control—at least no one drawing breath—and that it really was time to seal that bulkhead.

Levant hit the manual override, such a simple thing to do, and the bulkhead door began its descent like the portcullis on a castle in some dark fairy tale. It was maybe a meter from the floor when Yan struggled to his feet and staggered forward. Too bad he was on the far side of the deck, where he couldn't have beat that door even if he sprinted, and he was barely in a condition to walk.

There was no way to stop the door from closing—no override for that. The shrinks at HQ had made a point of reminding Levant of this. He always wanted to ask them what sick human impulse it was that compelled him to stare through the little window in the bulkhead. It was just a slit through which to feast the eyes.

Yan hung on with everything he had as anyone would. He'd made it to a handrail, and it was almost pretty the way the smoke whisked around him and into the star field as the jagged mouth of the hull breach opened up beyond his feet. Then all the fire shot out like purple lightning, and it was just sideways-hanging Yan gripping the handrail with first both hands, then only the one hand, then just a few fingers. His smooth countenance was as impassive as a Vulcan's, but all the pleading and fear that had been on the middies' faces was locked inside his eyes as he flew backward through the breach and was lost forever upon the star field.

Levant wondered sometimes if Yan and he had been friends. The junior officers referred to him as Mister "don't-call-me-Junjie" Yan

behind his back, this former academy wunderkind who made lieutenant before his twenty-fourth birthday. Certainly he and Levant shared a mutual respect, perhaps only a touch grudging. But would Yan have said they were friends? He supposed it didn't matter much to Yan anymore . . . if it ever had.

That stunner of a headshrinker at HQ liked to say the only way to go back was to move forward. The mistakes and trauma of the past couldn't be undone, yet if people worked together and strived every day to improve but slightly, we might find something better still, if not for ourselves then maybe for generations yet unborn. This was her only prescription for the nightmares that still plagued him. Levant had called it, in an effort to come across as both cheeky and charming, a replicated bologna sandwich with a heaping side of Iowa corn.

Dr. Helen Noel had admitted this was likely the case, but maintained there was little else people could do when faced with a tragic ending short of trying to turn it into a new beginning. She then encouraged Levant to avoid selfmedication and attend to his duties, but what else had he expected from a company doctor? Maybe he didn't swallow her prescription right away, but he had been listening.

And when Bob Wesley bucked the odds and secured another command, the old man—for reasons all his own— listed Levant on the duty roster.

Tina often said that space was cold and filled with horror, but she couldn't know what it was like for a San Francisco kid who'd grown up in the shadow of Starfleet Academy. Levant told her once, long before the *Lexington*, that space couldn't be filled with horror as by definition it wasn't anything but emptiness. She said she failed to see the distinction. Maybe she had a point.

He was still thinking about Tina, wondering if she'd return his calls before The *Mercy* left space dock, when he noticed the dark skinned and apparently human male standing before him. The man wore a long pea coat and held a duffle bag slung over his shoulder. His eyes were red rimmed and he was in need of a shave.

Levant offered him a curt nod, but still the man remained. He obviously expected something. "Can I help you, pal?" Levant asked.

The man pointed to the space above the lieutenant's head. Levant had almost managed to forget about that holo-sign. "I am he," the man said.

"Oh, right, sorry, sir." Levant glanced upward. "Dr. M . . . M . . . "

"M'Benga."

"Yes, sir. Sorry. I guess I was expecting a Vulcan." Levant hit the button on his collar and the holographic letters disappeared. "It would've been nice if HQ had sent me a vid feed or even a still, but the brass at Starfleet Command would rather spend all night shuffling the deck than just deal out the cards already."

This elicited a weary smile. "I understand," Dr. M'Benga said. There followed an awkward silence. "So . . . are you taking me somewhere?"

"Oh, yes, sir. To your temporary quarters in San Fran. You'll probably want to grab some shuteye before all the meetings they're gonna pull you into today."

The doctor rubbed his tired eyes. "A little shut-eye would be a boon. It was a long space flight."

"Sure. You want me to grab the rest of your bags, doc?"

The doctor shrugged and surrendered the duffle bag.

"This it?"

M'Benga smiled again and nodded, and Levant led him downstairs to the shuttle bay, where his skiff was docked.

The skiff was small and looked to M'Benga not unlike the lovechild of a flying saucer and a 20th century sports car. "Strap in, doc," Levant said as they boarded. "Reentry might be a little bumpier than if you took the earthbus, but we'll get there a lot faster and you won't have to wait in the queue."

"That's a tradeoff I'm willing to make," M'Benga said. "I would just assume they beam me straight to San

Francisco or for that matter into the bed in my hotel room."

Levant grinned as he powered up the small spacecraft. "The room attendants might object to that. Besides there aren't many transporters operating in San Fran. Starfleet is on high alert, but then we're almost always on high alert."

The lieutenant requested clearance and the station control started a ten count. The red light hanging from the ceiling turned yellow, then green. M'Benga felt his stomach drop as the bay floor opened beneath them and the skiff freefell into earth's upper atmosphere. The orange burn of reentry enveloped the ship and he thought his teeth might tumble out of his mouth for the rattling.

"It'll get better when the guidance thrusters come up," Levant shouted.

"It's fine," M'Benga grunted.

At last they entered the troposphere and Levant employed the guidance system. They levelled off a bit as San Francisco Bay came into view. "So what's your specialty, doc?" Levant figured this was the time for small talk, although the answer was anything but small.

"I have several, including Xenobiology, Aerospace Medicine, Molecular and Genetic Pathology, Vascular, Thoracic and Cardiac Surgery, with a solid grounding in Extraterrestrial Immunology, of course." The doctor rattled these off as if he was speaking in his sleep.

"Sure. Of course," said Levant. "Don't wanna leave out the Extraterrestrial Immunology."

"I attended Johns Hopkins and then the Vulcan Medical Academy."

"Well, then I'll know who to look for if I come with down the Tiberian bat flu."

"Oh, have you been assigned to the *Mercy* as well?" M'Benga asked, absentmindedly.

"You bet, sir. You're riding with the senior weapons officer."

Levant flew above the stanchions of the Golden Gate Bridge, perhaps closer than the ground controllers might have preferred, with the towers of Starfleet HQ glinting in the distance.

"What was that?" the doctor asked. "Did you say something about weapons?"

"My duty station. Technically I'm another security
redshirt, but my official job title is senior weapons officer."

M'Benga was staring at him wide eyed. "How can that be?" he asked. "There are no armaments on board the *Mercy*."

"That's news to me, doc. We spent all last month aligning the phaser arrays. And marveling at the size of those photon torpedo bays."

M'Benga said nothing.

"Another advantage of the skiff," Levant said, "Is that we can land right on the roof pad at the Fairmont. Starfleet has put you up at the nicest digs in town."

"Take me to Starfleet Command," M'Benga said.

"Huh?" Levant glanced over to see M'Benga's stony expression. "But it's o seven hundred, doc. Your first meeting isn't until—"

"I don't care what time it is," the doctor insisted.

"You'll take me to Starfleet or you'll take me nowhere. I was led to believe . . . I was assured time and again that there would be no armaments onboard this vessel. Their presence—your very presence, Lieutenant—will undermine everything I hope to accomplish. I must speak with Admiral Reeder immediately."

"Okay, doctor, I'll take you to Starfleet Command," Levant said. "And I'll try not to take that part about undermining everything too personally, I guess," he added sotto voce.

But it seemed the doctor possessed Vulcan like hearing as well. "I assure you it isn't personal," he said. "But it is a profound difference of opinion I have always had with Starfleet Command. And it may make it impossible for me to serve aboard the *Mercy* after all."

Levant told the doctor he was sorry to hear it, and there wasn't much to say beyond this. He understood the primary mission of the *Mercy* was to provide medical relief across the galaxy, but it had never occurred to him that any starship could go unarmed. Of course, Levant knew as well as anyone what a devastating weapon a starship can make. The brass had been presented with an AI sophisticated enough to independently operate such vessel, and their first instinct was to discover the machine's potential for obliterating other starships. Maybe a pacifist or two among the senior officers wouldn't be such a bad thing. He wondered what an old battleship like Bob Wesley would make of this peace-loving physician who seemed more Vulcan than human in spite of his apparent temper. How could two such

ideologically opposed officers serve together on the same vessel—not that it seemed likely at the moment.

The last few minutes of the flight were about as comfortable as Levant had expected. Sitting next to the outraged doctor was something like getting too close to an overheating warp core. They'd scarcely touched down on the pad at Starfleet HQ, when M'Benga offered Levant a curt nod and hopped out of the skiff. He might have seemed Vulcan in many ways, but as the doctor marched toward the large building on the horizon, he put the lieutenant in mind of nothing so much as an American Staffordshire terrier single mindedly pursuing his quarry.

Levant wondered if even that nest of admirals was ready for the passionate young physician.

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The great seal of Starfleet Command adorned the façade of the large building, but M'Benga didn't pause to take in the scenery. He identified himself at the security desk, and after a quick retinal scan, they let him pass in spite of his civilian attire. He wondered if it would have been so easy when he was still a lieutenant commander.

The admirals might regret promoting him to captain so abruptly.

The main hall was flooded with light from the high arching windows through which the sun shone first on the replicas of all the starships in the fleet. They hung from the rafters among great flying buttresses that lent the building the air of a cathedral of old. The models of those ships now out of service were recessed in nooks in the walls as big as old fashioned railway cars. The doctor barely raised his head as he crossed the gleaming marble floor with jaw set and eyes ablaze. He climbed the grand staircase, spiraling higher and higher until he reached those lofty spaces occupied by the senior most officers in the fleet. Adjutants moved to intercept him as he shot straight toward Admiral Reeder's office.

"Sir, do you have an appointment?"

"Sir, the admiral is in a meeting with his senior staff."

“Sir, please don’t make us call the security desk.”

They were snatching at his elbows when he burst through the double doors to find Admiral Reeder in the company of no fewer than two other admirals, two commodores and three captains. All of them were seated around a conference table in their high collared dress uniforms with ribbons adorning every breast. It looked to M’Benga like an aerie filled with a bunch of white feathered and gold embossed old war hawks. The only person in the room under forty, aside from the doctor himself, was a striking, raven haired lieutenant commander of Latin American ancestry. This officer had the added distinction of being the only woman present.

Admiral Reeder rose from his chair. “Dr. M’Benga! This is something of a surprise. You weren’t expected until this afternoon.”

The most tenacious of the adjutants piped up. “I’m sorry, Admiral. We tried to stop him, but—”

The admiral waved the young man off. “That’s okay, Lieutenant. You may go.” Then he turned back to M’Benga. “Well, Doctor, now that you’ve joined us so unceremoniously, please let us know what can we do for you?”

“You can begin by telling me why in the hell you weaponized my hospital,” M’Benga demanded. Then as an afterthought, he added, “Admiral, sir.”

The admiral’s eyes widened with anger, but he composed himself. “Surely you’re aware, Captain

M’Benga, that *your* hospital, also happens to be a Starfleet vessel. And as a Starfleet vessel it must be equipped to defend itself and its crew.”

“That wasn’t what I was led to believe, and it isn’t in keeping with Aldan of Antares’ design.” With these words M’Benga clapped a holodisc on the conference table and illuminated it to reveal blue tinted schematic after schematic of The UHS *Mercy*. “None of these blueprints detail weapons systems of any kind. I would remind you gentleman that this vessel was intended to be a United *Hospital* Ship. Not another Starship of the line. And not another damned dreadnought with which to wage intergalactic war.”

“Captain M’Benga, kindly modulate the tone of your voice,” Admiral Reeder said. “The reason the blueprints you were provided do not include the armaments is that all such Starfleet weapons technology is classified. Did you really believe we were going to launch a ship of this size with no defensive capabilities? I fear you’ve lived among the Vulcans for too long, Doctor.”

“Or not long enough,” M’Benga said. “I agreed to sign on as chief of medicine with the implicit understanding that there would be no weapons, sir. This is in keeping with Aldan of Antares’ design, and I discussed it at length with Admiral Pierce when he first recruited me for this assignment.”

“Admiral Pierce has retired,” Reeder said. “And Aldan of Antares was privileged to turn over his design to Starfleet, which as he well understood, was the only organization in the galaxy with the inclination or the capability to make his dream a reality. And so we have done.”

“But Aldan also understood, as he said many times, that weapons only invite aggression.”

One of the commodores seated at the conference table cleared his throat, and both M’Benga and Admiral Reeder turned to glare at this officer. “If I may point out,” the commodore began, “there is no shortage of aggression in the galaxy, Dr. M’Benga. The conflict on Cainus is a prime example. The Klingon Empire was bad enough in itself, and now we have renegade warriors with small fleets of breakaway battle cruisers attacking sovereign planets. Not to mention the recent Romulan incursions into the Neutral Zone, or the Gorns, the Tholians and the—”

“Excuse me, sir,” M’Benga said, raising a hand. “But I believe the rest of the fleet is well equipped to deal with any marshal considerations. And I don’t doubt that you, as a military man, are perfectly suited to that task. But the

Mercy was never intended to be a military ship.”

“That may be, Doctor,” the commodore said. “But it seems this military man has been tasked with the assignment nevertheless.”

M’Benga’s face dropped. “What do you mean? Are you saying . . . ?”

The admiral smiled slightly. “Doctor, it is my pleasure to make you acquainted with Commodore Robert Wesley. The new commanding officer of The UHS *Mercy*.”

“But what of Mr. Spock?” M’Benga protested.

“Mr. Spock has declined our offer of promotion to captain, and returned to Vulcan,” the admiral said. “Our efforts to persuade him to do otherwise have been no more successful than your efforts in that regard.”

M’Benga was struck silent. He had indeed been frustrated in his attempts to persuade Mr. Spock to request the command assignment onboard the *Mercy*. In fact, the former Starfleet officer had gone into a period of deep meditation and declined to even receive his former colleague.

The admiral took the opportunity to advance his argument. “Commodore Wesley is one of the most experienced starship captains in the fleet. He petitioned the chain of command for this assignment, and that petition was fast-tracked due in no small part to the escalating crisis on Cainus. He will be the *Mercy*’s captain, just as you will be its chief of medicine. Because, unlike Mr. Spock, you did accept promotion, Doctor. And you will serve Starfleet and the Federation in spite of whatever philosophical reservations you may be struggling to overcome.”

M’Benga recovered himself then and speared the top of the conference table with his index finger. “Not if I resign my commission first.” Then, almost as an afterthought, he added, “Admiral, sir,” and stormed out of the office.

The doctor left several slack jawed faces in his wake. These were men accustomed to deference on the part of their fellow officers, and they were nonplussed that anyone would speak so bluntly to Admiral Reeder, let alone a man who’d been promoted to captain scarcely a week before.

Commodore Wesley turned to the admiral. “Are you sure he’s the right doctor for the job? What about Frankel, or even Leonard McCoy?”

“Frankel was assigned to the Potemkin last month,” Pierce said. “McCoy just came home with the *Enterprise* and swears he’s good and well retired. Besides, even those two don’t have the background in xenobiology that M’Benga does. He’s the only one who can make this mission work. And I’m afraid you need him, Bob. More than he needs you.”

“Then I guess I’d better go talk to him,” Wesley said. He caught a few supercilious smiles as he left the room, but chose to ignore them. “Commander Latourna,” he called over his shoulder. “You’re with me.”

The shapely dark haired officer rose from her chair, nodded to her superiors and followed Wesley down the hallway. A few minutes later they caught up with Dr. M’Benga at the security desk, where he was apparently finding his egress from the building more problematic than his initial entrance.

“I’m sorry, sir,” said a large officer. “Admiral Reeder has asked us to hold you here and await further orders.”

M’Benga looked fit to be stunned, but he said nothing.

“That’s okay, Lieutenant,” Wesley said. “We’ll see that Dr. M’Benga doesn’t get lost on his way back to Admiral Reeder’s office.”

M’Benga shook his head. “I have said all that I care to say to the admiral.”

“And then some, I’m sure,” Wesley said and smiled.

When the doctor said nothing, Wesley took the opportunity to make his case. “Has it occurred to you, Dr. M’Benga, that perhaps the galaxy is a little more hostile than you care to admit? And even those aliens who see that your intentions are peaceful might just assume blow you out of the stars as turn their heads and cough for you?”

The doctor smiled wryly. “Are these glib remarks intended to win me over, Commodore?”

“I can keep the sarcasm to myself if you prefer,” Wesley said. “But I assure you my intention to convince you that you need me as

assuredly as I need you. How many unarmed Vulcan science ships have been lost to hostiles?"

"And how many Vulcan ships have been allowed to pass freely through neutral zones precisely because they were unarmed?" the doctor retorted.

"Yet the *Mercy* is not a Vulcan ship," Wesley said. "And, with all due respect, Captain M'Benga, you are not a Vulcan. It was quite an achievement I'm sure to become the first human to serve as chief medical officer on board a Vulcan science vessel, but I have difficulty accepting that even that success represents the pinnacle of your career. If you've accomplished nothing else this morning, you've demonstrated that your ego is roughly the size of a starbase."

M'Benga began to protest, but the commodore held his hand up and kept talking. "Don't worry, Doctor. You're not alone in that. My wife reminds me how big my ego is nearly every day. Will your ego allow you to turn your back on millions of innocents? On all those afflicted aliens and countless refugees from dozens of intergalactic conflicts? Like it or not, Starfleet isn't going to let you do this without me and my weapons. And I know you want to do it, Doctor. I'd wager credits to navy beans that you're eager to show all of us old warmongers what a peaceful man of science can truly achieve."

The doctor fumed, but a sufficient rejoinder escaped him in the moment as he couldn't help but admit, at least to himself, the logic in the commodore's remarks.

Wesley dipped his head and said, "I'm confident I've at least given you food for thought." With that he spun on his heal and headed for the stairwell with a self-confident spring in his step.

M'Benga sighed and reflected that it would prove highly difficult to suffer such an insufferable commanding officer. He felt sorry for anyone who had to serve alongside the commodore for any length of time. That's when the lieutenant commander cleared her throat, and M'Benga realized that she was still standing nearby.

"Yes, Commander . . . Commander . . .?"

"Latourna, sir."

"Yes, well, what is it, Commander Latourna?"

"May I have your permission to speak freely, Captain?"

M'Benga sighed. "You may say whatever you please. Is everyone at Starfleet Headquarters so obsessed with military protocol?"

Latourna interpreted this as a rhetorical question, and began to speak her mind. "I have been assigned to the *Mercy* as first officer in spite of the fact that I share many of your reservations. Like you I have spent years living among Vulcans. For a time I resigned my commission to study philosophy on the Vulcan home world, but I have returned to Starfleet at the direct request of Robert Wesley."

"And why is that?" M'Benga asked.

"Both because of the great respect I have for the commodore, having served in one of his battle fleets—"

The doctor blanched at the mention of battle fleets, but Latourna pressed on. "And I was motivated, like you, by the nature of this mission. Even now two separate species of Cainians are suffering great privation. It is the desire of both Admiral Reeder and Commodore Wesley that the first priority of the *Mercy* will be in alleviating this suffering."

"And you believe that Robert Wesley is the man to lead us to Cainus?"

Latourna took a step closer, and M'Benga realized that she was perhaps a few centimeters taller than he, but the doctor was accustomed to seldom being the tallest person in the room.

"I was onboard the Potemkin during the M-5 incident," Latourna said. "Were you aboard the *Enterprise* at that time?"

"I was on Vulcan, but I read Captain Kirk's report. It was madness to allow any computer, no matter how sophisticated, to—"

Latourna nodded vigorously. "Yes, of course. But the test and subsequent battle simulation was no more Commodore Wesley's idea than Captain Kirk's. In fact, the commodore protested the experiment with great vehemence and only agreed to participate under a direct order from Starfleet Command."

"Yet he did participate and the consequences were devastating."

"As I am well aware. But the consequences might have been more devastating still if Robert Wesley hadn't refused to fire on the

Enterprise after Captain Kirk regained control. And the commodore had no way of knowing that the M-5 was disabled. All communications had been severed"

"Perhaps if he had realized what was happening sooner," M'Benga said, "instead of blaming Captain Kirk, something more might have been done."

"I am primarily a tactician, Doctor. A profession in which I take no great pride, but as such I can assure you that it is difficult to see anything for the fog of battle. Yet Robert Wesley saw an apparently defenseless opponent and chose—and you'll forgive me, I'm sure—mercy."

M'Benga gazed at the first officer, sensing that she was not through.

A moment later she added, "Not all of the fleet admirals were pleased with the commodore's decision making. They were much relieved, of course, to have the *Enterprise* and its crew whole and intact, yet they are themselves the galaxy's foremost tacticians. As such they questioned Wesley's decision not to fire. How could he have known that Captain Kirk had succeeded in disengaging the AI? What if it was just another ploy on the part of the brilliant but disordered mind of the computer?

Might not the rest of the battle group have been destroyed?"

"That is pure insanity," M'Benga said. "Those bellicose fools would make an empire of the Federation."

"That might be true if they had the power to do so. That is why I believe officers like you and I must stand with commanders such as Robert Wesley."

M'Benga looked away, but nodded in acknowledgement of the woman's point.

Latourna bowed slightly. "And now I have said what I pleased, so I shall wish you a pleasant morning."

She followed in the footsteps of her commanding officer. M'Benga couldn't help but glance at her shapely figure as she moved away.

The doctor stood where he was for a moment and gazed across the marbled lobby. He hadn't noticed the starship replica that was lying on its side against the far wall, half concealed beneath a tarpaulin. This ship had only recently returned to space dock at the conclusion of its five year mission. The replica had been taken down from the lofty heights where those ships that were currently in service hung among the flying buttresses. Now one of the railcar sized nooks in the wall awaited this likeness of the USS *Enterprise*. M'Benga couldn't help but wonder how much more dangerous the galaxy would be without

Captain Kirk and crew gallivanting among the stars.

A few moments later, he nearly caught Latourna at the top of the stairs, and she wasn't altogether surprised when he followed her into Admiral Reeder's briefing room.

The admiral was speaking. "And it is imperative that the stipulations of the Organian treaty are understood by all parties. . . . Ah, and here is Dr. M'Benga to lecture us some more."

M'Benga didn't bother to apologize for this second intrusion, but instead zeroed in on Commodore Wesley. "Okay, Commodore. Maybe this ship will prove big enough for both our egos, but let's get something straight right now. You may command that bridge, but I am not merely chief medical officer. I am chief of medicine. By which I mean this is my hospital, sir. We will stop at nothing to provide relief to the afflicted. And we will refer to them as patients and patients only. Never aliens and never refugees. We'll always take the hit first, and turn the other cheek as many times as necessary. If we must bleed in order to maintain the peace and perform our calling, then bleed we shall, sir."

Wesley's only response to this speech was a thin smile.

Commander Latourna cleared her throat. "At 300,000 metric tons the UHS *Mercy* is the largest vessel ever commissioned by Starfleet. And while I can only estimate the size of your relative egos, I'm reasonably confident the 40,000 cubic meters of the ship's interior decks will prove sufficient to contain them."

Latourna had an apparent penchant for deadpan humor, and M'Benga and the commodore smiled in spite of themselves.

Admiral Reeder was not smiling. “Very droll, Commander,” he said. Then he turned to Dr. M’Benga. “I take it this means you won’t be resigning your commission after all?”

“No, sir,” M’Benga said. “But if it pleases the admiral I’ll send you a letter of resignation to keep on file in case we reach another such impasse.”

“I hope you won’t deem that necessary.”

“And I hope that Starfleet Command never loses sight of what inspired this mission,” M’Benga said. “Aldan’s design may have been corrupted, but I hope his vision remains whole and intact.”

The admiral nodded sternly. “It is up to us all to live up to Aldan’s vision.”

“So, I think we all understand one another then, sir.” M’Benga addressed these words to Reeder, yet he was looking at Commodore Wesley as he spoke them.

“I believe we do, Captain,” the Admiral said. “Do you wish to stay for the remainder of this briefing?”

The other officers appeared a little uneasy at this idea, yet they remained silent.

M’Benga shook his head. “No thank you, sir,” he said. Then he looked at Commander Latourna as he added, “I trust the *Mercy*’s commanding officers to represent the medical staff in any discussions that are germane to the mission at hand. I will be pleased to receive my first briefing as scheduled this afternoon.”

“As you wish, Doctor,” the admiral said.

“By your leave then,” M’Benga said and nodded.

The admiral smiled as if to say *you didn’t need my permission to go storming in and out of my briefing room before*, but he only returned the nod.

M’Benga had scarcely left the room when Reeder turned to Wesley. “Well, Bob, it looks like you have your chief of medicine. And may the Great Bird of the Galaxy fly forever at your starboard nacelle.”

Wesley smiled at this rare bit of levity on the admiral’s part.

“Oh, don’t look so happy,” Reeder said. “I still haven’t told you about your chief engineer.”

Chapter Two

Kalok sat alone in Crusader Square, not far the Fountain of Shimmering Iridescence. The fountain had long since run dry with the great bowl lying askew on its stone pedestal. Kalok was out of uniform for the first time in many Luna cycles, yet his former adjutants had no difficulty finding him. He took a sip of his unsweetened kalu and watched the young Drackhans approach from across the square. Both of the brothers were brash and headstrong. They had been capable officers, perhaps loyal to a fault. From the time they were halflings, they'd been true believers in all of their father's propaganda. Kalok knew these things with certainty, because the two youths had been his cousins long before they served as his adjutants in the war against the Klingon overlord.

"Hello, Marshal Kalok," Balthun said. He was the elder twin and perhaps the most jingoistic Drackhan Kalok had ever known.

"It's simply Kalok now, Cousin. I resigned my commission nearly a quarter cycle ago."

"But it's hard to see you as anything less," Martok said with a hint of disappointment in his voice.

Kalok smiled gently. "Is a cousin so much less than a field marshal?"

Martok was taken aback. "Not at all. I simply meant it as a testament to your leadership."

His father and brother may have molded him in many ways, yet Martok had always looked up to his cousin. "It's okay," Kalok assured. "I know what you meant. But I am content to be a civilian."

"Surely not so content as to abandon your people in their hour of greatest need," Balthun said. He was studying his former commander's impassive face with great intensity.

Kalok took another sip of his kalu. "Each hour of greatest need gives way to the next hour of still greater need. Where does it end?" He regretted this statement the instant it was uttered. Debating politics

with his cousins was like trying to wrestle a grong bone from the jaws of a tannock. Balthun and Martok were too much their father's sons.

"It ends when our people are safe," Balthun said. "When our traditions are preserved. When our values are upheld. When our beliefs are recognized as the One Truth.

It ends when the Aggs are—"

Kalok motioned for his cousin to be silent. Perhaps something of the field marshal remained in his bearing, although the expression on Balthun's face made it clear he was no longer interested in playing the part of the adjutant.

"Your father couldn't have stated it better," Kalok said, unable to still his tongue. "It's a pity Lord Kralloch can't be here to experience this fine oration first hand."

Balthun's smile was a long time coming, and in the end it was a mere spasm in the corner of his mouth. "My father is always with me," he said. "But today he is present both in spirit and flesh."

"That is why we have come seeking you, Marshal," Martok said quickly. "Father wishes to receive you."

Kalok made a point of being impressed—perhaps too fine a point. "An audience with Lord Kralloch," he marveled. "To what do I owe the honor?"

He could tell Balthun was becoming angry with him. Even a twice decorated field marshal of the Drackhan Guard had no right to mock the former minister of state. Kalok may have saved both his cousin's lives on separate occasions, yet their greatest loyalties would always remain with their father. He was about to offer some words of conciliation, lest the tension mount past the breaking point, when Balthun's anger was suddenly redirected.

A trio of Agmorran adolescents was crossing the opposite side of the square, their movements both furtive and darting, like those of lost children in some unpleasant fairy story.

"And here are three more who've slipped the barricades," Balthun said. "They will finish what the Klingons began and make a desert of this world."

“Those three will do all of that?” Kalok asked. “Honestly, Balthun, I think you overestimate them. Are they really so different than we were at that age?”

Balthun wheeled upon his cousin as though he might overturn the small table that lay between them, but he only spoke two words. “Father awaits.”

Kalok knew it was pointless to resist. A few minutes later he found himself marching down Convocation Hill in the company of his cousins. He soon saw that they were bound for the Temple of Light, where all of the shutters were drawn. They knocked and a resounding voice gave them permission to enter.

The large Drackhan man stood facing the far window with his back to the door, yet his head was turned slightly toward the three cousins. They could see the horizontal lines of light and shadow that ran the length of his grey face. “Hello, Marshal Kalok,” Lord Kralloch said. “It is kind of you to pay your uncle a visit.”

“I no longer represent the Guard, sir,” Kalok said. “But I am ever eager to play the dutiful nephew.”

“And yet this is the first we have seen of you since the overthrow of the Klingon devil.”

“I have been in repose, reflecting on the tumultuous events of the past year.”

“It has been as tumultuous for you as anyone,” Kralloch admitted. “But it is better not to dwell, unless one wishes to become some gloomy, penniless poet.”

Kalok snorted in mild amusement. “Soldiery can make one equally as gloomy and penurious.”

Kralloch turned to look directly at his nephew. “But it does not have to be that way, as I have told you many times.”

Kalok had stared into the eyes of fully armored Klingon warriors in the frenzy of battle, yet he could not but falter in the face of his uncle’s unrelenting gaze. It seemed some things never changed.

Kralloch could see that his nephew had nothing more to say on the subject of his immediate future. “Are you aware that the Assembly

has voted to hear the outworlder's words?" he asked. "Or has your repose been too deep for you to concern yourself with matters of state."

"I heard about the vote," Kalok said. "I understand it was quite close. Perhaps some of your connections disappointed you, my Lord. I for one would hear the Vulcan's words. It would have proven impossible to expel the Klingons without the intervention of this outworlder Federation. If the Vulcan believes it is time for us to negotiate in good faith with the Agmorrans, and our leaders agree, then I will not question it."

Balthun and his brother had remained in the shadows until now. This was their customary place when Kalok and their father spoke. But the elder twin could no longer still his tongue. "But where is your outrage, Cousin?" he demanded. "Do you not know that those fools have agreed to cease all military operations against the Aggs?"

Kalok did not deign to return his cousin's glare. He never took his eyes from Kralloch as he said, "I believe it was one of the Vulcan's first stipulations. Perhaps the time has come."

Balthun looked as though he might strike his cousin.

Lord Kralloch stilled his son with the wag of a finger. "Pray let go your anger, Balthun," he said. "I for one am past the point of all anger. The Klingon came to wound with his superior weapons. Now this Vulcan comes to heal with his superior words. But both are outworlders. I am a Drackhan. We must be free to govern our own affairs as we see fit."

"And to punish the Agmorrans to our heart's content," Kalok said, salting his words with irony. He looked up into the rafters of the Temple of Light, where the thousands of wooden slats were closed beneath woolen skies.

"The Agmorrans choose time and again to punish themselves," Kralloch said. "They chose to behave like animals, and they will remain as animals, feeding on grong in the waste hills."

Kalok smiled sadly. "I once had occasion to spend time in the waste hills, my Lord. And I too fed on grong and worse. Am I such an animal as the Aggs?"

“The depravations of war are terrible,” Kralloch said, scrutinizing a warped floorboard. “I know it well.”

For once Kalok did still his tongue, but he silently questioned how well his uncle knew anything of the depravations of war.

“Aggs are beside the point,” Kralloch continued. “It is the freedom of Drackhans that has always been my primary concern.”

“You should never have left the Council, Father,” Martok said. “You were the greatest high minister this world has ever known.”

“Perhaps it was the High Council that left me,” Lord Kralloch said, “When its membership chose time and again to countermand the wishes of loyal Drackhans. Now it is time for *loyal* Drackhans to countermand this misguided Council.”

Kalok felt his spine stiffen involuntarily at the emphasis his uncle placed on the word loyal. His cousins pressed close behind him, and he could tell that they were eager for more of their father’s rhetoric. The brothers were only slightly younger than Kalok, but the difference of that one cycle had been enough to spare them the horrors of Kunhuomarha—that first devastating stand against the Klingon overlord. It was a wonder that their entire species hadn’t been annihilated before the Federation troops even arrived.

Lord Kralloch was never one to disappoint an audience. “We must preserve our culture and guard our beliefs violently,” the older Drackhan said. “This outworlder Federation wishes to impose its will upon us as assuredly as did the Klingons. They haven’t used physical force, not yet. Their coercion is more insidious in its subtlety and for all its specious rationality. They would have us believe that all beings are equal, no matter how degraded their behavior or how far from the Truth of the Lifegiver they chose to stray.” He locked Kalok with his stare, determined to win over the veteran of Kunhuomarha. “These negotiations are pointless. This conference will prove to be an abomination. I will not accept the Vulcan’s terms. I will cleanse our home of outworlders, Kalok. My sons are at my back. Now I must know. Will you stand with us?”

Kalok met his uncle's gaze at last, holding it for a long moment. "I am a civilian, sir. And I believe in the rule of law. That is all the answer I can give you."

Lord Kralloch nodded slowly. "Then go," he said. "And know that you are my nephew no more."

Martok gasped. "Father—" he began, but his brother gripped him by the forearm.

Kalok bowed and turned his back on the former minister of state. He paused in the vestibule and regarded the lever that controlled the thousands of shutters that covered the walls of the temple. Without thinking the action through, he seized the lever and pushed it up. Instantly, the thousands of closed slats were raised, so that the skies of Cainus became visible through the rafters of the temple. The few candles were extinguished, and Kralloch and his sons turned to look at Kalok as if this action was an act of final betrayal. The shutters were only intended to be raised on Cainus's all too rare sunny days, and the overcast sky did little to illuminate the temple's interior. This came as something of a disappointment to Kalok.

He descended the front steps and soon disappeared among the winding alleyways of the capital. He knew not what he might do now, yet he must act quickly. It was clear that Kalok's relations were about to set in motion a chain events that would bring untold harm to the people of Cainus—both Drackhans and Agmorrans alike. He had several contacts in the Guard, although many of them were as loyal to Lord Kralloch as Kalok's cousins. There were a few officers he felt he could trust.

And then there was High Minister Dabbock, who had recently succeeded Lord Kralloch as the ranking member of the Council. Kalock had served with Dabbock when the old Drackhan was Supreme Commander of the Guard. Dabbock had surpressed many an Agmorran uprising, but he never reveled in violence the way so many lesser soldiers did. His reputation was impeccable and his honor without question. Kalok would request a meeting with the old soldier, who was perhaps less comfortable in his new political position. He could only hope that Dabbock didn't question his honor. But Kalok

had already chosen the state over his own blood. Now it was time to earn the title of traitor.

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Balthun hurried over and quickly pulled the lever down, lowering the temple shutters once more.

Martok relit the candles. “What will we do without him, Father?” he asked.

Lord Kralloch stepped forward and poked his younger son’s chest with a long, four jointed index finger. “We will go forward with our plans, Martok. We shall storm this profane conference and put an end to these cabalistic proceedings. We will capture this Vulcan and force the Federation to leave us to govern our own affairs. If we are not free to rid ourselves of Agg filth, then we will never be free. We will make an example of this outworlder ambassador. The Vulcan’s suffering will end in our deliverance.”

“You would seize the Federation ambassador?” Martok asked. “This will not be easy. He is in the center of the capital surrounded by a score of guards. We would lose many soldiers in such an attempt.”

Lord Kralloch lowered his head and regarded Martok from beneath his thick brow ridge. “You call it an attempt, my son? Have you already conceded defeat?”

“The loss of a few men is as nothing compared to the loss of our way of life,” Balthun said. “I will be honored to die fighting with our father.”

Kralloch’s eyes shone in the candlelight. “Our chances may be better than you realize,” he said. “The Klingons left us with slightly more than a legacy of privation and pestilence. There are weapons like the lightning weapons of the outworlders. We have kept them hidden. Our engineers have divined their secrets.”

“But, Father, why have you not employed these weapons against the Agmorrans?” Martok asked.

The old Drackhan placed a hand upon his son’s shoulder. “In war, as in politics, one must know when to withhold and when to strike.

Now is the time to strike with every weapon at our disposal. And the best weapon is one your opponent does not know you possess."

"We will fight bravely for you, Father," Balthun pledged.

"Not merely for me. For your late mother and for your sisters. For your ancestors and your own unborn offspring."

The brothers let forth with a spontaneous war cry and began to whistle a popular battle anthem through their three chambered nasal cavities.

Lord Kralloch shouted so that his sons might hear his oath. "I swear in the name of the Lifegiver—and I swear it upon my own head—Sarek of Vulcan shall never leave this world alive!"

Chapter Three

It was a perfectly lovely San Francisco morning, and yet Robert Wesley found himself in anything but a festive mood. The maiden voyage of a Starfleet vessel should always be cause for celebration as far as he was concerned, but Debbie had begged to differ. He couldn't blame her, not entirely. Their marriage had been little more than an unending series of compromises for his wife. She'd curtailed her own Starfleet career in order to concentrate on raising their daughters. It was only fair that Wesley stick with his desk job and settle into a comfortable middle age. He'd had his time among the stars, after all—far more time than Debbie had gotten—and she no less than an astrophysicist.

Now he was leaving her again, with both girls in the throes of puberty. It looked like another Christmas spent in front of a viewscreen, just as when the kids were little. He had begged Debbie to understand that it wasn't just a job to him. It wasn't merely science.

How he regretted those words. *Merely science*? Science had once been her greatest passion, and the very reason they had met. Wesley sometimes thought his one true talent was for saying exactly the wrong thing.

They had exchanged their final goodbyes an hour ago. He told them there was no reason to wait for the shuttle. His youngest had a piano recital to prepare for, and the eldest invariably preferred the company of her trouble seeking friends. Yet it was she, Emily Elizabeth Wesley, who'd openly wept as she'd embraced her father for the final time in perhaps a year. A year if they were lucky. Rose didn't cry, but her chin quivered as she offered up her own grudging hug. The last time she'd been too little to recognize him when he came home on leave, and hid behind her mother as if from a hostile alien. She didn't remember that now, but her mother would never forget it, or let Wesley forget.

Debbie swore she wouldn't cry for him each time he left her, and this time was no different. As always, her violet eyes were rimmed in

red in the end. “Keep everyone safe and come home to me,” she had whispered in his ear just before they kissed.

He hadn’t expected to spend the better part of the hour waiting on the space deck atop Starfleet HQ. It seemed his shuttlecraft was experiencing some major mechanical malfunction. What made matters worse was that he’d invited Dr. M’Benga to join him on the shuttle. He thought it would make for a strong show of unity if the *Mercy*’s senior most officers arrived together. Now the two men were standing shoulder to shoulder, enjoying an extended and extremely awkward silence high above San Francisco.

“I’m afraid,” Wesley said. “That I’m—that we’re— going to be late to our own receiving line.”

“Mmm,” M’Benga muttered. “So it would appear.”

The man had an infuriating habit of constantly fiddling with his tricorder.

“Here comes the crew chief,” Wesley said. “It had better be good news this time, Chief.”

The heavy set man in the red jumpsuit shrugged apologetically and began speaking to Wesley in a subdued voice. The conversation consisted entirely of mechanical matters, so M’Benga took the opportunity to enjoy a selfguided tour of the space deck. There wasn’t much to see aside from the multitude of shuttlecraft in various degrees of preparation. Most of them were emblazoned with Starfleet emblems denoting that they were intended for the exclusive use of admirals and other senior officers. But a particular shuttlecraft, if one could describe it as such, stood apart from the others. This ship was longer and more cylindrical, and it came equipped with relatively large warp nacelles that looked not unlike rocket boosters. But it was the name of this vessel that truly caught M’Benga’s attention, as he recognized it from the schematics of the *Mercy*.

“The Florence Nightingale,” he said. “Isn’t this shuttle assigned to the UHS *Mercy*?”

He addressed his question to the large pair of boots that were sticking out from under the base of the shuttle, but the answer came from above. “That’s right, doc,” said an impish young woman who

was perched on the roof of the Nightingale. She was absent-mindedly flicking a laser spanner on and off as if to watch it glow. “But we call her Flo for short.”

“No, we don’t!” said a gravelly voice from underneath the ship.

“Oh, quit your grouchin', Gerty.” said the young woman, sliding down the side of the Nightingale. “We have a visitor.” She landed in front of M’Benga and extended her hand. “Emergency Space Medic first class Lazenbee at your service, sir. Everybody calls me Laz for short.”

“No, they don’t,” said the voice from below.

M’Benga shook the young woman’s hand. “Pleased to meet you. I am Dr. M’Benga.”

Laz’s eyes widened a bit. “Oh! You’re chief doc on the *Mercy*, right?”

“I’m chief of medicine, yes.”

Laz kicked the bottom of one of the large boots.

“Hey, Gerty, come on out of there and meet Dr. M’Benga.”

There was a shuffling and sliding and the largest Tellarite M’Benga had ever seen rose up before him. He stared down his porcine nose at the doctor and extended his hairy, three fingered hand.

“This here’s Gerty,” Laz said in way of introduction. Then in a stage whisper she added, “He’s cranky ‘cause he’s only an emergency space medic *second* class.”

The Tellarite turned on her as if he might squash her with one fist. “It is Gert. Only Gert. G-E-R-T in your accursed alphabet.”

M’Benga called for a truce by waving the palms of his hands. “Is the Nightingale ready for takeoff?” he asked.

“It soon will be if this foolish child stops playing with my laser spanner,” Gert said and snatched the tool from Laz’s hand.

“How soon?” M’Benga asked.

“Two minutes, doc,” Laz said. “I guarantee it.” “Twenty minutes,” Gert said.

M’Benga smiled. “Can you make room for two more?”

Laz shrugged. “It’ll be a squeeze. We’re loaded with supplies, but I think we can shift a few crates around.”

“I’ll be back in a minute,” M’Benga said and strode away.

“Officers,” Gert grunted.

Laz poked him in the ribs with her elbow. “Show some respect.”

M’Benga found Wesley still engaged in animated discussion with the crew chief. The commodore did not look well pleased. M’Benga waited for the chief to leave.

“It seems Starfleet has saddled me with a lemon of a shuttlecraft,” Wesley said. “I’m afraid we may have to postpone our boarding ceremony until another shuttle can be prepped.”

“Perhaps not,” M’Benga said. “I believe I’ve chartered us a ride. So long as you don’t mind some cramped conditions.”

“I’d ride inside a flying refuse bin if it meant getting to that ship already. I wish Starfleet would just let me beam aboard, fleet protocol be damned.”

“My sentiments exactly.”

“Is this charter of yours space worthy?” Wesley asked.

“It’s one of ours. The Nightingale.”

Wesley smiled. “I’ve heard a lot about that little ship. They say she can make warp six in a pinch.”

The commodore’s mood improved as he followed the doctor along the crowded space dock. After a near endless succession of briefings and procedural reviews, he was beyond eager to return to space. It had seemed so close these last few weeks, and now it was difficult to believe that he might be minutes away from breaking earth’s orbit at last.

The side portal of the Nightingale was wide open as they approached. A smallish woman was half inside, attempting to shift a crate that was approximately three times her mass. If not for her blue ESM uniform she might have passed for one of Emily Elizabeth’s classmates.

“Need a hand?” Wesley asked

“I sure do, bud,” she said, without looking around. “My partner is useless when it comes to the heavy lifting.”

Wesley glanced back at M'Benga, who held out his hands and shrugged. "Sorry. These delicate surgical instruments are Federation property."

The commodore proceeded to push and shove. He wasn't sure if the young lady was working with or against him at times, but they budged the crate perhaps half a meter in the end, which was enough to open a pathway to the Nightingale's two passenger seats. He wasn't sure how the girl had ended up on top of the crate, but she appeared to be satisfied with the result of Wesley's labors.

"Thanks, bud," she said and wiped her brow. Then she looked down and saw the three solid stripes on his sleeve, and her head connected with the roof as she leapt from the crate. "Sorry, Commodore, sir. I didn't realize it was you, sir, or that you're a commodore, sir. I don't know you, sir. But now I see that you're a commodore, which I—"

"Okay, Medic," Wesley said. "At ease. And watch that noggin. I don't need any concussed space medics onboard my ship."

"Onboard our hospital, Commodore Wesley," M'Benga corrected. He took the opportunity to step forward and examine Lazenbee's saucer-wide eyes.

"So, this is Commodore Wesley?" she asked. "CO of the whole ship!"

"One and the same," M'Benga said, feeling the top of the medic's head. "There's a small lump, but I'm going to declare you fit to fly just the same."

"We're in a bit of a bind, Medic," Wesley explained. "My shuttle is a garbage scow compared to this little beauty, and we're late for a welcoming ceremony. What do you say? Care to show us what this zippy ambulance of yours can do?"

Laz flashed a grin as bright as a Vulcanian sunrise. "Gerty, fire up the impulse engines! We just got our first mission."

Ten minutes later they received clearance from the tower and shot into the sky. The cockpit window was wide and afforded a breathtaking vista as the stars winked into view like lightning bugs on

a summer evening. The Nightingale broke free of earth's atmosphere with the merest hint of a shudder, and the moon glowed before them.

The commodore was grinning almost as wide as Laz. "We're a little late already, Doctor. But do you suppose it would be too much of an imposition to ask our officers to wait a few minutes more?"

M'Benga shrugged. "They will need to exercise patience, so long as we two are their commanding officers. I suppose this is a good opportunity for them to practice."

Wesley leaned forward into the cockpit. "Okay, Mister Lazenbee. Mister Gert. Let's see what the old girl's got under the hood."

Laz was near euphoric. "Warp speed, sir?"

"No, let's not go beyond the heliosphere this morning," Wesley said. "Just loop us round the moon at full impulse."

"Aye, aye, sir," Laz said and plotted the course.

M'Benga and Wesley felt the g-forces much stronger now and were pressed into their seats as the moon loomed ever larger. Its iridescent light soon filled the whole of the cockpit window. Then they skirted around the western hemisphere of the ashen globe. The glow of the sun's albedo faded, but was soon replaced with the lights of Aldrin City.

"Slow to one quarter impulse power," Wesley said. "Let's enjoy the view for a minute."

"I was born on the moon," M'Benga said suddenly.

"No kidding?" Wesley said. "I had a roommate at the academy who was a lunatic."

M'Benga glanced at him sharply.

Wesley cleared his throat. "I mean, he was also from the moon—a lunite."

The doctor smiled. "That's okay, Commodore. The earth kids used to call us lunatics. Used to shout it whenever we whipped them at the interplanetary cricket trials. Yes, I grew up a moon boy through and through." He leaned forward and pointed over Mr. Gert's shoulder. "Look, you can see Lake Armstrong. I used to row my little boat out there long after the lights went down in Aldrin City. When my father was . . . When I was of a mind, I guess."

“Yeah, my old man could be a real Mugatu when he was in one of his moods.”

The doctor turned away, retrieving his tricorder from its sleeve.

“Did you get a chance to visit?” Wesley asked. “Before you landed in San Francisco?”

Suddenly there was something vitally important on M’Benga’s tricorder screen. “No. I’m afraid not.”

“Well, maybe there’s still time. We aren’t scheduled to leave space dock until—”

“No,” M’Benga insisted. “It simply isn’t going to happen. Not this time around.”

There followed a silence tenfold more awkward than any that had passed between the men on the space deck.

“Take us back up to three quarter impulse power, Lazenbee,” Wesley said at last. “Our shipmates have waited long enough, I think.”

That’s when Laz hit the wrong button—perhaps from force of habit—and strains of the most discordant, earsplitting music M’Benga had ever heard began to assault his eardrums. Both he and Commodore Wesley covered their ears and ducked their heads.

“Turn it off!” Mr. Gert managed to shout above the din. “Turn it off!” He pounded at the control panel.

Laz fumbled and killed the music at last. “I’m so sorry, sirs! I hit the wrong button.”

“What was that awful noise?” M’Benga cried.

The commodore turned to him with a wry smile. “That, Doctor, was Rigelian death metal. I have two teenage daughters who would listen to it half the night if not for the stilted musical tastes of their mother. Of course, the Rigelians don’t call it death metal.”

“Oh, what do they call it?” M’Benga asked. “Other than the infliction of tinnitus upon an unsuspecting galaxy?”

Wesley grinned. “They call it opera.”

They emerged from the dark side of the moon and set course for a space station that was large enough to nearly rival the lunar body. Laz requested clearance and a few moments later they were granted final approach. The gulf that lay between the gargantuan doors

appeared wide enough to swallow an entire fleet of starships, and the Nightingale was made miniscule as she passed between them. M'Benga couldn't shake the notion that he and his companions no more represented the realized dreams of Asimov, Bradbury and Clarke than the descendants of Swift's Lilliputians forever struggling to constrain the twin giants of space and time. The interior of the space dock was a great lighted dome, the inner rim of which was lined with seemingly endless pedways and control rooms. The doctor could see literally thousands of human forms weaving their way through this narrow landscape, inevitably calling to mind industrious insects as viewed through the glass of a child's ant farm.

"This is the largest space dock ever completed," Wesley said. "What do you make of it, Doctor?"

"It is a marvel," M'Benga said. "But something appears to be missing. Where is the *Mercy*?"

The commodore bent his index finger and gestured to the deck plating of the shuttle. As if on cue, Lazenbee pulled up on the control grips and dipped the nose of the Nightingale downward at a 90 degree angle. A tremendous well opened beneath them, its sides illuminated by rings of blue and green light that extended downwards to a depth that M'Benga could not fathom. His ordinarily ironclad stomach performed a somersault and he pressed a hand against the back of Mr. Gert's chair for fear that he might plunge headlong through the cockpit window and freefall forever inside the well.

But the well was not empty as a great ship lay crouching several meters below the rim like a leviathan hibernating in some vast cavern beneath the sea. The UHS *Mercy* was perhaps twice the size of the USS *Enterprise*.

She glowed iridescent with thousands of running lights and the spotlights of shuttles and service pods that hovered about like a retinue of demigods come to pay homage to a titan.

She boasted the largest secondary hull M'Benga had ever seen, with double wings stretching downward on either side like those of an enormous bird forever thrusting itself higher into the sky. Each of these wings ended in a pair of nacelles, giving the *Mercy* a total of four warp

engines. The primary hull—what would traditionally have been referred to as the saucer section—was more of an elongated arrowhead, and upon this Dr. M'Benga read the ship's call letters—NCC 1901—as they grew ever larger through the cockpit window. He saw also the multitude of medical insignia embossed upon the secondary hull, including the red cross, the winged and serpent entwined caduceus and the healing hand of the Vulcan Medical Institute.

Lazenbee spoke into the com. "Nightingale to *Mercy* control. Nightingale to *Mercy* control. Requesting permission to dock."

A voice soon responded with, "*Mercy* control to Nightingale. We've got half a dozen shuttles in the queue.

Wait your turn, Laz."

The commodore leaned forward so that his voice might be heard over the comlink. "*Mercy* control, this is Commodore Robert Wesley. Is there any chance the Nightingale can receive priority status? Maybe just this once?"

There was a pause while the control officer presumably blinked in astonishment. "*Mercy* control to Nightingale. Please proceed to docking bay alpha. Repeat. Nightingale to docking bay alpha."

Lazenbee exchanged a near imperceptible glance with Mr. Gert, puffed herself up a bit, and maneuvered the shuttle around to the big ship's stern. Docking bay alpha slid open to receive them. Scarcely three minutes later, Laz had irised open the hatch, and the two senior most officers of the UHS *Mercy* navigated several crates of cargo and made their way down the Nightingale's short gangplank.

The men were greeted with the sight of the ranking officers and senior medical staff, who stood facing one another in two rows that stretched nearly the length of the docking bay. The boatswain blew his whistle and the assembly snapped to attention, with Lieutenant Commander Lorraine Latourna at its head.

"Permission to come aboard, Commander?" Wesley called from the edge of the gangplank.

Latourna offered a tight smile and replied,

"Permission granted, sir."

Only then did Wesley step onto the deck of the UHS *Mercy*. M'Benga quickly followed.

"Welcome aboard, Captain Wesley," Latourna said and bowed slightly. "Dr. M'Benga."

The doctor recalled that it was protocol to address the commander of a starship as 'Captain' regardless of his or her actual rank.

There followed a muster of officers and crew, which Wesley appeared to relish. M'Benga bore this review with all the patience he could summon, and was greatly relieved when the commodore finally put them at their ease. The medical staff immediately took the opportunity to surround their chief of medicine and several introductions were made.

M'Benga knew Dr. Helen Noel by reputation as she'd also spent time on the *Enterprise*. He had it on good authority that she was a brilliant young psychiatrist, but no one had prepared him for the almost ethereal beauty of her smiling face. She began introducing her fellow department heads, and the first among them could not have contrasted more strongly with the lovely chief of psychiatry in terms of appearance. The chief of pathology and extraterrestrial immunology was a tall and gaunt Andorian male, who grinned down at Dr. M'Benga with jagged yellow teeth. His blue skinned visage was pitted and scarred. Had Noel called him Dr. Vormin?

M'Benga told himself it was time to stop feeling overawed and attend to his duties. Next he was introduced to the chiefs of neurology and molecular biology. The former was a diminutive and middle aged human woman named Blenhiemer. The later was a mermastian female called Fontar, who might have been Dr. Blenheimer's twin from the opposite side of the galaxy, if not for Dr. Fontar's pinkish skin and the vestigial horns growing from her temples.

There were actual twins as well in the form of a pair of conjoined surgeons from the Gamma quadrant. They were called Ganede and Nantine, and they appeared to be joined at the hip. But M'Benga knew that this unique species had the ability to separate or remain connected via several hip, back and shoulder nodules which allowed them to

couple their central nervous systems. This extraordinary mutation afforded compatible Ambidextrians a multitude of advantages including total mind, body synthesis with highly accelerated cellular renewal and vastly increased cerebral capacity. Two or more Ambidextrians were said to be living in concert and once connected they found it excruciating to be separated.

There were several others whose names and faces M'Benga scarcely registered as the conclave became boisterous with everyone talking at once. This circle of lively medicos was ringed at a distance by Wesley and his bridge officers.

The commodore looked a little sullen like a man who felt cheated out of being the guest of honor at his own party. He turned to Latourna. "Well, Commander. I think we can trust Dr. Noel and the others to give our chief of medicine the grand tour. I for one am eager to get to the bridge."

"My sentiments exactly, sir," Latourna said and led the way to the turbolift.

The grand tour, although it was destined to be cut short when the yellow alert sounded, was most agreeably conducted by Helen Noel. She led M'Benga down corridors bathed in hues of crimson, magenta and emerald green. On certain decks the light was as dim as that of a midnight dormitory with walls that seemed to close on all sides. But they'd round a corner and enter some startling operating theatre surrounded with observation bays, crammed full of gleaming banks of equipment, and topped with a vaulted ceiling that appeared to be made of near blinding white light.

"This is all most extraordinary," M'Benga said. The doctor's smile was verging on an outright grin as he took in the startling interior of the enormous ship.

Dr. Noel intercepted his gaze. "Welcome home, Dr. M'Benga," she said. Her smile was punctuated by prominent dimples, and her beautiful brown eyes were as captivating as a First Federation tractor beam. "Would you like to see your quarters?"

The living quarters were on the uppermost deck of the secondary hull, high above the labs, ICUs and recovery rooms. The door swished

open to reveal richly upholstered living quarters with high-backed arm chairs before a Vulcan fire hollow. Noel pressed a button on the wall panel and the fire hollow came to life with violet and silver flames that cast their flickering glow against the spines of the books that lined the walls. A short spiral of steps led up to a loft where the higher shelves could be accessed.

"The library consists mostly of medical research from across the universe," Noel said. "And there might be a few mystery novels from late nineteenth and early twentieth century earth," she added with a wry smile.

M'Benga pointed to the antique model train that ran the length of the second level walkway. "Is that the Orient Express?"

"We took the liberty of reviewing your personnel file," Noel said. "It gave us a sense of your tastes."

"I had no idea my personnel file was so detailed," M'Benga said, slightly embarrassed yet flattered just the same.

"Starfleet likes to know something about its senior officers."

"Or perhaps everything," the doctor said. But he was still smiling. "This is most impressive. And much larger than I expected. I'm not sure I need this much space."

"As chief of medicine, it's important that you have a sanctuary," Noel said. "And you haven't seen everything. The bedroom is on the second level to the left. I suggest you get into the bed before you hit the button on the headboard control panel."

The doctor raised his eyebrows at this, and Noel realized her words might be interpreted as being of a highly suggestive nature. She flushed deeply and started to stammer an explanation, but was interrupted by the yellow alert.

The wall panels flashed and a short alarm sounded. It was immediately followed by the sound of a familiar voice. "This is Captain Wesley addressing the officers and medical personnel of the UHS *Mercy*. I know many of you have barely had a chance to check in, but it seems we're going to get underway a little sooner than expected. All hands report to your stations and await further orders."

It occurred to M'Benga that inspiring speechmaking did not rank high on the lists of Robert Wesley's talents.

"A yellow alert before leaving space dock," Noel said. "That has to be unusual."

This time it was Commander Latourna's voice over the ship's com. "All senior officers please report to the captain's briefing room. All senior officers to the captain's briefing room."

M'Benga looked to Dr. Noel. "I trust you know where that is?"

She smiled. "Follow me."

Chapter Four

The buzz of hundreds of diplomats moving to and fro beneath the dome of the Lifegiver barely registered with High Minister Dabbock. He dismissed several aides with a wave of his hand and they departed in a silent huff. All questions were urgent and every trivial concern an emergency when one was young. Sometimes Dabbock wondered if his aides worked for him or if it was he who did their bidding. He often reminded himself that he was no longer a soldier commanding troops.

Only Loktan was the same, forever by his side, scanning every crowd for an armed extremist or an Agmorran guerilla with a pipe bomb. "No one wants to kill an old politician, Loktan," Dabbock said time and again.

And Loktan would give his customary reply. "It is a dangerous world."

The young Drackhan's sobriety always brought a smile to Dabbock's face. Loktan must have sensed that today was a good day to keep silent and remain in the shadows. Dabbock was pensive, and more so than usual. He would never have lent credence to the tale if anyone other than Field Marshal Kalok, late of the 1st Light Guard, had told it to him. But it had been Kalok—one of the most loyal and competent officers Dabbock had ever served with. Stacked against the reputation of the field marshal was that of Dabbock's very predecessor. Lord Kralloch had resigned for the sake of principle when the Assembly voted in favor of Agmorran suffrage, but would he go so far as to foment rebellion in the name of Drackhan supremacy?

It was unthinkable.

Yet this was the tale that Kalok had whispered to Dabbock with great urgency and no shortage of regret. If Dabbock was not mistaken Marshal Kalok and Lord Kralloch were actually kin. Yes—he recalled now—Kalok was a nephew and had been something very like a third son to the old politician. This rather dramatic falling out was most unsettling.

Dabbock knew he should return to the sanctuary of his office in order to finalize his speech for the commencement ceremony. Yet he'd always done his best thinking in noisy, crowded spaces. He supposed this was because military encampments were seldom quiet places, and he'd long since grown accustomed to din and tumult.

The Drackhan delegation occupied one side of the rotunda. Dabbock could not claim that his people were comporting themselves particularly well. Several representatives sat with arms folded and noses pointed toward the lofty spaces of the dome. The Agmorrans on the opposite side were not fairing much better. They had a habit of climbing and squatting atop the table tops as often as they sat in the chairs. He supposed this was simply their nature and not due to poor manners, although he doubted that many of his people would easily accept this cultural divide.

The man who would bridge that divide was forever in the middle. The Vulcan. The High Ambassador whose every word and gesture seemed composed to dissipate enmity and coax a spirit of amity from the ashes the Klingon overlord had left to smolder. Colonel Krow had punished Agmorran and Drackhan alike, and for the first time in their shared history the two species had stood united. They'd at least been united in rebellion. Now the Vulcan seemed to believe the two species might chart a shared posterity. Dabbock would have believed it impossible prior to the Klingon occupation, yet that calamitous event had forced the Drackhan people to undergo a rather harsh self-evaluation.

Dabbock believed that if anyone could set them on that path it was this Sarek, outworlder though he may be. As High Minister, Dabbock would play his part in the proceedings and lend the Vulcan his full support, both moral and political. But right now he felt he must play the soldier once more.

If the peace conference was to have any hope of success, then it could not be disrupted by extremists of any stripe. He must investigate every threat, no matter how unthinkable.

He motioned for Loktan to accompany him. A few of his young aides moved to follow. Dabbock made a downward motion with his

hand. “Only Loktan,” he said. Then he managed a reassuring smile. “Please, my young friends. All will be attended to in due course. Now there is a matter that must take precedence.”

They were crestfallen and did not accept dismissal as readily as soldiers, yet they did accept it in their way. Such youth were the future of Drackhan society. It was a less disciplined generation, certainly, but perhaps more imaginative. Their ingenuity might build a brighter future if elders such as Lord Kralloch and even Dabbock himself knew when it was time for the old guard to yield.

The high minister’s office was tucked in a corner of the west wing. Unlike the galleries of the central dome, it was anything but ornate and somewhat cramped. Dabbock preferred it this way. He understood that as the second highest official in the Drackhan government he must present a public face, yet he also valued his privacy.

Time was running short. He could hear the band playing the anthem that signaled the start of the preceremony. He spoke quietly to Loktan as they navigated the maze of corridors. “I’m going to give you a special assignment. It will require a deft hand.”

Loktan’s hand was more heavy than deft, but Dabbock was determined to keep the matter quiet. The words he’d already spoken were sufficient to make his bodyguard understand this. As usual the younger Drackhan was content to let his superior explain in his own time. Unlike the political aides, Loktan had no particular fondness for questions.

“There have been disturbing whispers,” Dabbock said as they turned down the corridor that led directly to his office. “It seems that only former High Minister Kralloch can help us dispel these rumors.” Loktan waited in silence.

The minister stood with his hand resting on the handle of his office door. “Please locate Lord Kralloch and request that he come in for a conversation.”

Loktan had at least one question. “If he refuses?”

“See that he doesn’t.”

With these words, High Minister Dabbock threw open the office door, and was confronted with the unsettling sight of the very Drackhan with whom he wished to converse. Lord Kralloch was seated behind the high minister's own desk. He at least hadn't taken the added liberty of resting his boots upon the desktop.

Dabbock stopped short of making a quip about Loktan's efficiency. The old soldier in him considered it best to gather all of the intelligence before revealing his own state of mind. He had a sinking feeling that he might have gathered intelligence on Lord Kralloch much sooner.

As it stood now, Kralloch was smiling like the man who knew just a little more. "As you can see, Minister Dabbock, I am ever your humble servant. You need only summon me in secret and . . . well . . ." The large Drackhan demonstrated with an expansive gesture of his long arms.

Dabbock moved calmly to the refreshment stand and poured himself a cup of kalu. He motioned to his guest with the carafe, but Kralloch declined. "I'm glad you've made yourself at home in your former chair. But don't forget yourself, Lord Kralloch. You may be my honored predecessor, but the peace conference, and the very future of Cainus with it, is in my hands."

Kralloch regarded him darkly. "With all obeisance, I've come to relieve you of that responsibility. I fear it has proven too burdensome for you."

"Is this your way of admitting that these allegations levelled against you carry the weight of truth?" Dabbock asked.

"I am sorry," Kralloch told him quite sincerely. "I never wanted this. The prime minister should have allowed you an honored retirement instead of asking you to perform vital functions for which you were never well suited."

Dabbock placed his cup on the desk harder than he'd intended. "Don't be absurd. It is not your place to say anything at all concerning my functions and duties. And you, sir, are the one who might have had an honorable retirement, although you are quite clearly determined to

besmirch it. I have the authority to hold even you for questioning and that is precisely . . .”

The high minister’s words trailed off as he instinctually turned toward his bodyguard. Loktan was holding a Klingon disruptor of all things, but it wasn’t the choice of weapon that was most peculiar, but the fact that Loktan was not directing the barrel toward Lord Kralloch.

“How long have you served with me, Loktan?”

Dabbock asked. “Since you were but a youth. I know you’ve always hated the Agmorrans, yet I never mistook you for anything other than a loyal soldier.”

“You are the one who would disarm half the Guard and make lesser soldiers of us all,” Loktan said. “It is a dangerous world. And you bend your ear to outworlder lies. We need someone stronger, more conservative. Someone who will force the Aggs to behave, not coddle them. Such is the Truth of the Lifegiver. Drackhan supremacy is the only way forward.”

“You forget that we asked the outworlders to help us,” Dabbock said. “The Vulcan Sarek in particular.”

Lord Kralloch rose abruptly and pushed back the chair. “You and the prime minister and that Assembly full of puppets begged for their interference. I would sooner have perished at the hands of the Klingons.”

“And the Assembly no longer represents the will of the Drackhan people?” Dabbock asked.

“Not all of them”

“And you do, Lord Kralloch?”

“More so than you,” Kralloch said.

The band music rose higher. It was past time for the high minister to make his appearance on the dais. The dignitaries would be left waiting, although Dabbock feared they would soon suffer worse indignities at the hands of Lord Kralloch. He was suddenly overcome with indignation, and the old soldier could not stand flatfooted.

Kralloch saw the elderly Drackhan coming with surprising alacrity and stepped back. Those deft hands might inflict some damage still if not for the ease with which Loktan could pull a trigger. The

beam of deadly energy caught the high minister square in the back. But still he came on as Kralloch lost his footing and landed on his backside. Dabbock glowed red even as he rose above Kralloch, slowly dissipating like the ghost of Cainus IV‘s past.

Lord Kralloch drew himself up and adjusted his tunic. He wished the old Drackhan could have met a more dignified end, but things that were necessary were often disorderly. Perhaps it was the nature of soldiers to die fighting in vain. Kralloch believed this was why political strategists would always be the true leaders. Cainus needed Drackhans such as himself with the ability to gaze far into the future to a time when outworlders have long since given up and returned to the stars. For were not the stars the true purview of ideas lofty and ludicrous, such thing as Agg suffrage that would never come to pass so long as Kralloch and his sons drew breath.

He regarded Loktan who showed no regret for having assassinated his superior. “Are your men in position inside the dome?” he asked.

“Yes,” Loktan said. “We are ready to take back this sacred place in the name of the Life Giver.”

“Good. We shall end these heretical negotiations as soon as they have begun.” Kralloch moved to the window and gazed down upon the city. It sickened him to see humans in red tunics stationed on every corner, while Agmorrans in filthy rags came and went as they pleased. “Even now my sons are in the hills, meeting our brethren and preparing the weapon for deployment. They shall scatter these redshirted devils from the city and wipe the Agmorran scum from the Plain of the Unending Horizon. Then they shall join us here, and stand with us until the outworlders have fled.”

“Do you have further orders for me?” Loktan asked.

“I think you know your business,” Kralloch said. “But I do have one additional directive. If you encounter former Field Marshal Kalok—my nephew—you must kill him on sight.”

#

Dr. Helen Noel led M'Benga down a labyrinth of hallways to the nearest turbolift. He feared he might not find his way back again without a homing beacon. They climbed into the lift, the doors shut and the humming of machinery in motion filled their ears. When the doors hissed open the briefing room was before them. Most of the senior bridge officers were already seated around the long conference table. The medical department heads came in sporadically, with the Andorian Dr. Vormin being the last to arrive. He drifted in sporting a silver cape over his blue Starfleet tunic, and sat next to a pretty lieutenant who appeared uneasy at his presence.

A moment later Wesley swept in with Latourna following close behind. The bridge officers leapt to their feet. The medical staff, looking a bit out of sorts, had only begun to draw themselves up when Wesley said, "At ease." As one they slumped back into their seats.

Wesley cast his gaze about the room. "Is everyone present?"

"All senior officers and staff are accounted for," Latourna said with a mere glance around the table. "With one notable exception."

"Who?" Wesley grunted.

"Master Chief Engineer Greel."

"Why am I not surprised," Wesley said. He punched the com button and spoke loudly. "Captain Wesley to Master Chief Greel. Your presence is requested in briefing room one. Please don't make me ask you again."

A few of the medical officers raised eyebrows at this, but no one spoke. Wesley decided it was best to dispense with the pleasantries. "Starfleet Command informs us that the xeno-humanitarian crisis on Cainus IV has escalated. Removing the renegade Klingons was just the beginning it seems."

"What became of Colonel Krow and his followers?" Dr. Noel said. "If you don't mind my asking, Captain?"

"Most of his warriors are dead," Wesley said. "But T'Pau extradited Krow back to the Klingons, with the stipulation they not execute him. You might say he received a short sentence just the same."

"Oh," Dr. Blenheimer said. "I understood that T'Pau threw the book at him. Did the Klingons reduce the sentence?"

“No, they gave him life alright,” Wesley explained.

“But life sentences are notoriously short on Rura Penthe.”

There was a brief silence as everyone in the room contemplated the horrors of the infamous Klingon penal colony know throughout the galaxy as the alien’s graveyard. For a Klingon warrior to be exiled there was the ultimate humiliation, and it was sure to lead to a dishonorable death.

“Whatever Krow’s fate may be, he certainly left a mess on Cainus,” Wesley continued. “The planet’s two sentient species have been at one another’s throats for months now. The Drackhans are slightly more advanced, and they have an ugly history of mistreating the Agmorrans. Slavery and genocide were the reality for generations. But when Krow came they formed a necessary alliance. The Drackhans needed the Agmorrans for the first time. Promises were made, and when Krow was removed, most of those promises were broken. The inevitable result was the biggest Agmorran uprising in living memory. The damage Krow did to the Drackhan defense forces evened the odds.

“Now Vulcan Ambassador Sarek has secured a temporary armistice between the two species. No mean feat and a big step forward to be sure. The only downside is that legions of displaced Cainians are making their way toward the capital city where the negotiations are being conducted. They’re desperate for food, shelter and medical attention—none of which are in abundance anywhere on

Cainus at the moment. There’s a strong chance the negotiations will be interrupted when a riot inevitably breaks out.”

M’Benga raised a finger. “Is there any estimate on the number of displaced individuals currently in the vicinity of the capital?”

“Approximately four hundred and twenty two thousand,” Latourna said. “And rising at a rate of ten thousand six hundred and fifty per hour.”

M’Benga nodded grimly and addressed his next question directly to Latourna. “Are we fully loaded with relief supplies? I believe the *Mercy* has capacity of 100 metric tons.” He knew this

figure wasn't entirely accurate. He wanted to hear how the Lt. Commander would respond.

She did not disappoint him. "100.75 metric tons to be exact. And we are fully loaded as of zero nine hundred hours. I saw to it myself."

M'Benga smiled slightly. Latourna reminded him very much of another first officer he'd served with, and that was in no way a bad thing.

Captain Wesley cleared his throat. "Preparations to exit space dock are underway. We hope to reach Cainus IV by fourteen hundred hours. Can you prepare a relief team by then?"

"I can and I will," M'Benga said. "I understand we're carrying three E class sub- freighters. I'll require two of them with the third on standby. The Nightingale can run interference and provide quick transportation for me and my team. Once I have determined that the ground situation is stable, we'll begin dispersing basic survival kits, and then set up emergency care centers. We'll release hydration packs and thermal blankets before nightfall."

"Very good," Wesley said. "Latourna will accompany you with a full security detail."

"An armed security detail?" M'Benga asked. "I'd say these people have been exposed to far too many weapons already."

Wesley sighed, but it was Latourna who spoke up. "I agree with the doctor. And I propose that the security detail be equipped with phasers that have a stun only setting. I will also outfit the landing contingent with other nonlethal weapons of a subsonic nature."

Wesley forced a smile. "Well, Doctor, what do you say to that?"

"I say that I will trust in Commander Latourna's good judgment. As we were often reminded in med school:

Primum non nocere."

All of the medical personnel nodded their heads at this.

"I'm afraid I'm not up on my dead earth languages,"

Wesley said. "Someone wanna translate that for me?"

"First do no harm," Dr. Vormin said with a flash of jagged yellow teeth.

“Right,” Wesley said and regarded the Andorian skeptically. “It’s reassuring to hear you say it, Doctor.”

Just as Wesley was reflecting that Dr. Vormin’s gaunt visage was the most startling sight in the briefing room, a panel popped off the far bulkhead and clattered to the deck. A pair of long yellow arms extended into the room, soon followed by an elongated head with protuberant eyes and a slight prognathous about the mouth. There was a frog like cast to the face, which like the rest of the body was covered in the near translucent yellow skin and shot through with a network of red veins. The torso was small in comparison to the arms and legs, which came equipped with reversible joints and tendril like digits. The resulting dexterity lent itself to both an aptitude for climbing as well as the manipulation of complex machinery.

Master Chief Greel clambered down the bulkhead and perched himself upon a chair. He hissed something sibilant into the device clipped to his collar, and the translation came out in a human monotone. “I apologize for my tardiness. I was deep inside the Jeffries’ network, realigning the warp coils.”

“Commander Latourna,” Wesley said without taking his eyes off the Protoborian engineer. “Did Master Chief Greel just enter my briefing room through a maintenance panel?”

“Yes, sir,” said Latourna, raising an eyebrow in genuine surprise. “I do believe that is what we just witnessed.”

Wesley regarded the Protoborian for only a moment longer before turning his attention to Dr. M’Benga. “Quarter Master Donnelly will assist you with your preparations, Doctor. The Nightingale and the sub-freighters will be at your full disposal.”

“Very good,” said “M’Benga. “I’m eager to begin.”

There was a brief silence. Wesley knew this is where a commander like Jim Kirk would deliver some inspirational speech and send his officers out of the briefing room walking several feet off the deck as if they’d all donned levitation boots. As usual he found himself tongue-tied once all the orders had been issued. He decided this was perhaps an opportunity to display a little magnanimity. “Doctor

M’Benga?” he asked. “Is there anything you would like to say before we get underway?”

M’Benga gazed at the tabletop for a moment and then studied the expectant faces of his new colleagues. “On the flight from San Francisco, I happened to mention to the commodore—to Captain Wesley, I mean—that I was born on the moon. It’s nothing so unusual for a human of my generation to have been born off world, but I was remembering Lake Armstrong in particular. As a boy I’d sometimes I’d sneak out after the lights went down in Aldrin City, when the glare off the containment dome wasn’t so strong, and take my rowboat out into the middle of the lake. I had an old fashioned nautical spyglass. What we used to call a pirate glass when we were kids. It was the last gift my mother ever gave me.”

There was a short pause as the doctor looked back down at the tabletop. “I’d drift for hours and gaze into the night sky. One little dark skinned boy—maybe eleven, twelve or thirteen—lost in the darkness of the lake with the void of space all around. I’d think about girls, of course, and sports or school. And inevitably I’d think of Einstein. An odd segue I’ll admit, but I didn’t just think of the physicist, but the man himself. How odd it must have been for him after he emigrated to the United States. How he escaped, like von Hippel and others, the nightmare that was about to engulf all of Europe in his time. He was the first to postulate the theory, now a proof as I’m sure you’re all aware, that the universe is constantly expanding.”

Now the doctor gazed into the near distance. “I’d think about how that widening gulf slowly pulls all those planets, star systems and the sentient races who people them farther and farther apart. Maybe someday the gulf will be so wide that even warp engines and all the dilithium in the galaxy won’t be enough to bring us together. There were thousands of known xeno-sentient species at that time and now there are thousands more. All of them, whether they’re warmongers, peaceniks or something in between, are just people really. People in need of the same basic things as you or I. And I’d wonder, even then—I was a dreamy kid, mind you—who will aid them when they need it,

what will unite them and what will keep them from drifting forever apart, as is the universal imperative."

Wesley nodded and smiled. "If I may, Doctor. I'd say we call it the United Federation of Planets."

M'Benga returned the smile. "I'm surprised you didn't say Starfleet, Captain."

"One and the same in my book," Wesley said.

M'Benga took a last look at the assembled officers and doctors, locking eyes with each of them in turn as he spoke. "Our trials have yet to begin. During the long course of our voyage we will witness great suffering. At times we will live in the locus of tribulation and strife. But if we are resolute, if we commit ourselves mind and body, then we will not falter and we cannot fail. Let the UHS *Mercy* be our ship, our hospital, our home, and by our dedication, courage and compassion may her quality never be strained."

The room didn't break into applause and there was no cry of 'here-here,' but everyone sat a little straighter and Wesley could feel the energy. M'Benga might as well have passed out the levitation boots after all. Wesley rose slowly and placed his hands on the table. "Well, I can't very well follow that. So, I'll simply paraphrase my childhood hero. Let's light this candle. Dismissed."

They rose as one and all but sprinted to their stations. Master Chief Greel was eager to return to his network of Jeffries tubes. He moved toward the maintenance panel in the bulkhead, but was impeded when someone placed a slender yet strong hand upon his shoulder. "Mr. Greel, it is a requirement onboard this vessel that all personnel make use of the turbolift," Latourna said in a tone that was both gentle and firm. "Unless the circumstances are extreme."

"This vessel has four warp engines, Commander," Greel said. "The circumstances are always extreme." Latourna did not remove her hand, and her gaze remained fixed upon the Protoborian's veiny yellow face. At last he sighed and relented with an "Aye-aye, ma'am." Latourna watched as he made his way to the nearest turbolift, with the suction cup like appendages on the undersides of his feet making a squelching noise upon the deck.

Chapter Five

Captain Wesley had invited Dr. M'Benga to join the bridge officers for the launch. And now they were all assembled, with M'Benga and Latourna flanking the captain on either side of the conn. The first officer was in her element, with hands folded neatly behind her back, while the doctor appeared a bit fidgety and ill at ease.

Wesley could feel the tension on the bridge. Both the young navigator and helmsman were bent over their duty stations, their hands inching tentatively toward the controls. The communications officer was hunched upon his chair pressing on his earpiece hard enough to puncture an eardrum. The science officer and chief of security sat so rigidly at their stations Wesley could have sworn they'd been fitted with back braces.

"Mr. Latourna," Wesley said. "You've had the crew out on a few training runs. Care to show us what the *Mercy* is capable of?"

"I would be honored, Captain," Latourna said. She would have preferred that Captain Wesley dispense with the tradition of referring to bridge officers as 'mister' regardless of gender, but she appreciated this show of confidence in her abilities. It was a clear signal to the crew that the captain considered the first officer to be his equal. "Lt. Xeona," she called to the communications officer. "Do you have a clear channel?"

"I do, ma'am," the lt. said. "Station control is awaiting instructions."

"Very good," Latourna said. "Away all boats."

The lieutenant relayed the order, and everyone looked to the viewscreen as a flotilla of service craft with blinking red and green lights drifted away from the *Mercy* like pod fish separating themselves from a whale. "All boats are away, Commander."

A moment later, Latourna said, "Clear all moorings."

Lt. Xeona spoke into the com again. Great cables unfastened themselves and receded into tunnels in the sides of the well. "All moorings are clear, Commander."

"Secure all hatches," Latourna commanded.

"All hatches are secure, Commander."

Latourna turned to the helmsman. "Mr. Kearney, fire forward thrusters one quarter power, then fire lower thrusters one half power. Bring us to just above the rim of the well."

The massive ship slipped backwards and then rose from the well. M'Benga understood the artificial gravity was supposed to cancel out most sensations of motion, yet he felt as though he was inside the belly of the beast—a beast that had just leapt over the rim of the Grand Canyon.

"Heading zero point one two mark seven," Latourna said and waited for the helmsman to plot the course. "Forward one quarter impulse power."

Latourna had barely spoken the order when the lilting voice of the ship's computer piped up. "It is my duty to remind the bridge crew of Starfleet regulation D179.8, which stipulates that the method of propulsion for a vessel in space dock is limited to thrusters only."

Latourna looked to her captain. Wesley raised his eyebrows and shrugged. "Computer," he began. "Please alter your programming so that the only time your voice is heard on this bridge is immediately after you've been spoken to by a senior officer."

"Aye, aye, Captain," the computer said, with a fading whir.

M'Benga could have sworn that its feelings were hurt—a notion that was patently absurd. In this regard it reminded him of the *Enterprise* computer, although this voice had what sounded like an Irish lilt.

The ship remained stationary for a moment longer.

"Lt. Kearney, you were given an order," Latourna said.

The helmsman flinched. "Aye, ma'am."

The ship surged forward and slipped between the gaping doors of the space dock. It looked to M'Benga to be a bit of a squeeze, but no alarms were triggered and there was no sound of rending metal. Now only blackness and the distant glinting of thousands of stars filled the viewscreen. M'Benga tilted his head back and gazed up through

the vaulted ceiling of the bridge, where still more stars glowed high above the UHS *Mercy*.

"Bring us 90 degrees to starboard," Latourna said. "Then ahead full impulse power."

Lt. Kearney immediately complied. Her hands danced up and down the control panel and the stars reeled.

Latourna turned to the navigator. "Have you plotted a course for the Cainus system, Mr. Wainwright?"

"Yes, Commander," the young man responded. He leaned back so that Latourna could glance at his calculations.

"Heading thirteen seven nine nine zero mark twelve," Latourna called.

The gentle beeping of the helmsman punching in the coordinates seemed to fill the whole of the ship for the silence.

Latourna addressed her commanding officer.

"Captain Wesley, the honor is yours."

"Thank you, Commander," Wesley said and rose from the conn. "Mr. Kearney, ahead full. Warp factor eight."

The stars elongated and a prism of color enveloped the ship, filing the viewscreen and glowing in the domed portals of the vaulted ceiling.

Wesley felt a surge of exhilaration. It had been too long since he'd warped into deep space. He understood that even those officers who weren't assigned to the bridge might prefer to linger for a few moments, yet the mission at hand now demanded their utmost attention. He turned with the intention of reminding Dr. M'Benga that now was the time to begin prepping his relief team. "Well, Doctor," he said and found himself addressing the man's back. The turbolift doors closed and M'Benga was gone. It seemed that even a starship captain need not remind the good doctor of his duty.

Wesley felt Latourna's gaze upon him. "I hope you're not waiting on any orders from me, Commander," he said. "Surely you know your business." "I do, sir," Latourna said.

"Then be about it."

She gave one of her curt nods and stepped into the turbolift.

Robert Wesley took his seat in the captain's chair, shut his eyes for a moment and yielded to the ineluctable pull of the cosmos. "Not too old," he whispered. "Not yet."

#

Kalok had never liked the hill country. He'd been born in the capital and educated at its finest academy. That alone would have been enough to instill in him a slight disdain for the rural provinces. But a greater loathing was born of his experiences fighting the Klingons. The remains of the Drackhan Guard had been forced to take to these very hills like a band of common Aggs. The frigid weather nearly finished what the Klingons had started and all but annihilated the survivors of the Battle of Kunhuomarha. They'd subsisted on dorb roots and even resorted to hunting grong and lesser vermin. And it was their temporary allies—the despised Aggs—who'd taught them to live this way. There'd been no alternative, because it was the only way to survive. Kalok wondered how long that had been true for the Agmorrans.

And now, many moons later, Kalok found himself in the hills once again. This night was not quite so cold, but he felt frigid and bloodless just the same. He peered out from the cover of brush and watched the extremist camp, no better than a common spy. He knew that his kinsman and their allies were awaiting the approach of their fellow freedom fighters—the hill Drackhans who were eager to join his uncle's crusade.

High Minister Dabbock had listened to all of Kalok's claims of treason on the part of Lord Kralloch and his sons. The minister had promised to investigate the matter. But had Kalok been emphatic enough in warning the old soldier of his uncle's duplicity? He hoped that his uncle was under arrest or at least being held for questioning, but something told him this wasn't the case. Lord Kralloch was simply too clever. He doubted very much that the Drackhan Guard would come to his rescue this night.

Kalok wondered how long he would have to wait before something occurred. His cousins were milling about like the raw recruits they had been not so very long ago.

What manner of commander am I that they have becomome such extremists? he wondered. Yet he knew that was a battle in which his uncle was always destined to be the victor.

As Cainus's twin moons drifted toward the horizon, something began to stir deep within the forest. No cry or whistle pierced the darkness, but there was a distant crashing sound.

Kalok saw his cousin Martok flinch. The young Drackhan turned to his twin brother. "What was that, Balthun?" This was not the first time Kalok had overheard him ask such a question.

The crashing grew louder and drew nearer.

"We shall soon know," Balthun said in a show of bravado. "Try to master your fear, Brother."

They were surrounded by a handful of their father's acolytes, all of them armed with Klingon disruptors and knives and Kalok knew not what else.

Martok hissed through his clenched teeth and snorted as was the method of expressing contempt common to Drackhan soldiers. "I am not afraid."

Balthun regarded him skeptically. "Yet your voice trembles. Someone must reconnoiter the ridgeline to discover if it is our new companions or some unknown threat which bears down upon us. If you are too afraid—"

"No, I'll do it," Martok said much too quickly. He'd always been overeager to prove his bravery. It was a trait common to dead soldiers as Kalok well knew.

Martok withdrew his disruptor from the holster at his waist and crept up the ridge. With each step he slunk nearer the ground until his chest was touching the fallen leaves.

All the while the crashing grew in intensity so that Kalok feared the very trees would be toppled before this mysterious onslaught. He was grateful he'd chosen a place of concealment on the side of the clearing opposite the ridgeline.

Martok reached the crest of the ridge at last and peered into the darkness below.

"Martok, what do you see?" another Drackhan cried out.

Balthun hissed at him to be quiet.

Martok held out his hand in the universal plea for patience. At that very moment the crashing ended as abruptly as it had begun. Martok peered into the darkness with the concentration of a scholar attempting to decipher extraterrestrial hieroglyphs.

This time it was Balthun who called out to his brother, although his voice was restrained. "What . . . do . . . you . . . see?"

Martok rose into a crouch and looked back at his friends. "I'm not certain. There's something. I think it's . . ."

His words trailed off as he sensed the thing rising up from the opposite side of the ridgeline. As he turned toward it, the beast breathed its foul breath in his face. The skull was at least three times the mass of his own, and Martok's head was not small. The snout twitched and the lips curled, revealing teeth that hung like daggers from the snarling mouth. The eyes were tiny glints of silver fixated upon Martok's throat. As the reluctant scout backed away the rangy creature crested the ridge and towered high above him. It stood taller on four legs than the average Drackhan stood upon two, and it could outrun a combustion vehicle.

Kalok observed that the chain around the tannock's thick neck was sizzling and cracking with an electric current. At times he had difficulty understanding the depth of hatred that motivated the hill Drackhans to continually employ these animals to harass and control the Agmorrans. "It seems our hill brothers have arrived at last," Balthun said.

First one and then a score of hill Drackhans crested the ridge behind the snarling tannock. The large heads of still more beasts appeared, their silver eyes gleaming in the darkness. Each tannock was barely restrained with the electrified chains held by two or more of the rural Drackhans, who were dressed in the skins of still less fortunate specimens of the fierce species.

There was something of immense size rumbling up behind these Drachans and their beasts. It was partially concealed in dark cloth and camouflaged with tree braches, but Kaolok soon recognized it for the devastating weapon it was. How many Drackhan towns and Agmorran villages had been annihilated by such Klingon weaponry? It was one thing to pilfer a few disruptors, but to turn such an instrument of death as was the photon mortar battery on one's own people. It seemed his cousins truly aspired to terrorism.

Balthun stepped forward at last and exchanged greetings with the leader of the hill Drackhans, who replied in monosyllables and grunts.

Martok looked uneasy after his close encounter with the savage tannock. "Those beasts will be difficult to control," he said. "What do we need of them if we have lightning weapons?"

He believed that only his co-conspirators could hear him, but Kalok was near enough to hear all of them breathe. He was at least an accomplished spy.

Balthun dismissed his brother's concerns with a wave of his hand. "The tannocks will serve to cause much chaos on the Plain of the Unending Horizon. They will scatter the Aggs and disrupt the Federation guards. We can storm the city amidst the confusion. As Father has said, we need all of the weapons at our disposal." Martok nodded reluctantly.

The hill leader must have overheard as well, because he made what was his longest speech. "Our tannocks haven't tasted Agg meat in many moons."

"Kill all of the Aggs you wish," Balthun said. "But do not forget that it is the Vulcan who is our primary concern. Even now my father is arranging the outworlder's capture in the Dome of the Lifegiver. We must storm the dome and join Lord Kralloch there."

"The Vulcan is a filthy Agg lover," the hill leader said. "He must die screaming."

"You will leave him to Lord Kralloch," Balthun said. "My father intends to use the crystal-tongued alien to drive away the other

outworlders. But if it becomes necessary we will write a message in the Vulcan's very blood."

"We will never surrender our civilization, my brothers!" Martok cried. "Not to Klingons or the Federation and least of all to the Aggs. We are as one in that. May the Lifegiver shine His light upon our Great Crusade."

It seemed both Balthun and Martok were every bit their father's son. Kalok wondered if Lord Kralloch intended to reward his eldest son with a council seat. Of course, Balthun would have to outlive many of his father's other plans in order to accept such a reward. Several of the former high minister's devotees had not been so fortunate.

The hill leader's men and Kralloch's acolytes were forming a prayer spiral in order to pay homage to the Lifegiver. Kalok knew he couldn't shadow them forever. If he was going to act against them, now was the time. Perhaps he could sabotage the mortar battery. He had done so once before in the war against the Klingon overlord.

He turned to move deeper into the wood in hopes of circling round behind the large weapon. He came face to face with a tannock instead. Just like his cousin, he hadn't heard the large creature until it was upon him. Perhaps he wasn't so accomplished a spy after all. The creature might have devoured him outright, if not for its master's halfhearted intervention. The hill Drackhan whipped the chains and triggered a jolt of electricity sufficient to temporarily still the beast.

Kalok was soon surrounded by the band of crusaders. Several disruptors were trained upon him.

Martok smiled down at him, genuinely delighted. "Cousin, you have joined us after all!"

His brother batted him on his large nose. "Shut up, idiot!"

The hill leader grinned. "I know a spot. We'll lead him far over the ridge. And dig the ditch deeply."

"No!" Balthun said. "He is our kin. My father would want Martok and me to deal with this traitor."

Kalok searched his cousins' faces. Martok refused to meet his gaze. Balthun stared at him with hatred in his eyes, and drew his Klingon weapon. A moment later Martok mimicked his brother.

The hill leader smiled his approval.

"This will not be what you think," Kalok said. But he knew his words were wasted.

Balthun motioned with the disruptor. "Do not speak. I will not hear the words of a traitor."

Kalok wondered why they hadn't dispatched him where he stood. Perhaps the brothers wished to spare their cousin the indignity of dying before the sneering hill Drackhans. But what did they think would happen if they succeeded in seizing the Dome of the Lifegiver? How many would die ignominious and pointless deaths then?

"Walk slowly," Balthun told him.

They made their way over the ridge and into the deeper forest. Kalok reflected that it would prove an odd sensation to be led to one's death by friends, family or former subalterns. His cousins represented all three of these relationships, and yet they were prepared to dispatch him seemingly without hesitation. After all it was what their father would demand.

Kalok understood the time was short. Balthun may refuse to hear his words, but words were his only weapons at the moment. "In Crusader Square I asked you where it will end," he said. "This ever-escalating crisis. The neverending war. I think the one thing you two do not understand is that your father will never permit it to end."

"Shut up," Balthun said. "You are not fit to speak our father's name."

"Lord Kralloch cannot allow the bloodshed to end," Kalok pressed on. "Because the end of all his plans will be the end of his glorious reign. His power will only wane without outworlders or Aggs or some other threat to Drackhan freedom."

"Father gave up his leadership of the council!" Martok blurted.

"And yet he would command a small army equipped with a cache of outworlder weapons!"

"Necessary evils," Martok insisted. "We must expel the outworlders by any means."

"Necessary evils are evils nonetheless," Kalok said.

“Enough!” Balthun shouted. “Do not argue with this coward, brother!”

“Do you hear this, Martok?” Kalok asked, half turning. “Now a veteran of the Battle of Kunhuomarha can be labeled a coward. This is how malleable facts become in your father’s world.”

Balthun raised his disruptor higher and aimed at his cousin’s head. “Do not turn around. Keep moving or die here.”

Again Kalok wondered why his cousins wished to delay the execution. Perhaps they felt some pangs of conscience after all. The glance back had been sufficient to tell him they were not walking shoulder to shoulder. The twins would not be so foolish as that. He had taught them better tactics. They remained several paces behind Kalok, with Balthun staying a few lengths to the left of his brother. They were approaching the edge of a steep embankment.

Kalok understood that overpowering Martok was his best chance. He slowed his pace gradually, hoping his younger cousin would move closer by imperceptible degrees. Half a step now, and after another dozen paces, half a step more. He knew he should keep talking to further distract his would be executioners. “Do you even know the power of the weapon in your hand, Martok?” he asked. “I’ve seen what these lightning weapons, as you call them, can do. They don’t merely maim or kill. They can annihilate the bodies of living beings, so that there is nothing to bury. But I suppose that is what Lord Kralloch wants: to reduce all of his enemies to ash, be they Aggs or outworlders or even wrong thinking Drackhans.”

Kalok was at the edge of the embankment now, and he knew Martok would feel compelled to answer these accusations in spite of Balthun’s injunction. His younger cousin did not disappoint him, and the instant Martok began to speak, Kalok wheeled and leapt upon him. He tried to seize the disruptor, but only succeeded in knocking it from Martok’s hand. It tumbled to the forest floor. Martok made the error of reaching for the weapon, and Kalok took the opportunity to twist his arm and wheel him about.

“Let him go!” Balthun screamed.

Kalok held fast to his cousin, using the younger Drackhan's body to shield himself from Balthun's disruptor. He sensed that the elder twin was determined to fire the weapon. Balthun had so longed to prove himself and now he could not pass up the chance to perpetrate parricide upon such a traitor as Kalok.

"Be careful, Balthun," Kalok taunted. "What will Father say if you miss, or if you hit Martok? But we all know you will disappoint your father. . . sooner or later. He knows how scared you were of the Klingons. But I suppose cowardice runs in your side of the family."

Balthun's hand twitched as he shook with uncontrollable rage. He fired the disruptor wildly. The searing beam was wider than perhaps he'd anticipated. It did not miss by much. The energy and heat it radiated was enough to singe both Martok's shoulder and the side of Kalok's head from a distance of several centimeters.

Kalok did not attempt to prevent himself from reeling backward. An instant later the ground gave way beneath his heels and he tumbled down the embankment, gaining both speed and a multitude of contusions as he went. It occurred to him that such misadventures do not conform to the limits of ordinary time in that they feel equally instantaneous and interminable in their duration. When the veteran of Kunhuomarha reached the bottom at last, his body felt as jagged and broken as the bed of stones upon which he lay . . . motionless.

If not for the cover of the foliage, through which Kalok had so rapidly cut a swath, his cousin might finish him with a second disruptor blast. He knew the weapon had such a range, and Balthun now had ample time to steady his hand. The brothers might also take their time in descending to Kalok's resting place. He was half conscious and entirely immobilized. He wished they would come down and be done with him already. He didn't want to suffer a lingering death.

But the brothers did not come.

Gradually Kalok became aware of movement in the forest all around. Leaves rustled and parted to reveal bright eyes and shadowy faces. Soon he could distinguish furry limbs from tree branches as the small band of Agmorrans crept closer.

“It’s just like my cousins,” he muttered in his delirium. “To be frightened away by the very creatures they so desperately want to annihilate.”

With these words he lapsed into unconsciousness.

Chapter Six

Three hours out of space dock, Captain Wesley stepped through the doors of landing bay alpha to the sight of dozens of crewmen in blue jumpsuits hustling around the *Mercy*'s relief freighters. The crewmen were assisted by whirring and spinning load-bots that always put Wesley in mind of small hyperactive cranes. The freighters—named the Clara Barton and the Roberto Clemente—were boxy spacecraft each about the size of a two story building. They were constructed so that their long rectangular fuselages could open while the ships were at low altitude. There were a series of clamps along their upper hulls that once released allowed each ship to unfold to form a rectangular platform ideal for the distribution of supplies.

Dr. M'Benga stood atop the Clemente, which was fully loaded and sealed for takeoff. The doctor appeared to be inspecting the clamps with the assistance of a technician. Wesley wondered how M'Benga could see much of anything through the thick, blue tinted sunglasses he was wearing. "I happen to know Cainus IV is notorious for its gloomy skies," he called in way of greeting. "So I can only assume that you're making a fashion statement, Doctor."

M'Benga turned and gazed down at him. "At 130 over 88, I'd say your blood pressure is a little high, Captain. I'm willing to allow for the excitement surrounding the *Mercy*'s first mission, but we'll revisit that at your next physical. 175 pounds is a near ideal weight for a man your age and height. The 1st degree phaser burn you received at—age 28, I'd say—has healed very well, and your cybernetic lung is operating at a higher capacity than its organic counterpart."

"I was celebrating my 29th birthday when I ended up on the wrong end of that burning phaser," Wesley said. "But I'm impressed. Those shades are better than a tricorder, huh?"

The doctor lowered the sunglasses and peered at Wesley through unfiltered eyes. "I often use them in conjunction with my tricorder."

“Of course,” Wesley said. “I’ve come down here to tell you we’ve entered the Cainus system. We’ll take orbit around Cainus IV within the hour.”

“Excellent,” M’Benga said. “My teams are prepped.”

Latourna marched toward them dressed in fatigues and flak vest. M’Benga glared at the large phaser cannon balanced on her shoulder. “Do not be alarmed, Doctor,” she said. “It is a stun cannon.”

“Yet it makes an impression,” M’Benga said. “Quite an alarming impression.”

“That’s the general idea,” Wesley said.

M’Benga raised his index finger, but Wesley and Latourna were spared the lecture when the voice of the communication’s officer erupted over the ship’s com. “Captain Wesley, the commanding officer of the *Lexington* is . . . requesting a brief consultation with you and your senior officers.”

Wesley suspected that Lt. Xeona was practicing a bit of diplomacy. He could well imagine that, as commander of all Starfleet operations in the Cainus system, the new captain of the *Lexington* was hardly requesting much of anything these days. He punched the switch on the wall panel. “Patch him through the viewscreen in control room alpha, Xeona.”

“Aye, aye, sir.”

“Doctor? Commander?” Wesley called. “Care to join me?”

M’Benga was already climbing down the side of the Clemente. Latourna handed off her stun cannon to a security officer.

The smiling and square jawed face of Captain Bradley awaited them on the viewscreen. “Bob Wesley,” he called as the *Mercy*’s captain entered the room. “It’s nice to see you back in service.”

“They have yet to decommission me, Captain Bradley,” Wesley said. It was a strange sensation to find himself staring at the bridge of his old ship with a new captain seated at the conn.

“I wanted to officially welcome you to my little fleet,” Bradley said with a nearly imperceptible smirk. “And find out how soon you can you get a relief team on Cainus IV.”

“Within the hour, Captain,” M’Benga said.

"Wonderful," Bradley said. "Let's make it happen then. My security people have divided the Plain of the Unending Horizon into quadrants and penned off the refugees with level three laser wire."

"Is the laser wire necessary?" M'Benga asked.

"Have these people displayed any signs of aggression?" "They haven't so long as the laser wire has been up," Captain Bradley said. "We have to protect the capital, Doctor. That's where the peace negotiations are being conducted."

M'Benga did not appreciate the condescending tone of the man's voice. He started to say more, but Wesley broke in with a question. "What kind of numbers are we looking at now?"

"Must be closing in on half a million," Bradley said. "I just hope your relief team can handle it." M'Benga narrowed his eyes at this.

"We have two sub-freighters prepped and fully loaded," Wesley said. "With more to follow. Our medical personnel are the finest in the galaxy. Their security team will be led by my number one, who is the best—"

"Let me stop you there, Bob." Captain Bradley held out his hand, all but obscuring the viewscreen. "We already have security teams from the Lex, the *Excalibur* and the Copernicus on the ground. Plus several shuttlecraft patrolling the skies. We've got the security situation well in hand. Just send your medical personnel and leave the rest to us. Don't worry. We'll take good care of your doctors and nurses."

Now it was Wesley's turn to be angry, but he was determined not to let it show. He drew a deep breath through his nose and forced a smile. "I'm going to have to question you on that one, Captain." In the past he might have said 'I'm going to countermand you,' but Bradley had full tactical command. Wesley could not override him regardless of rank. He was forced to take a more diplomatic tact. "As you say, these are my doctors and nurses, and I'd be more comfortable with my own security people backing them up."

"I understand, Bob. But the situation is delicate to say the least. It took a long time to get things stabilized to the point where negotiations can be conducted. My people are coordinated and

functioning like a Rigellian clock. No offense to your first officer or any of your security folks, but we just don't have room for any dunsels. Not now."

Wesley knew these remarks were in no way directed at Latourna. Bradley's reference to a dunsel—the term midshipmen commonly used to describe a part which serves no useful purpose—was aimed solely at Wesley himself. The commodore had once used the term to goad Jim Kirk, who happened to be one of the most respected captains in the fleet. He'd meant it as a harmless jibe, but that wasn't how it had come across amidst the tensions of the M-5 incident. Now it seemed that other commanding officers would never let him live it down.

"Very well, Captain Bradley," Wesley said. "It seems your decision is final. Dr. M'Benga and his relief team will be on site within the hour."

He killed the vid feed before Bradley could say anything more. It was a bit irregular and damned rude, but he simply didn't want to hear the man gloat. Latourna knew better than to say anything, although she too was angry that her security team had been barred from the relief mission. M'Benga was not disappointed, but he kept mum as well.

"Your teams are probably waiting on you, Doctor," Wesley said.

"Yes, sir," M'Benga said. "No doubt they are." He bowed slightly and backed out of the room.

"You should see if they need any help with the final preparations, Latourna."

"Aye, sir," the first officer said and followed the doctor.

The hour passed slowly for Wesley. He returned to the bridge and guided the *Mercy* into orbit around Cainus IV, although the helmsman might just as easily have performed the routine task without a single command from his captain. A few minutes later Wesley approved the deployment of the Barton and then the Clemente. "I'm going to see the Nightingale off myself," he said, rising from his chair. "You have the conn, Mr. Kearney"

Dr. M'Benga was wearing his blue glasses again, and he had donned a navy blue coat with a caduceus on one breast pocket and the Starfleet medical insignia on the other. The shining stars and blue background of the UFP emblem adorned the patch on his right shoulder.

"Doctor, I do believe that coat makes you look taller," Wesley said as he entered docking bay alpha.

"I'll take that," M'Benga said and smiled slightly.

Latourna joined them. "The Nightingale's pilot informs me that the ambu-shuttle is ready to deploy. She was most emphatic."

"I don't doubt it," M'Benga said and turned toward the ship. He climbed the short gangplank, and paused in the open hatchway. "Captain Wesley. Commander

Latourna." He offered each of them a nod as the Nightingale's engines began to hum.

"Listen, Doctor," Wesley said. "Don't you think it's time we dispensed with all the formality. There's no reason you can't simply call me Bob, so long as we aren't on the bridge and there aren't any junior officers present." "Very well," M'Benga said. "Bob it is then."

Wesley shouted over the sound of the engines, which had risen in intensity. "And what can I call you?" He knew from M'Benga's personnel file that the man had a first name, although he couldn't quite recall it at the moment.

M'Benga stepped inside the hatchway of the Nightingale, and the gangplank was wheeled away by two techs in red jumpsuits. He leaned forward and, with only the ghost of a smile, called down to answer Wesley. "You can call me Dr. M'Benga. Whatever else?"

The hatch irised shut in the wink of an eye and the doctor was gone. Wesley and Latourna were obliged to move back into the control room as the whine of the Nightingale's impulse engines filled the docking bay. A moment later they watched through the window, as the ambu-shuttle slid forward and shot through the yawning doorway, which no sooner slid shut again.

"Bob," Latourna said, turning to her captain. "Shall I keep my security team on standby?"

Wesley flushed. “You manage in the course of one sentence to presume both too much and too little, *Lt. Commander*.”

The emphasis he put on her rank told Latourna that the invitation to break with formality did not extend to her. “Yes, Captain,” she said.

“You seem to expect me to tell you that which should be second nature,” he said. “I hope that trend will not continue for the entire five year run of this mission.”

“I assure you that it will not, sir.”

“I’ll be on the bridge,” Wesley said. He might have added ‘if anyone needs me,’ but the shreds of his dignity prevented it.

#

“I’m asking you for the last time, Commander,” M’Benga all but shouted into his communicator. “Turn off the laser wire!”

The physician stood atop the hull of the Nightingale some 200 meters above the Plain of the Unending Horizon. He gazed down upon the multitude of desperate Cainians surging against the yellow glow of the wire. Most of the refugees were Agmorrans, the planet’s less advanced sentient species, but there were Drackhans in the throng as well. The former were squat and somewhat hirsute, while the more dominant species tended to be svelte with long limbs and ashen skin.

“Negative, Doctor,” came the insistent voice of the security officer on the ground. “We can’t shut the grid down. Not while they’re agitated like this. They might storm the capital.”

“They’re agitated because many of them are receiving first-degree burns from the damned lasers!” M’Benga took a deep breath and composed himself. A display of emotion was seldom the most practical method of attaining one’s goals. “Commander, I was given this assignment for a reason. You must trust that I know what I’m doing. I will control the crowd. Now shut down the grid.”

There was a long pause. “Okay, doc,” the Commander said at last. “It’s your party. But if a full scale riot breaks out it’s—”

M’Benga snapped his communicator shut. He didn’t need to hear any clichés about his death warrant or his funeral. He paused and

looked toward the large city in the distance. The skyline of stone buildings and smoke stacks reminded him that this was a planet in the early stages of industrialization. The woody hills on the horizon bespoke of the more rural existence that was the reality for the majority of the population. And the sea of despondent people in between embodied the terrible aftermath of war.

As he watched the intersecting laser lines flickered and vanished. The crowd appeared to breathe a collective sigh of relief. M'Benga flipped his communicator open again and adjusted the frequency. "Take me down to the Clemente, Laz."

The sub freighters were circling the plain at a height of 100 meters. As the Nightingale descended, the wide rectangular hull of the Clemente presented a surface upon which the smaller spacecraft might have landed, but Lazenbee kept the ambu-shuttle hovering just above the freighter. M'Benga unhooked his safety harness, slid down the side of the Nightingale and landed on top of the Clemente.

A hatch opened near his boots, and the white haired head of Dr. Blenheimer emerged. "That type of daring do is going to make me nervous, Dr. M'Benga," she said in her Austrian accent.

"Time is of the essence," M'Benga said. "They finally switched off the laser wire."

He followed her down the hatchway. The cramped interior of the ship was illumined with red light that cast an eerie glow on both the metallic supply crates and the faces of the blue garbed medical personnel. M'Benga wended his way to the cockpit, ducking to avoid those crates that were mounted on the upper bulkhead. "It's time, Chief," he told the pilot. "Let's open shop, and descend to five meters."

"Aye, aye, sir," said the chief. The man proceeded to flip several switches in a pattern that the doctor could not discern.

The sound of the clamps snapping open was like a succession of sledge hammer strikes from stern to bow. There was a hiss of decompression and the whirring of several motors. Then the ship was divided by an expanding ray of sunshine as the upper bulkhead, and those crates that had been mounted above, unfolded into two great

wings. In less than three minutes the freighter converted itself into a floating platform, shaped not unlike a football field of old.

Dr. Blenheimer stood with her white hair aglow in the sunshine and the wrinkles of her face tracing the lines of a million smiles. “Cainus IV gets approximately twelve sunny days per per solar cycle, Doctor,” she called as she punched in the code to open the first crate. “I think we can take this as an auspicious augury.”

M’Benga suspected that Dr. Blenheimer no more believed in auguries than he did, but there was something reassuring about the sunlight. It lent a touch of warmth to what was otherwise a harsh environment. He moved to the edge of the platform and looked down. The crowd was restless, but the Cainians weren’t rioting, and they certainly weren’t about to storm the capital.

The medics and nurses worked quickly and efficiently to unpack the supply crates. Only one man seemed out of place and uncomfortable in his blue tunic. The others were impatient with his fumbling as he ducked and tried to stay out of their way. For reasons all his own he appeared determined to avoid Dr. M’Benga’s gaze.

Lt. junior grade Simon Walid Levant was glad that Bob Wesley had entrusted him once more, but that didn’t make him feel any less a common spy. It didn’t hurt to have an experienced security officer watching the doc’s back, but he doubted M’Benga would see it that way. All things being equal Levant would just assume face a horde of angry Horta rather than get caught impersonating a member of the good doctor’s relief team. He could swear the others were visualizing his tunic as bright red when in fact he was clad in blue. But the professionalism of the actual medical personnel more than made up for his lack of experience and he was at least able to help with the heavy lifting.

The next three hours passed in a blur with M’Benga and his teams in constant motion. The doctor had insisted the freighter pilots not bring their ships any lower until the crowd was under control. He broadcast instructions through a combination amplifier and universal translator. He encouraged the refugees to select leaders from among

their own ranks, and soon these representatives performed a triage, sending those with the most urgent need to the fore.

Only then did the freighters descend to a depth of two meters from which the supplies might easily be dispersed. The hydration packs were the first to go—each contained a chemical compound that could be used to extract clean water from a puddle of mud. The replicators on both ships worked constantly to produce protein concentrate in the form of less than appetizing brown pellets. The medical personnel soon wound through the crowd with handheld sensors flashing and hypos at the ready. In the meantime, technicians and bots worked to set up the temporary hospitals.

M'Benga was in the middle of it all, repairing an Agmorran child's fractured wrist, when the first photon mortar shell whistled through the air and exploded in the center of the capital city. Clouds of dust wafted into the sky and the tallest of the stone buildings rocked and swayed. Two more photon mortars arched over the plain and struck other quarters of the city.

The concussive booms of the explosions shook the ground for miles. The anatomical differences of the various species assembled on the plain seemed to melt away as hundreds of thousands of faces wore the same expression of disbelief and each pair of hands twitched for want of something to do.

Then several large creatures burst from the tree line just below the far hills and raced toward the crowd at a rate of 20 kilometers per hour. They looked like something akin to wolves in the eyes of the Federation personnel, but as they neared it became apparent they were as large and fast as Clydesdale horses with jaws like those of grizzly bears.

The crowd surged like a wave of biomass, and M'Benga knew he couldn't fight the tide. He threw the child over his shoulder and ran for the nearest freighter, which appeared to be the Clemente. The flat surface of the deck was being overrun with panic stricken Cainians. M'Benga could see the ship begin to wobble with the weight of those teeming bodies. It looked like the stabilizers were about to fail. His communicator was already chirping as he managed to flip it open with

his left hand, while cradling the now wailing child on the crook of his right arm. He found himself wishing that Commander Latourna and her security team had been allowed to accompany them after all.

"Doc, where are you?" cried the tinny voice of the Clemente's pilot. "We're getting swamped! The Barton too!"

"So, I see," M'Benga said. "Take the ships up now. Don't wait for me. Get out of range of those mortars."

He didn't have to give the order twice as both freighters rose above the plain. The doctor winced as a few Agmorrans clung for a desperate moment to the edge of the Clemente before inevitably dropping back to the ground. None of the falls appeared to be fatal, and M'Benga was impressed with the steady rate at which the pilots of the freighters guided their ships to safety. He was glad that at least a handful of refugees had found temporary safety aboard the Starfleet vessels, but there were scores of less fortunate Cainians being trampled in the crush.

He waved with his free hand and appealed for calm as the smallish Agmorrans rushed past, shoving and stumbling. But all hope of an orderly retreat was lost when the fearsome creatures reached the outer environs of the crowd. M'Benga no sooner heard cries of "Tannocks! Tannocks! Vicious tannocks!" before he witnessed bodies being flung into the air. Sentient beings rendered up as so much bloody meat—it was an act of defilement he'd witnessed too many times. It made his stomach churn.

All of his immediate hopes were invested in the safety of the child in his arms. He felt every bit the desperate guardian with her small fuzzy face pressed to his neck and the warmth of her tears running beneath his collar. He soothed her as best he could and ran with the crowd. Soon he felt a hand upon his arm and turned to see a familiar face.

"Just stick with me, doc," said the Starfleet officer running at his side. "I'll get you out of this."

The man was wearing a blue tunic with a medical emblem in the center of the star on his chest, yet the confidence with which he

wielded the small phaser in his hand put the lie to the color of the uniform shirt.

"Lieutenant Levant, I believe," M'Benga said. "You appear to have donned the wrong uniform this morning, but I can't say I'm sorry to see you."

"It's nice to see you again too, sir," Levant shouted. "Now let's separate ourselves from the pack and take cover."

Levant spotted a ditch and guided the doctor, along with his young charge, to the temporary safety of this low ground. The security officer peered over the edge and flipped open his communicator. "Levant to anybody. I've got Dr. M'Benga and one guest. Beam us up or come get us, but don't make us late for the party. We're at latitude 52 and longitude 68, give or take a few degrees."

There was a roar worthy of the Serengeti Plain and M'Benga looked up to see a tannock bearing down on their position. "That one's coming straight for us," he called, shielding the child.

Levant was already on his feet, aiming the phaser.

M'Benga noticed what appeared to be a Drackhan soldier running behind the tannock. At first he assumed this soldier intended to shoot the creature with what appeared to be a Klingon disruptor, but he quickly realized the man had slowed his pace in order to take aim at Levant. M'Benga grabbed the security officer by his belt and pulled him back into the ditch. The disruptor bolt sizzled by overhead. A split second later it was followed by the bulk of the tannock. Both soldier and monster had set their sights on the most likely target in the person of Levant.

The creature's leap ended in a crash and roll far on the opposite side of the ditch, but it would soon be back on all four of its hooves.

"I'll distract the beast," M'Benga said in Levant's ear. "You knock out its master."

"What master?" Levant asked.

"The one that just tried to vaporize you with a Klingon weapon," M'Benga said. He gestured in the direction from which the disruptor bolt had originated.

The Agmorran child curled herself into the fetal position, which was an enviable strategy. M'Benga quickly patted her head and picked up the fist-sized rock lying next to her.

"You're kidding yourself, doc," Levant told him.

"Just deal with the soldier," M'Benga said. "Then worry about me. One. Two. Three. Go."

The doctor leapt over the rear wall of the ditch, as Levant rose up to provide cover fire. The soldier pointed the barrel of his disruptor at M'Benga's back, but Levant was faster. The beam of his phaser caught the Drackhan square in his broad chest and sent him reeling backwards.

Levant spun around to see the doctor hurling his rock in the face of the charging tannock. The creature barely registered the missile, and M'Benga just managed to dive clear of its path. "Goodnight, beautiful," Levant said and fired his phaser again.

The beam struck the belly of the beast, and while the tannock did stagger, it didn't go down.

The lieutenant regarded his phaser. "Stun only piece of junk," he said. He resisted the urge to fling the weapon aside and search for a rock of his own. The tannock had fixed him with its silvery eyes and soon it was moving rapidly in his direction. He gave it everything the small phaser had, yet onward it came, snarling and grinding its teeth as if in demonstration of how it would repay him for the phaser fire.

The doc had a hypo in his hand and was running full tilt in preparation for a leap onto the tannock's back. *Gotta love the man's can-do spirit,* Levant thought. *Too bad it's gonna get him killed*.

That's when he heard the explosion of an energy beam from somewhere over his right shoulder. At first he was afraid the soldier had recovered in time to help his pet finish the job. But that explosion hadn't been the sound of disruptor fire. A much larger phaser beam hit the tannock and sent it spinning across the plain like a stricken hedgehog.

Both Levant and M'Benga turned to see Emergency Space Medic Lazenbee sitting on the ground a few yards from their ditch. The stun cannon was still on her shoulder, and it wasn't much of an

exaggeration to say that the weapon rivaled her in size. The cannon's kickback had been sufficient to knock her on her butt.

There was a whirring sound and the men glanced up to the sight of the Nightingale hovering a few meters overhead. M'Benga retrieved the child and returned her to his shoulder. Then both he and Levant scooped Lazenbee up by her armpits and hauled her stun cannon and all toward the ambu-shuttle as it touched down. "Nice shooting, Laz," M'Benga said, eyeing the large weapon.

"It was a gift from Commander Latourna," Laz said, still half-dazed.

The hatch barely closed before Mr. Gert had them airborne. M'Benga thrust the Agmorran child into Levant's arms and stumbled backwards against the bulkhead as the shuttle banked to the left. The roar of the thrusters filled his ears and the chaotic scene on the plain receded through the port window. He was afforded a reeling, panoramic view as scores of innocent Cainians fled in every direction. The photon mortars were falling on the plain now. M'Benga saw one of the temporary hospitals take a direct hit. There were several casualties, with Starfleet personnel in both red and blue tunics lying among the dead and wounded.

The leather garbed Drackhan soldiers, who appeared to be controlling the tannocks, were storming the city now. The Starfleet troops were still trying to recover from the mortar attack and they could not mount a sufficient defense. These Drackhan extremists breached the city gate, and advanced rapidly toward the center of the metropolis. It dawned on M'Benga that the dome where the peace conference was being conducted must be their ultimate target.

He struggled forward to the cockpit. "Take us over the capital, Mr. Gert."

"We've been instructed to assume orbit and await further orders," the Tellarite said.

"Gerty, didn't you hear Dr. M?" Laz said and flung herself over the back of the co-pilot's seat. "He just gave us some further orders."

M’Benga was relieved to see that the young medic had fully recovered from her adventure on the plain. “Watch out for more of those photon mortars,” he warned.

“The deflectors are already raised,” Gert said.

“Where’d they get photon mortars?” Laz asked.

“Another legacy of the Klingon war criminal, I’m afraid,” M’Benga said. “Discarded weapons inevitably fall into the hands of terrorists.”

The capital city was a maze of streets and stone buildings. The negotiations were being conducted in a large domed structure fronted by a rise of steep marble steps. The crumpled forms of several bodies lay strewn upon these steps. Two of them were Drackhan extremists dressed in leather skins. The others were Starfleet Security officers with the evidence of a darker red staining their uniforms. One officer fired his phaser from a prone position before collapsing entirely and rolling down the steps. He’d fired in the direction of the dome’s entranceway.

“The terrorists have taken the dome,” M’Benga said. He leaned forward over Laz’s shoulder and gazed through the cockpit window, with Levant crowding in behind him.

“Does this shuttle have phasers?” the security lieutenant asked.

“It does not,” M’Benga said. “And if it did, how would we employ them, Lieutenant? To blow up the entire dome and everyone who is attending the peace conference just to spite the terrorists?”

The doctor pointed to an outbuilding. “There, Mr. Gert. Set us down in the courtyard behind that building.”

“Belay that order,” Levant said. “Have you lost your mind, doc? Last time I checked you weren’t in Starfleet Special Ops.”

“Nor do I intend to request a transfer,” M’Benga said. “But I am your superior officer and I am in command. There are people down there in need of immediate medical attention. Don’t work against me, Lieutenant. That’s all I ask.”

Apparently, Laz and Mr. Gert needed no convincing, because the shuttle was descending toward the area M’Benga had indicated.

“Just get me close enough to hit the ground running,” the doctor said, removing a first aid kit from a wall panel. He felt something impeding his movement and glanced down to see the Agmorran child clinging to his leg. He patted her on the head. “Levant, do you want to give me a little help here?”

“What am I supposed to do with her?” the lieutenant asked, gently peeling the child from M’Benga’s leg.

“Take care of her until we can get her somewhere safe.”

“Oh, no, Doctor!” Levant said. “If you’re going down there I’m coming with you. I promised Commodore Wesley—”

M’Benga flashed a knowing grin.

Levant rolled his eyes at his own stupidity. It seemed he was no Starfleet Special Ops agent either. “The point is I’m coming with you.” He spun around and placed the child on Lazenbee’s lap.

Laz stiffened and said, “Hey, sure dump the kid on me. It’s not like I’m trying to co-pilot a shuttle in the middle of an active war zone.” Yet the young ESM managed to balance the child on one knee, while helping to guide the Nightingale into the narrow courtyard.

“That’s close enough,” M’Benga said. “I’d just assume you keep the shuttle off the ground. In fact, take the child to the *Mercy* and come back for us later.” He moved aft and opened the hatch.

“Hold on,” Levant called. “At least let me go first.” The lieutenant had retrieved Latourna’s stun cannon. He leapt through the hatch with it in his arms, hit the ground and immediately threw himself into a barrel roll.

M’Benga followed him down, but didn’t bother with any acrobatics. As the doctor approached, Levant was making wide, back and forth sweeps of the courtyard with the cannon. He could feel M’Benga’s gaze upon him. “Can’t be too careful in a combat situation,” he said. But he felt a little foolish for the heavy handed dramatics. The courtyard was clearly deserted.

“I’m going to try to reach the security officers on the steps of the dome,” M’Benga said.

Levant nodded. “Good. I’ll cover you.”

The doctor was already on the move. He was quick and agile for a medical officer. Levant followed him at a distance of about ten meters. They rounded the dome, where M'Benga checked to see if the first fallen redshirt had a pulse. The doc employed his scanner and attempted CPR, but the grim expression on his face told Levant all he needed to know. The lieutenant counted a total of five redshirts lying on or near the steps of the dome. And frankly none of them looked any better than the guy M'Benga was working on at the moment. It was a scene he'd witnessed too many times. He couldn't help but wonder when his turn would come, and he'd end up another dead red, gone and forgotten.

Ultimately the doctor had no choice but to give up on the first casualty of the assault on the peace conference. He moved up the steps in order to examine the other officers in turn, but each prognosis was no better than the first. Only the last one, who appeared to be a young woman of South Asian ancestry, was still breathing, and M'Benga worked frantically to seal her wounds. After a few minutes, he motioned Levant forward, but the lieutenant was suddenly pinned down when the shooting started.

Levant estimated that there were at least three snipers. They were firing from inside the dome. And they all seemed to be armed with Klingon weapons. He saw M'Benga shield the wounded woman with his body. The security veteran crept higher on the steps, hoping to draw fire away from doctor and patient. He began to count the blasts, trying to detect a pattern. None was discernable, so he feinted with the stun cannon and they all fired at once. He heard several disruptor bolts whiz by overhead, then sprang up and fired a stun burst into the dome. The energy reverberated around the vestibule of the main chamber.

Levant half convinced himself that he heard a few thuds from inside. Maybe it was his imagination, but it was satisfying all the same. His hopes were quickly dashed when a voice called from behind one of the columns on the third story balcony. "Do that again, human, and we'll kill every last hostage!"

Dr. M'Benga rose to a crouching position. "Why have you taken hostages?" he demanded.

“For the Glorious Crusade to rid Cainus of all outworlders,” the voice replied.

Levant did not like how calm the Drackhan sounded. There was something of the brainwashed zealot in that detached tone.

“There’s nothing glorious about killing innocent people,” M’Benga said. “I am a physician. Allow me to treat the wounded.”

There was a pause. Perhaps the Drackhan was having difficulty translating the term physician. “You are a surgeon?” The voice inquired at last.

“I am,” M’Benga said.

This time the pause was longer. Levant was just relieved the snipers had ceased fire for the time being.

“Are you in need of a surgeon?” M’Benga called.

There was no response, yet the silence itself was telling.

M’Benga waved to Levant, and the security officer carefully made his way toward doctor and patient.

“I have stabilized the ensign,” M’Benga told him. “But she requires extensive surgery. I want you to contact the *Mercy* and request that they beam you both aboard.” “And what are you gonna do?” Levant asked.

“I need you to support her head,” M’Benga said, ignoring the lieutenant’s question. “Give me the weapon.” Letting go of the stun cannon was the last thing Levant wanted to do at the moment. He expected the Drackhans to resume firing at any time. “You didn’t answer my question, Doctor. What is your plan?”

“Just give me the gun,” M’Benga said. “And support the ensign’s head before she begins to hemorrhage again.”

Reluctantly Levant did as he was ordered and cradled the young woman’s head in his lap. M’Benga took up the stun cannon, but looked as if he barely knew the barrel from the stock. “See if you can contact the *Mercy*,” he told Levant.

“Fine,” the lieutenant said and opened his communicator. “But I’d still like to know what you’re gonna do?”

“Better that I show you,” M’Benga said. The doctor stood up and hurled the cannon onto the uppermost steps of the dome. Then he

thrust his hands in the air, palms out and called up to the soldier on the third story. “I surrender myself as a hostage to the Glorious Crusade!”

Levant winced and braced for the disruptor fire but it didn’t come.

“I know you’re in need of a surgeon,” M’Benga said. “And I’m offering you my services.” He moved slowly up the steps, sparing a glance back at Levant that made it clear he expected his last order to be followed.

The lieutenant adjusted the frequency on his communicator. “Levant to UHS *Mercy*. We’ve got wounded down here. Lock onto my signal and prepare to beam us up. Over.”

The crackling voice of the *Mercy*’s communications officer replied a moment later. “*Mercy* calling Levant. There’s some type of radiation interfering with your signal. What is your position?”

“We’re in front of the dome in the middle of capital,” Levant said. He wondered what type of rock the dome had been carved from. By the look of it, the way it glistened in the sun, there was little doubt that it was emitting the radiation.

“We have a lock on you, but it’s tenuous at best,” said the com officer. “How many are in your party?”

M’Benga had climbed to the top of the stairs. Several armed Drackhans emerged from the dome, and quickly surrounded the doctor. They forced him to his knees and searched him. There were several disruptors trained on the young physician.

Levant cursed.

“I didn’t catch that,” said the com officer. “Repeat. How many in your party?”

Levant looked down at the wounded woman whose fate was literally in his hands. “Just two,” he said into his communicator. “Beam us up now if you have a lock.”

Wesley might not be happy with him, but Levant couldn’t very well bring back the *Mercy*’s chief of medicine if the Drackhans vaporized the man. And he didn’t doubt that the extremists would start blasting away at the first sign of a transporter lock. Besides, it seemed unlikely the *Mercy*’s transporter chief could even get a lock on the

doctor at this point. The radiation combined with the huddle of soldiers that surrounded M'Benga would surely make it impossible.

There was a familiar whining noise, and Levant felt the sensation of weightlessness that always accompanied teleportation. He was relieved to see that the young ensign had started to glow with silvery light. The same light began to fill his field of vision, as he looked up in time to witness the extremists dragging M'Benga into the dome. The doctor appeared indifferent to the rough treatment. He glanced back one last time, and nodded approvingly just before the glow of the beam obscured everything.

Levant found himself kneeling on the *Mercy*'s transporter pad, with the Ensign's head still on his lap. He stood up cradling the young woman in his arms, as a team of blue garbed medical techs swarmed around them. "You're in good hands, kid," he whispered, gently placing the unconscious redshirt on a gurney. "I just wish we could say the same for the doctor."

Part II: Above This Sceptered Sway

Chapter One

The last place Robert Wesley wanted to be was the very place he'd once longed to be: onboard the USS *Lexington*. Yet to the *Lexington* he'd been summoned like some administrative officer. The relief mission on Cainus IV was well underway. He belonged on the bridge of the *Mercy* from where he could monitor the situation on the planet's surface. What made matters worse was that the only other officer Wesley would completely trust to coordinate the relief effort wasn't on the bridge of the *Mercy*, or on Cainus IV where she was truly needed, but seated beside him.

At the moment he and Latourna were the only ones occupying the *Lexington*'s briefing room. It seemed Captain Bradley was determined to keep them waiting indefinitely. This impromptu conference was a damned nuisance and yet another way for the *Lexington*'s young commander to indicate how little he regarded both Wesley and the mission of the UHS *Mercy*. But what really bothered Wesley was the inevitable flood of memories that came with being back onboard his old ship. The *Lexington* hadn't been his first command assignment, but it was the only command he'd lost before the conclusion of a standard five year mission.

After they'd waited a long twenty minutes, the doors slid open to admit Captain Butala of the *Excalibur* and Captain Van Eldik of the Copernicus. Their own first officers were presumably in command of the respective starships. Wesley could only assume that Bradley's insistence that Latourna attend the conference was yet another way of saying that he considered the *Mercy* to be merely a floating hospital, and not a starship that required an experienced officer at the conn.

They exchanged greetings with the two captains, but the small talk was preempted by the red alert. Wesley felt an all too familiar sensation in the deck plating beneath his boots. It was a faint rumbling,

but Latourna sensed it too. The *Lexington* had fired its main phaser banks.

The four officers rose as one and rushed into the corridor. Security personnel and technicians were moving to and fro. Wesley stopped a crewman. “What’s going on, son?”

“I don’t know, sir,” the young man said. “The red alert just sounded and the captain ordered us to battle stations!”

“Better get there then,” Wesley said, quietly hoping the green crewman would manage to locate his battle station.

“Someone must know what the nature of the emergency is,” Captain Van Eldik said. She looked up and down the corridor.

Wesley knew she was thinking of the safety of her own ship and crew. His thoughts and those of Captain Butala were running along a parallel course. They might head for the transporter room, but the chances of being beamed back to their respective ships during a red alert were not good. “Shall we head for the bridge?” he asked.

The other captains nodded their ascent. It would be a little irregular for them to rush onto Bradley’s bridge in the middle of an emergency, but they weren’t about to sit on their hands while battle raged. This was not the most peaceful sector of space. There might be an entire fleet of renegade Klingons de-cloaking all around them.

They headed for the turbolift, but the doors opened before they reached it. The ensign who came toward them looked as though he’d wandered away from a cadet review. He was clearly nonplussed to see that the guests had the audacity to leave the waiting room. “Captain Bradley sends his apologies,” he said. “But I’m afraid a situation has arisen that demands his immediate attention.”

“You don’t say,” Wesley said.

“I think the best thing we can do is return to the briefing room and await further instructions,” the young man said. It was a valiant attempt to carry out his orders.

Latourna almost felt sorry for the ensign as the captains pounced on him like a trio of Denevan parasites and literally forced him back into the turbolift. Latourna followed and directed the lift to take them to the bridge.

“What’s going on out there, Ensign?” Captain Butala asked. “Are we under attack?”

“Not at the moment. But something is transpiring on the planet’s surface.”

“Why have we fired phasers?” Wesley demanded.

The turbolift doors opened before the young officer could answer. Wesley was the first to step onto the bridge. He was immediately confronted with the still alien sight of another commander seated upon the *Lexington*’s conn. Bradley half turned and leaned over the back of the chair. He appeared surprised and more than a little annoyed at the sudden intrusion. Wesley saw a flicker of uncertainty in the younger man’s eyes, but then Bradley summoned his customary bravado.

“I apologize for being an inattentive host,” he said. “But as you can see I’m a little busy at the moment.” “Are we in battle or not?” Wesley asked.

“The battle is on Cainus at the moment,” Bradley said. “Our personnel are being shelled, and the energy readings are consistent with photon mortars. It seems we still have Klingons on the planet surface. They must have been hiding under our noses all along.”

“That is unlikely,” Latourna said.

Bradley wheeled around, startled that Latourna was suddenly on his left. Wesley was not surprised. His X-O moved like a lynx.

“Why is it unlikely?” Bradley asked. “Enlighten me, Latourna.”

“A bird of prey has a crew contingent of a dozen officers and men with only limited space for additional personnel. Colonel Krow led approximately sixty two men to Cainus IV, and there were few survivors among his warriors. But if there were deserters, there is no reason to believe they would continue to conduct offensive operations without their overzealous leader to incite them.”

Bradley turned away as if dismissing Latourna’s logic. “A photon mortar attack seems plenty offensive to me,” he said, leaning back in the conn with a smirk. “Commander Ellsburg,” he called to his first officer. “I’m still waiting on that status update.”

“Just a moment, Captain,” Ellsburg said. He sat hunched in front of his station, with his hand cupped over his earpiece. “The mortar battery is still intact. It has launched another barrage.”

Bradley slammed his fist on the arm of the conn. “Dammit!”

“Is that why you’re firing phasers at the planet?” Wesley asked. “You’re taking stabs at the mortar battery from orbit?”

“We’re trying to take it out!” Bradley insisted. “Before any more of our people are killed!” His voice was shrill and much too emphatic. “We have to do something. We’ll just have to deal with the consequences later. I gave the order, and I’ll accept full responsibility.”

There was a perceptible silence on the bridge. Wesley got the distinct impression that collateral damage had already occurred. He hesitated only an instant before asking the obvious question. “Take full responsibility for what, Captain?”

“For firing ship’s phasers!” Bradley said.

Everyone in the room could tell there was something the captain wasn’t ready to admit. He looked down and unconsciously wrung his hands.

“It is against regulations to fire on a developing civilization,” Captain Van Eldik said.

“I’m well aware of that!” Bradley snapped. “I was firing at the Klingons! Since when are they a developing civilization?”

“But there aren’t any Klingons on Cainus, as far as we know,” Wesley said. “And I take it you missed the mortar battery. What did you hit instead?”

“The mortar launcher has cloaking tech. And it casts some kind of phantom signal. It messed with our ground sensors.”

“What did you hit?” Wesley demanded.

Captain Bradley did not respond.

“Perhaps Commander Ellsburg will explain,” Captain Butala said. The statement was only a suggestion on its surface.

Ellsburg quickly found himself surrounded by the three starship captains. He was nearly as intimidated as the ensign who’d disappeared along with the turbolift. “It appears that a small Agmorran village has been damaged,” the first officer said. His narrow face was

expressive of the remorse that remained absent from his captain's bearing. "There were a number of casualties."

"By Starfleet phaser fire," Wesley said. "Now we're no better than a fleet of renegade Klingons." He did nothing to hide the contempt he felt in regard to Bradley's actions.

"I resent that, Commodore Wesley," Bradley said. "It couldn't be avoided. Friendly fire is a reality in any war." The man was becoming openly hostile and maintaining his arrogant demeanor even in the wake of a reckless decision. "I'm under no obligation to justify my actions to you."

"No, you can justify them to Admiral Reeder," Wesley said. *And to the officers at your court martial*, he thought, but refrained from verbalizing that particular sentiment.

"That's fine," Bradley said. "Now if there's nothing further, I'll ask you to leave my bridge. I have nearly a thousand officers and personnel on that planet. They are my first priority. Not having this conversation with you.

Frankly I resent the intrusion."

Wesley approached the conn and spoke coolly, looking Bradley square in the eye. "Here's what's going to happen. I'm assuming command of all operations on Cainus. You will beam the four of us back to our vessels. Then you will beam up all nonessential personnel. And you will reduce the alert level from red to yellow and await further orders."

"My people are being killed!" Bradley insisted, rising and belligerently confronting Wesley. "I don't have time for this. I am in command of this sector. Nothing that has transpired can change that."

"That's where you're wrong," Wesley said. "Commander Latourna, please explain it to the captain."

"Captain Wesley intends to invoke Starfleet regulation 809.8," Latourna said. "It is the prerogative of the senior officer in a battle fleet to assess the state of mind or physical condition of any commanding officer, and relieve said officer whenever it is determined—"

"I know the blasted regulation!" Bradley interrupted. "But the *Mercy* is not part of a battle fleet. It's a floating hospital!"

"You yourself welcomed us to your 'little fleet,' sir," Latourna said. "I believe those were your exact words."

"And you just indicated that we're in a state of war," Wesley said. "Stand down, Captain. Don't make this worse than it already is."

Bradley smiled menacingly. "Bob, you can either walk off my bridge on your own two feet, or I can have you carried out by a couple of my security officers. The choice is yours." The captain punctuated this statement by stabbing his chin in the direction of the turbolift.

"The one thing we agree on, Captain," Wesley said.

"Is that we don't have time for this."

There was a pause in the standoff. Wesley gazed steadily at Bradley, while the *Lexington*'s captain made a silent appeal to his peers from the *Excalibur* and the Copernicus.

Captain Van Eldik, standing with her hands on her ample hips, spoke first. "I think we're in need of Bob's experience," she said. "Maybe it's best that you stand down, Captain Bradley. At least for the time being."

Captain Butala was more concise. "I concur," he said, folding his arms and fixing Bradley with an unwavering stare.

"Starships are not governed by democracy,"

Bradley said smugly. He sat down again, as if determined to petulantly ignore the other captains. It was plain this was a final attempt to forestall the inevitable.

The three captains surrounded the conn in semicircle, treating Bradley to the unrelenting intensity of their combined gaze. As his anger cooled, the *Lexington*'s captain determined that a tactical retreat was his least humiliating option. But this did not mean he had to retreat gracefully. He looked up at Wesley and said, "I just hope you don't think this is how you're going to regain command of the *Lexington*, Commodore, sir." His bitterness and insecurity could not have been displayed more effectively if he'd spat upon the deck.

Wesley turned to Ellsburg. "I'm returning to the *Mercy* immediately." He gestured to Latourna. "My X-O is coming with me, but she will be beaming to the planet's surface in a matter of minutes. She will arrive with a team of highly skilled tactical officers and

assume full command on the ground. I suggest you instruct your security personnel to cooperate fully. Her first priority will be to secure the plain and take out the photon mortar battery. Tell your people to take cover, hunker down and await her orders."

"Understood," said Commander Ellsburg. His captain glared at him, but the young man appeared not to notice or at least he pretended not to care.

#

Wesley and Latourna beamed back to the *Mercy* in under five minutes. A yeoman was waiting for them with a full status update. Apparently, Lt. Levant had beamed up scarcely fifteen minutes earlier, shouting about a terrorist attack and insisting that Dr. M'Benga had been taken captive along with the entire Federation peace delegation. The crews of the Nightingale and the two sub-freighters had been fortunate to find their way home intact, but that hadn't stopped them from bringing several refugees. Nearly all of these Cainians were in need of immediate medical attention. Of course it was the primary mission of the *Mercy* to provide such attention, and Wesley was impressed with the efficiency of the medical staff in the absence of their chief.

But it was the captain's job to see to the safety of all hands, and Wesley's newly appointed chief of medicine was hardly an exception. The yeoman was explaining that security personnel on the planet had tried to retake the dome, but that the Drackhan extremists had erected some type of deflector shield, which like the photon mortars appeared to be the result of stolen Klingon technology.

"Thank you, Yeoman," Wesley said, holding up a hand to temporarily halt the steady flow of information. He turned to Latourna. "I'm heading for the bridge. You're heading for Cainus. But you'll need to stop off at the armory and assemble your response team. I'll walk with you."

They stepped into the nearest turbolift, and stood shoulder to shoulder as the doors closed. The yeoman was left on the transporter

deck, looking as though she had at least a dozen other urgent matters to discuss with her captain. Those matters would have to wait. Wesley and Latourna dropped several decks. Latourna stared at the doors as if willing them to open again.

Wesley cleared his throat. “I gather you’re of the opinion that I was a little heavy-handed with Captain

Bradley.”

“The captain’s actions were undeniably reckless,” she said. “But by all reports he did lose several officers on

Cainus.”

“Reckless is one thing a starship commander can never afford to be,” Wesley said. “Our job now is to prevent additional loses. Maybe I don’t have to be an SOB to achieve that goal, but we all have to play to our strengths.”

“Aye, sir,” Latourna said, perhaps a beat too quickly.

The doors opened at last. The corridor leading to the armory was flooded with crimson light. Latourna did not step out of the lift. She knew her captain well enough to sense that he had more to say.

“I have just one order for you, Commander,” Wesley said. “You must prepare for every eventuality, and arm yourself with *all* of the tools at your disposal. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes, Captain,” she said. “Your meaning is quite clear.”

And the message was clear. There would be no stun only phasers on this mission.

There was a brief silence, and then Wesley placed his hand on the young woman’s shoulder. The gesture was a bit awkward, but the sentiment was genuine. “Be careful, Lorraine.”

“I will try, sir,” she said and proceeded down the crimson corridor.

#

The young Drackhan was writhing in pain and spurting copious amounts of arterial blood. “I told you not to move him,” M’Benga said. “Now the damned shrapnel has severed an artery.”

The doctor's armed captors did not react. They were clearly concerned for their wounded comrade, yet they felt powerless to do anything to help.

"Hold him!" M'Benga shouted. "Hold him down!"

The doctor could sense the disruptor barrels at his back. It seemed nothing would persuade the Drackhans to lower their weapons. He wheeled upon them, his brown eyes filled with quiet rage. "You brought me here to save him. If you refuse to help me he will be dead in two minutes."

One of the Drackhans nodded and two of the extremists put their disruptors away, and knelt beside M'Benga. "What do we do?" one of them asked.

"You hold him," M'Benga said. "Firmly but gently."

The soldiers did as they were instructed, freeing M'Benga's hands long enough to fill a hypo. He administered the combination anesthetic and antibiotic and retrieved a laser scalpel from his kit. The Drackhan's body stopped convulsing and lay still. M'Benga's sensor indicated the youth still had a pulse, but the doctor trusted as much to the tips of his fingers. Satisfied that the patient was temporarily stabilized, he donned his blue tinted diaglasses and programmed his tricorder to act as an internal scanner. The pattern of shrapnel was as scattered as a star map. This kind of operation should not be attempted without the aid of a surgical support frame, but M'Benga's captors were leaving him no choice. The falling mortars were an added distraction, with some of the explosions erupting near enough to shake the building.

M'Benga covered his patient as they were treated to a shower of dust. "How did this happen?" he asked. "The amount of shrapnel in this person's body is staggering."

The Drackhan who appeared to be in command spoke first. "One of your Starfleet men hit a crusader with a lightning beam," he said. "The crusader dropped the grenade he'd been poised to throw. My brother dove upon it in order to spare several others."

"Your brother is quite brave," M'Benga said. "I will do everything in my power to save him. But I must tell you that his

chances of survival will increase greatly if you end this madness, and allow me to—”

M’Benga’s words were cut off by the feeling of the disruptor barrel digging into the small of his back.

“Be silent and attend to your duties,” the Drackhan said. “Whatever my brother’s fate may be, I promise you will share it, physician.”

The threats barely registered with M’Benga. He was already performing the surgery.

Chapter Two

Latourna's team was assembled in transporter room one, with Mr. Ur standing apart from the human security officers. The Arcturian's sallow, drooping skin made for a stark contrast to his crimson tunic. The flesh appeared to be melting from his scalp and jowls, although Latourna knew this was not the case. He held a metallic briefcase, with the type 2 hand phaser holstered in his belt being his only visible weapon. The five humans all wore hand phasers as well, but these burly men were also armed with an assortment of sonic and concussion grenades. And each man stood with a heavy phaser cannon resting on his shoulder—these weapons were capable of blasting a shuttlecraft out of the sky from a distance of 1,500 meters.

The humans snapped to attention as Latourna entered the room. Mr. Ur's posture did not change, as he was already standing as straight as a cadet on inspection.

"At ease," Latourna said. "We're beaming onto the Plain of the Unending Horizon, where the situation is volatile to say the least."

She took three graceful strides and leapt onto the transporter pad. Mr. Ur joined her in an instant. The five human males hesitated only slightly and then stomped up the steps to claim their own spots.

"I would prefer to provide you with a clear plan of action," Latourna said. "But since we have no way to know precisely what it is we will be facing, we must prepare ourselves . . . now."

"Well, that's why you picked us, Commander," said Lt. Marko, the *Mercy*'s chief of security. "We're always game for a war."

Latourna glanced sidelong at the sandy haired bruiser. "You have a penchant for the oxymoronic turn of phrase, Lieutenant."

Marko made a show of wounded pride. "There's no call for insults, ma'am."

The other human's smirked at this. Naturally Mr. Ur's expression remained unchanged.

"You may energize, Chief," Latourna said.

The jump-suited noncom standing behind the control console manipulated the levers, and the whistle-whine of the machine filled the room. The familiar orange glow enveloped the response team, turning each officer into a column of dancing light. Latourna always found this instant of fleeting oblivion to be liberating in its own peculiar way. As a child she had liked to pretend that she wasn't locked in a transporter beam, but that she'd been struck by a phaser ray and her body was disintegrating.

Her parents had been shot with phaser fire, and she'd watched them disintegrate as quickly as people in transporter beams. Of course the transporter reassembled bodies and sent them somewhere safe. And each time she was beamed onto a ship or to a new foster home, Latourna would open her eyes and whisper, "I'm alive. They shot me, but they couldn't kill me. I fooled them and rematerialized somewhere safe. Just like Mom and Dad."

She'd played this private game well into preadolescence, but by then she no longer had to prevent herself from smiling when she arrived somewhere new. Instead she had to bite back the tears, because by then she understood what a silly fantasy she'd concocted. Her parents were dead.

As her atoms reassembled on the Plain of the Unending Horizon, Lt. Commander Lorraine Latourna was anticipating a scene of mass carnage, but nothing could have prepared her for the gruesome sight before her. There would be no question of who was in command. The *Lexington*'s chief of security lay dead, surrounded by several junior officers who were staring down at his remains in disbelief. The corpse was badly mangled, but Latourna could see by the stripes on his sleeve that the man had also been a lt. commander. She couldn't recall his name.

"It pounced on him from out of nowhere," said an ensign, who was clearly in shock. "So quick. I couldn't get a clear shot. Those creatures, they were everywhere." "Where are they now?" Latourna asked.

“They disappeared as fast as they descended on us,” a second ensign said. “Back into the hills, I guess. And then we were hit with the second mortar barrage.”

“We must reassemble,” Latourna said. “The mortar battery is still operative. Another attack is imminent.”

“What about Commander Bishop?” the first ensign asked. “Shouldn’t we bury him, and have a funeral. Shouldn’t we say something, or sing his favorite song? What’s his favorite song?”

The last question was directed at the second ensign, who merely shrugged in reply.

Latourna knew this young officer by name, and she was relieved to see that he was more in control of his faculties. “Mr. Muret,” she said. “Your friend needs to return to the ship and report to sickbay. Please contact the *Lexington* and request that he be beamed aboard immediately.”

Other security officers approached, many of them were bloodied and staggering. It appeared that Muret’s friend wouldn’t be the only one beaming back to the *Lexington*. Latourna motioned them forward and stood in the center of the gathering crowd, the sole goldshirt surrounded by the troop of battered redshirts. She began to issue orders, but it was difficult to be heard over the sound of the shell shocked ensign singing a popular old Earth tune known as “Strawberry Fields Forever.” Fortunately the ensign was beamed up in the middle of his performance.

Now Latourna only needed to make herself heard over the fading shouts and wails of the refugees who were stranded on the plain. She couldn’t help but wonder how many had been killed outright, but her duty was to alleviate the suffering of the survivors. In order to do that she must gain control of the situation. She performed a quick headcount of security officers, with most of them being ensigns from the *Lexington* and the *Excalibur*. She noticed more than a few of them eyeing Mr. Ur skeptically. Arcturians were still something of a rare phenomenon in Starfleet, and the actions of the Drackhan extremists had likely stirred some feelings of xenophobia.

She introduced herself, although many of the officers knew her by reputation if not by name. She'd served over ten years in security before trading her red uniform for the gold of the command grade. "We did not anticipate nor invite this attack," she said. "But we will maintain this post, and continue to protect the innocent inhabitants of Cainus."

There was a whistling overhead and another photon mortar arched an eldritch path through the darkening sky. It seemed the battery had set up in a new location.

"Ensign Muret," Latourna said. "With some modifications, your level eight power generators can be used to create a temporary deflector shield."

"Lt. Gravowski is working on that now," Muret said. "He's the only engineer we have left."

"Where can the lieutenant be found?" Latourna asked.

Muret pointed to the nearest temporary hospital. His hand shook as the mortar hit and exploded several meters to the southwest.

Latourna heard a nearby clump of refugees scream, and saw them disperse in every direction. It didn't appear as though anyone had been killed, but an extended mortar barrage would quickly result in a score of new casualties. "Mr. Ur," she said, turning to the Arcturian. "Find Lt. Gravowski and assist him in creating a deflector. If enough generators are available, see if they can be linked to form a shield canopy over this portion of the plain."

The Arcturian turned and wordlessly set off across the rocky terrain, toting his silver case.

Latourna addressed the remaining security personnel. "Our primary responsibility is the safety of the Cainians who are trapped on open ground.

"What about the safety of our own?" Ensign Muret demanded shrilly. "We came here to help and these aliens—"

"You will be silent, Ensign," Latourna told him. "And you will accompany Lt. Marko. Follow his orders or be relieved of duty. The choice is yours."

The large security chief placed his hand on the shoulder of the much smaller ensign. The young man lowered his gaze and nodded.

"I will assist Mr. Ur," Latourna said, as two more mortars whistled above the plain. "Once the deflector is up, and the plain is secure, we will rendezvous at the main hospital structure."

"You sure you don't want one of us to watch your back, Commander?" Marko asked.

"That won't be necessary," Latourna said. Then it occurred to her that Marko had just expressed concern for her well-being. "But I appreciate the sentiment."

Her words were lost in the sound of the explosions when the mortars hit the ground. These explosions were much closer, and the assembled personnel were treated to a shower of yellow clay. The officers ducked for cover. Latourna was the first to raise her head again, and she determined that everyone in the immediate vicinity was uninjured. "Move out!" she called and headed in the opposite direction from her men.

When Latourna arrived at the hospital structure, she discovered that one of the generators had been damaged. But she and Mr. Ur managed to concatenate the power couplings on the remaining three generators. The resultant deflector shield was sufficient to provide cover for a sizeable population of wounded and displaced Cainians, as well as Latourna's own personnel.

The photon mortars began hitting the shield at a rapid rate. Each time the canopy was struck, the displaced energy would create great pulsations of thunderous noise and flashes of blinding light. The underside of the deflector was a most unpleasant place to be, yet it was the only place of relative safety at the moment, as evidenced by the mortar craters scattered across the open plain.

Latourna turned to Mr. Ur. "How long will it hold?"

The Arcturian shrugged. "Your guess is as good as mine, Commander."

"It never ceases to amaze me," Latourna began, narrowing her eyes. "How rapidly the lackadaisical habits of human expression

hobble the communication skills of even the most analytical extraterrestrials."

Mr. Ur watched another mortar explode against the shield canopy, and quickly performed some calculations on his tricorder. "Approximately 2.768 terra novan hours," he amended. "Give or take a decimal. That's assuming the Drackhan supply of photon mortars is as large as the current rate of launch would indicate."

"We can request additional generators from the *Mercy* and the other starships in orbit," Latourna said. "But ultimately the barrage must be ended at the source." "Agreed," Mr. Ur said.

"You and Lt. Marko will accompany me."

Ur did not have eyebrows, but the folds of skin upon his brow rose considerably. "Only three officers? I understand the Klingon mortar battery requires a contingent of a dozen officers for full operation. It seems likely that the Drackhans will devote even more soldiers to the task."

"Perhaps so," Latourna admitted. "But we will have the element of surprise. And we three will be more mobile than a larger contingent of officers."

Lt. Marko was not quite as confident as his superior. "Just the three of us?" he asked upon hearing of Latourna's plan. "I don't know, Commander. That doesn't leave much margin for error."

"We have zero margin for error, Mr. Marko," Latourna said. "But such is the nature of this mission. You may rest assured that I am confident we possess the tactical skill to neutralize the weapon as well as its operators and any guards."

"What about the monsters?" Marko pressed. He did not try to hide his fear from his commanding officer. He was too experienced a soldier for that.

"We will not be deterred by animals," Latourna said. "Be they wild or trained, our phaser cannons should prove sufficient to scatter them."

Latourna knew that most commanders would prefer to attack the Drackhans with an overwhelming force, but she was of the opinion that an escalation of troops was not the answer. There were many

Agmorran villages in the region, and Starfleet could not afford another friendly fire incident.

Of course, motives always run deeper. Latourna did not want to risk the lives of any more individuals than was completely necessary. She knew many of the officers on the plain, and she had determined almost from the instant they arrived on the planet's surface that Ur and Marko were the only ones with the combat experience necessary to accompany her. The others were simply too young and she would not be an instrument of their deaths. She understood such reticence was a weakness for a commanding officer, and Robert Wesley would not approve of her decision, yet the commodore had left all such decisions in her hands.

The three officers retrieved their gear where they had stowed it, and set out across the plain. Mr. Ur took point, looking more to his tricorder screen than where his boots were treading. This left Latourna to steer him clear of craters and stones, while maintaining a constant watch for the mortars that continued to scream down upon the open plain.

"That one's gonna be close," Marko said, tracking a falling mortar.

Ur did not glance up from his tricorder. "Not so close as to concern us."

"Are you sure?" Marko asked nervously.

The whistling reached its crescendo and the explosion was enough to stagger them, but they maintained their balance. "We might still be in one piece," Marko said. "But I am nevertheless concerned, Lt. Ur. Quite concerned."

"Now may be a good time to implement mission silence," Latourna said. She was growing impatient with Marko's near constant questioning of her orders.

The whistling of another mortar rose high above their heads.

"Permission to break mission silence, Commander?" Ur asked.

"You have already done so, Mr. Ur. What is it?"

“This mortar should concern us,” Ur said. “Now would be a good time to sprint in a westerly direction.” “Commander?” Marko called.

“Make it so!” Latourna shouted and shoved the big man forward.

They ran several paces and dove at the last second before the concussive force of the explosion swept over them. The shower of yellow clay all but buried them. A few moments later they struggled to their feet, and cleaned themselves as best they could. “Perform an equipment and weapons check,” Latourna said.

“Everything I’m carrying is clean, Commander,” Marko said.

“Likewise,” Mr. Ur said.

“Very good,” Latourna said. “Let us proceed. We will soon reach the relative safety of the hills.” She anticipated that Marko was about to make a sarcastic remark concerning the nature of relative safety, and quickly stifled him with a look.

The Cainian hills were steep and home to little save thorny plants and jagged stones. Mr. Ur continued to lead the way, constantly monitoring his tricorder, yet somehow never stumbling. Lt. Marko brought up the rear, with his phaser cannon pointed skyward. “We should have fatigues,” he whispered to Latourna. “The redshirts Ur and

I are stuck with stick out like homing beacons.”

“Thank you for reminding me,” Latourna said, and reached into her tricorder pouch. “Now is perhaps the best time to camouflage ourselves.”

She handed the lieutenant a small patch, which he held in the palm of his hand. “This what I think it is?”

“If you think it is a chameleon patch,” Latourna said. “Then you are correct.”

Lt. Marko placed the patch on his left shoulder and pressed on it with the heel of his hand. A pattern of green and brown gradually spread over his uniform tunic until the original red was entirely concealed. The pattern continued until it covered Marko’s pants and boots as well. It was a perfect match for the surrounding foliage. The

lieutenant examined the changes to his uniform and said, “I feel safer already,” as a smile spread across his face.

Latourna placed a chameleon patch on her own uniform. Mr. Ur was somewhat distracted, so she took the liberty of attaching one of the camo devices to the Arcturian’s back. If Mr. Ur noticed the changes to his uniform’s appearance, he made no mention of it.

The three officers continued their ascent, decidedly less conspicuous. Latourna did not need to remind the men to be silent at this stage of the mission. Lt. Marko’s footfalls produced more sound than she would have preferred, but she understood there was little the large officer could do to lighten his step. She reflected that perhaps ballet training might be in order for the *Mercy*’s security officers. There did seem to be an overabundance of testosterone and machismo in the ranks of largely male redshirts, and the broadening of horizons may prove as beneficial as the increased flexibility, agility and balance that came with such conditioning.

Another mortar arched through the sky. It was clearly bound for the plain, and no danger to them. Mr. Ur glanced up, and then resumed the close scrutiny of his tricorder screen.

“Do you have the coordinates?” Latourna asked.

“Indeed, Commander,” Ur said. “I have mapped the trajectory of several mortars and fixed the exact position of the battery.”

They advanced several paces, but Mr. Ur did not elaborate. “And?” Latourna said, trying to mask her impatience.

“Approximately 2.3 kilometers to the northwest.”

“Very well,” Latourna said. “As we draw near, I will—”

Her words were cut off when Lt. Marko made a misstep. There was a crashing sound, but the experienced officer managed not to cry out as he fell.

Latourna wheeled in time to see the big man disappearing into the widening hole. The pit was just that —a hole in the ground that had been unartfully yet effectively concealed with forest debris. Marko knew how to take a fall. He rolled with it and somehow managed not to impale himself on the sharp spikes that erupted from the soil at the bottom of the pit. He folded his body so that he landed among these

implements of cruelty, scraping his leg against the nearest spike but avoiding serious injury. When he stood up, the edge of the pit was only shoulder high. Both he and Latourna spotted the tangle of tree roots at the same instant. For Marko it was just what it appeared—the perfect handhold to grab in order to vault himself from the pit.

Latourna saw the notches. Someone had carved markings on the roots. They were made to appear random, but they had been arranged. Her hand shot out as if to seize Marko's wrist, although he was well out of reach. "Don't!" she cried.

It was already too late. Marko couldn't resist the convenience of the handhold. Maybe he was faster than the trap maker estimated, or simply taller than the average Agmorran, but the first dart buried itself in his abdomen when it had likely been intended to pierce the victim's heart. Marko made a harrumph noise and stiffened. The second dart went as deep as his hip bone would allow. The third went wide and disappeared into the soil on the opposite side of the pit.

Marko shook his head and smiled. Then he tried to say something and failed. An instant later he was sitting in the dirt.

Latourna slid into the pit, displacing as little soil as possible. Mr. Ur acted as though he might follow her, but she motioned for him to remain above. Marko was struggling to get up again. Latourna gently laid a hand on his shoulder. "Don't move," she said. "You are in shock. And you might exacerbate the wound."

She flipped open her communicator. "Latourna to *Mercy*. Come in please."

The response was garbled.

"The radiation," Ur said. "These hills are largely comprised of Romanza stone, which is notoriously disruptive to sensors and hailing frequencies. It no doubt complicated the search for the mortar battery. The stone's prevalence on Janus VII makes all communication there—"

"That will do, Mr. Ur," Latourna said. "We have a medical emergency."

"Of course, Commander," Ur said. He placed his silver case on the ground and opened it, producing some type of phaser tool. He handed it down to Latourna.

“This is meant to fuse Marvick circuits,” she said, examining the cylindrical tool.

“The general principal is the same,” Ur said. “A carefully aimed beam should be sufficient to cauterize the wound.”

Latourna administered an emergency sedative via a small first aid hypo. Then she utilized her tricorder to determine the most effective angle to aim the short beam that the tool emitted. Marko groaned in spite of the sedative, but his most intense suffering was short lived. Latourna’s tricorder readings indicated that the wound was effectively sealed, although this did not change the fact that a foreign object, approximately seven centimeters in length with a spiked tip, was lodged in the lieutenant’s abdomen.

She looked up at Mr. Ur. “He will need to be carried back to the plain,” she said. “A firefighter’s carry will exacerbate the wound. You possess the physical strength to cradle him. I do not. Contact the *Mercy* as soon as possible and request emergency transport.”

“What will you do?” Ur asked.

“I will continue the mission,” Latourna said.

“That is unwarranted, Commander. There is little you can do on—”

“I will be the judge of that, Mr. Ur. At the very least I can scout the battery and gather intelligence until you are able to send reinforcements to assist me.”

Several mortars whistled overhead as she spoke. Both officers looked to the sky.

“It seems time is not on our side,” Latourna said. “Our makeshift deflector will not hold for much longer.”

Ur shrugged in resignation, and carefully lowered himself into the pit. The two officers worked together to lift Marko out of the trap, exercising as much care as possible. Then Ur cradled the security chief in his arms and began walking in the direction they had come, leaving Latourna in possession of his silver briefcase. She couldn’t help but be reminded of a Hollywood monster movie of old, although Mr. Ur was anything but a monster, all appearances to the contrary.

#

M’Benga knew something of Drackhan anatomy, but the grenade had made a mess of the youth’s internal organs. He repaired the severed artery as best he could, but it was a temporary fix without the aid of at least a fifth generation organic replicator. Hours passed like minutes, but that was how it always seemed when he performed an intensive surgery. In the end he removed enough scrap metal to fill a storage unit. He closed the wounds and administered another hypo full of antibiotics, followed by an analgesic.

The doctor struggled to his feet and turned around. Most of the guards were slumped against the wall, or seated upon the stone floor. Still they started each time one of the mortars exploded near enough to shake the Dome of the Lifegiver. They were already exhibiting signs of a dangerous battle fatigue.

Only the patient’s brother remained standing. He pointed his disruptor at M’Benga, who responded with a look that indicated that he would not be intimidated. The Drackhan lowered the weapon. “Will my brother live?”

“He is stabilized,” M’Benga said. “He may live yet, although many others have not been afforded the same opportunity today. But as I said, his chances will improve greatly if—”

“You know that is impossible, human.”

The doctor sighed. He decided to employ a different strategy. “What is his name?”

The Drackhan hesitated before deciding that his brother’s name was no great secret. “Martok,” he said. “And I am called Balthun. He is prepared to sacrifice his life for the Crusade of Truth . . . as am I.”

M’Benga said nothing to this, preferring to let the terrorist’s words ring hollow in the silence of the blood soaked room. “You must allow me to examine the hostages,” he said at length.

Balthun looked at him sharply. “You do not give orders here.”

“Then who does give the orders?” M’Benga asked. “You may be a leader among these men, but you do not strike me as a ring leader.”

“Mind your words,” Balthun said and brandished the disruptor again. “Lord Kralloch is a great man and he is my father.”

M’Benga nodded, silently reminding himself to avoid idioms and other figurative language, as it was impossible to predict how the universal translator might render them.

“*You* are a hostage,” Balthun said. “And you may pay the price of outworlder transgression at any time.”

His underlings sensed this was their cue stand up and menace the doctor with their own weapons.

“I am also, as you have said, a physician,” M’Benga insisted. “I have saved your brother’s life. Now let me attend to the other hostages. There may be additional injuries. These people are no good to you dead.”

“That remains to be seen,” Balthun said. But he motioned to his men. “His medical equipment stays here.” “That’s unacceptable,” M’Benga said.

His protest was ignored as two of the Drackhans dragged him from the room. He did not resist as they hustled him along a corridor and all but threw him down a flight of stone steps.

The door was opened and several faces were briefly illuminated by the light of the corridor. Some of them were human; others Vulcan, but they were all dressed in the white uniform of the UFP diplomatic corps. They squinted against the light, and flinched as the doctor landed among them. Several hands helped him to his feet.

“Are you all right, sir?” a young Vulcan asked.

“I’m fine,” M’Benga said. But he took a moment to gather himself. “How many of you are there?”

“Fifteen,” the Vulcan said. “Diplomatic and support staff. They have selected only the Federation representatives as hostages. There were Agmorran and Drackhan negotiators among us. The Agmorrans were executed by disruptor fire the moment the attackers seized the building. The Drackhans were led away. The extremists seemed to consider them traitors to the Drackhan species. I fear they met a worse fate than even the Agmorran negotiators.”

M’Benga had spent enough time around Vulcans to know that the young man was devastated in spite of the controlled tone of his words. “What is your name?” he asked.

“I am Jadic,” the Vulcan said. “I am the ambassador’s senior aide.”

“My name is M’Benga. I’m a Starfleet physician. Do you have any wounded?”

“Only one, who is seriously injured,” Jadic said and led M’Benga to a far corner.

A pale face shone in the low light of the windowless room. The Drackhan extremists had taken his tricorder and diaglasses, but the doctor had managed to palm a hand held scanner. He flashed it over the halfconscious form of his new patient, highlighting the streaks of green blood that stained the Vulcan’s robes.

“It is good to see you again, Dr. M’Benga,” Ambassador Sarek said. “Although the circumstances are most regrettable.”

The Vulcan struggled to pull himself into a more dignified position.

“It’s best to restrict your movements, sir,” M’Benga said. “Don’t cause yourself undue strain on my account. After all I’m accustomed to conversing with people while they’re flat on their backs.”

The Ambassador nodded in acknowledgement, but true to form he did not attempt a smile. It had occurred to M’Benga in the past that the disadvantage of a Vulcan specialty was the lack of opportunity it afforded to perfect one’s bedside manner.

“You have several broken ribs,” the doctor explained. “And there is a little internal bleeding, I’m afraid. How did this happen? Did the extremists target you specifically?”

Sarek nodded again. “It seems they did not appreciate my attempts to reason with them. Nor my very presence in their sacred Dome of the Lifegiver. I considered it better to let them vent their rage upon me instead of instead of harming my aides. I could not prevent the atrocities that were committed upon our Agmorran colleagues, nor the removal of the Drackhan negotiators.”

M’Benga masked his anger at the brutality of the Drackhan extremists. “I must recover my equipment to administer further treatment,” he said. “Until then I can utilize some qui’lari stimulation techniques to alleviate the pain . . . if you will allow it.”

Sarek’s eyes widened. “You are familiar with the art of qui’lari, Doctor?” he asked. “Very few earthmen—” He paused and corrected himself. “Pardon me. I meant to say that it is unusual for a human to have any familiarity with the practice, let alone a mastery of the techniques. There are few disciplines more esoteric. I doubt even my own son . . .” The Ambassador’s words trailed off as he experienced a sudden fit of pain. “Please proceed.”

“Rest assured, Mr. Ambassador,” M’Benga said and vigorously rubbed his hands together. “I am a stubborn student, who has visited many of the temples of your home world.”

He began a quick succession of strikes with the tips of his fingers, hitting the various pressure points of Sarek’s central nervous system. Some of the other hostages were slightly disturbed by the sight of the doctor apparently attacking his patient, but the look of relief that washed over Sarek’s face soon put them at their ease. The Vulcan’s body was being flooded with endorphins acting as a natural analgesic, while at the same instant enzymes essential to the healing process were being stimulated. It was not as potent as half a hypo, but it was better than nothing.

When M’Benga sensed he’d done as much as he could, he stopped the procedure for fear of harming the patient. Sarek rested for a moment. His condition was visibly improved if but slightly. The doctor decided he might be well enough to answer a few questions.

“What do these people hope to achieve with this violence, Ambassador?” he asked. “It is highly illogical.”

“Violence is inevitably illogical, Doctor,” Sarek said. “But primitive goals are often achieved through primitive methodology.”

“Have they made demands then?”

“Few demands have been verbalized. Their overarching goal seems to be the expulsion of the Federation and all of its representatives from this world.

Their leader—Lord Kralloch—has indicated that my life is forfeit if the Federation does not immediately withdraw all personnel."

"He must know that will never happen as long as there are Federation hostages."

"Precisely, Doctor. He does understand that. He is barbaric, yet possessed of a cunning intellect. That is why I'm certain he has arrived at the inevitable conclusion that I must never be permitted to leave the Dome of the Lifegiver alive."

M'Benga retained his composure, as he knew Sarek would expect no less. "Then we will simply not permit him to succeed."

Sarek bowed his head slightly, and what appeared to be the specter of a smile played across his lips. "Perhaps I have judged Starfleet too harshly in the past," he said. "Many of its officers are most dynamic individuals . . . if excessively optimistic at times."

Chapter Three

Commander Ellsburg had been summoned to his captain's quarters. It was irregular for both captain and XO to be away from the bridge during a yellow alert, but

Bradley had all but been relieved of his command before Ellsburg's very eyes. The *Lexington*'s first officer half hoped the change would be permanent, but he knew his captain had many allies in Starfleet Command. It seemed unlikely that Bradley would face reassignment, let alone court martial or outright demotion, in spite of his rash actions. "You wanted to see me, Captain?" Ellsburg said.

Bradley was supine on his rack, yet fully clothed much to Ellsburg's relief. "You're goddamn right I wanted to see you," he bellowed. "Just what the hell did you think you were doing out there?" Apparently Bradley did not feel obligated to mask his anger.

"Sir, I was just trying to diffuse the situation in order to—"

"I don't need any appeasers on this ship, mister," Bradley said. "Let alone as first officer. The rest of the galaxy needs to know that Starfleet will not tolerate aggression. I don't care if it's the Klingons or extremists from a backwater like Cainus. We need to stand firm. And I need someone who's going to have my back. If that's not you, I suggest you find another ship. The freighters and garbage scows are always looking for experienced hands." He smiled mirthlessly at his executive officer and waited for the young man to respond.

It occurred to Ellsburg that this was vintage Bradley. Cajole and bully when you can get away with it. Mock and dismiss when all else fails. "Captain, I'm here to see to the best needs of the ship and to ensure we accomplish our mission. I've been nothing but loyal to you and my oath since the day I came aboard. Commodore Wesley can't change that. No one can." His tone was even and measured. He refused to engage in some childish shouting match with his CO.

Bradley let out a heavy sigh and stood up. He paced around the room. Ellsburg suspected his captain wanted to create the illusion that

he might lash out at any moment, whether verbally of physically. “I believe you, Els,” he said at last. “But I’m not about to have somebody tell me how to do my job. And I’ll be damned if I allow Klingons or terrorists to dictate the terms of our mission.”

Ellsburg stiffened his posture and nodded slightly. “Yes, sir.” He silently wished that Bradley would abandon the notion that the Klingons were directly responsible for the attack on the planet’s surface. He suspected that his captain was still hoping to justify his use of excessive force in firing the *Lexington*’s phasers.

Bradley moved closer to Ellsburg and his tone became conspiratorial although there was obviously no one else in the room. “You have to understand that when we’re dealing with a species, any species, that has no value for life we don’t always have time for negotiation or debate. We have to take prompt, aggressive action and overwhelm them with sheer force. We have to strike before it’s too late. And now it may already be too late thanks to Wesley and those disloyal . . .” He allowed his words to trail off, which was just as well. “But there are many fine officers in the fleet. Men like Commodore Cartwright and Major West to name two. Up-and-comers who aren’t interested in capitulating to Klingon aggression or appeasing terrorists.

Men who are ready to fight in order to protect the Federation. We have to be ready to do the same.”

“Yes, sir. I understand,” Ellsburg said, although he felt a little sick to his stomach.

The Captain laid a hand on his X-O’s shoulder, as a more genuine smile overspread his face. “That’s good, Els. I’m glad to hear it. And I’m sorry I had to lose my temper, but it’s not the first time and, as you’re undoubtedly aware, it won’t be the last.” He snickered to himself and moved toward the door. “Now let’s go. I want to get back to my bridge and get this mission the hell over with. I’m not going to hide in my quarters. I won’t give Bob Wesley the satisfaction.”

#

Kalok was resting upon a fallen tree, feeling despondent and wondering how he could hope to take out a large piece of extraterrestrial field artillery when he was barely in a condition to walk. He knew he had multiple fractures if not bones that were broken outright. His temple felt as if it was inflamed from where his cousin's disruptor beam had come too close. He was fortunate to be drawing breath, but the Klingon weapon must be destroyed. As long as the mortars were falling, it would be all but impossible for the Federation troops to drive Lord Kralloch and his men from the Dome of the Lifegiver.

Kalok's self-appointed mission felt no less impossible at the moment. It seemed he'd spent the better part of the short journey trying to breathe through the pain and gather his strength. His companions were at home in the hills, or at least more so than he.

But Kalok knew it was dismissive to say the Agmorrans belonged in the wilderness. The leader of this small band, like many Aggs, had lived in the city before the Klingons came and uprooted Agg and Drackhan alike. Decades before the invasion, Agmorrans had begun migrating to the cities and towns where they had functioned, not merely as servants, but also as manual laborers and occasionally as skilled craftsman. The speciesists in the Anti-Agg party used it against them, of course, never missing an opportunity to deride the Agmorrans for stealing bread out of the mouths of common Drackhans. Somehow it always escaped the notice of those common Dracks that the same industrialists and politicians who were exhorting them to hate the Agmorrans were often the ones profiting from cheap Agg labor.

Kalok could tell that Ti'Tuva's followers were growing restless. The Agmorran leader had saved his life, and Kalok had no wish to endanger him or any of the members of this small band.

Ti'Tuva approached, tiptoeing nimbly along the length of the fallen tree. His head was barely higher than Kalok's own head, and Kalok was seated.

"I should go on alone from here," Kalok told him.

"If you feel the weapon must be destroyed," said Ti'Tuva. "Then let us destroy it together. You are not yet whole, my friend."

“It is my responsibility,” Kalok said. “You have done enough.”

Ti’Tuva had known of Kalok by reputation. Apparently he was considered fair and just among the Agmorrans, which was something of a rarity for a Drackhan soldier. Never mind the fact that Kalok had done nothing to help the Aggs prior to the Klingon war. Like so many others, he’d turned the other way in the face of maltreatment and outright atrocity.

Since his rescue at the hands of this brave Agg, Kalok had spoken at length with Ti’Tuva, who’d fled to the hills to join the fight against the Klingons three cycles before. And now Colonel Krow had been deposed, yet the Aggs were still unwelcome in the cities. In winter they sent the children to seek shelter in the Drack cities—a desperate move that broke the hearts of many Agmorran parents. Kalok knew those children were often jeered, spat upon and sometimes met worse fates still.

The adults could subsist in the forest as their ancestors had done. It left them underfed and forever in competition with tannocks and at the mercy of the hill Drackhans. Ti’Tuva said that the worst part wasn’t the privation, but the separation from the children and the division among the sexes. Foraging and hunting parties were made up of males, as the preparation of food and the mending of garments required females to remain isolated in camps deep in the forest. In Ti’Tuva’s opinion this sowed the seeds of disunion, inequality and abuse.

“You are known among my people as a great fighter,” Ti’Tuva said at last. “But it is our world too, Marshal Kalok. We have as much right to defend it as you.”

When Kalok did not respond, the Agg leader spoke again. “My people were proud to stand with you against the wrinkly headed men who murdered the great Tu’Talok in cold blood. Let us stand with you once more.”

This was not the first time an Agg had saved Kalok’s life. He’d known many Agmorrans during the Klingon war when Cainus’s two separate species were forced to fight side by side against a common enemy. The realization had first occurred to him in a trench deep in the waste hills, where snow and the constant threat of annihilation inspired

a rare comradery. These Aggs—this supposedly lesser species—were not so debased as he was raised to believe. It sounded simple, but he'd grown up at a time when Drackhan young were told tales of mischievous children stolen away by Aggs with dripping fangs. In reality, he hadn't expected wild beastmen—not as an adult—nor had he anticipated kindness, humility and compassion.

"We have heard the words of Sarek," Ti'Tuva said. "And we have much respect for the Vulcan. We do not wish to fight your people any longer. We do not wish to fight anyone in emulation of the Vulcans. But we are prepared to fight if we must."

"My people," Kalok whispered. He was embarrassed and ashamed. He did not know how to express these feelings, nor did he wish to do so.

When the war had ended many among his people assumed they could simply return to the old ways of maltreatment and injustice, and he had done nothing for the Aggs in spite of his great epiphany. He'd told himself there were more immediate concerns in the aftermath of such devastation. And Kalok was just a soldier, after all, not a diplomat, so he had done nothing.

Today he struggled to his feet. "You must understand that it will be mass suicide if a dozen die together. One suicide will be sufficient."

Ti'Tuva was about to respond, but he was interrupted by the disembodied voice. "It does not have to be suicide if you will accept my help," the voice said.

Ti'Tuva leapt from the tree and drew his knife. Kalok assumed a defensive posture with his fists clenched.

"Do not be alarmed," the voice continued. "I mean you no harm. I have come to assist you."

This voice was speaking flawless Drackhan, yet Kalok knew by the inflection that the speaker must be an outworlder . . . and a female. The Agmorrans gripped their primitive rifles, but seemed not to have the slightest notion where they might point the weapons. It was no mean feat to confuse them, particularly for an outwordler.

"I, on the other hand, am Cainus's least stealthy soldier," Kalok remarked with a sigh.

“That is precisely why you will need my help to disable the mortar battery,” Latourna said and lowered herself from the canopy of leaves.

#

The young Drackhan called Martok had a body temperature of 105 degrees Celsius, which was only slightly elevated as the species norm was 103.9. His pulse rate was slow but steady. These were good signs. M’Benga administered another hypo full of antibiotics, followed by a sedative. As he tended to the patient, the doctor heard heavy footsteps approaching at his back.

“In spite of these deplorable conditions,” he said. “It seems your brother’s prognosis is improving, Balthun.”

“I am pleased to hear it,” an unfamiliar voice responded. “For only a father can know greater anguish than a brother.”

M’Benga turned slowly to see a large Drackhan man looming above him. He had a grizzled face that betrayed his cruel demeanor. His posture was slightly stooped but this did nothing to detract from his muscular physique. Balthun and the other guards were nowhere to be seen. The doctor refrained from offering any form of greeting. He simply said, “Lord Kralloch.”

The Drackhan elder regarded Dr. M’Benga for a long moment, weighing and taking his measure with all the efficiency of a med scanner. “Our meeting is long overdue,” he said at last. “But you understand that I have been burdened with a terrible responsibility.”

“Insanity is its own burden,” M’Benga said, without giving his words due consideration. He knew he must master his anger in order to make an effective argument.

If Lord Kralloch took offense, his face did not betray any sign of outrage or wounded pride. “My world has seen no shortage of insanity, Doctor.” His words were punctuated by the sound of a distant mortar explosion. “Then end it here and now,” M’Benga said. “You have the power. Provided you’re willing to accept the consequences of your own actions. You have made your point, sir. You’ve written your

manifesto in blood. Now is the time to lay down arms, and allow the people of Cainus to choose their own future."

The doctor's reasoned argument succeeded where his rash words had failed. Lord Kralloch became visibly enraged. "The future of Cainus is being denied! The will of loyal Drackhans is subverted every day with paper proclamations of rights for the few. We are plagued by those who would corrupt our society to better suit their lies and perversions. They would use outworlders such as yourself and the Vulcan to silence the truth. But the Drackhan people will not tolerate crystal tongued scholars who would defend the right of one man to question that which must never be questioned. None may shut his eyes. The Light is Truth and Life. All else is error."

It was apparent to M'Benga that he was dealing with a true zealot. There would be little point in further discussion with Lord Kralloch. He hoped that the son would not prove so megalomaniacal as the father. He intended to attempt to reach Balthun through the obvious love the young Drackhan felt for his brother. In spite of Kralloch's pronouncements, M'Benga was convinced the Drack elder saw his wounded son as little more than a disposable foot soldier in his private little war.

"I respect that you are a man learned in practical matters," Kralloch said, visibly composing himself. "I hope you do not consider yourself a philosopher as well as a physician. We only have need of the latter. The former is anathema—the very thing we wish to eradicate."

The threat was more than implied. M'Benga decided to employ what leverage he possessed. "If I am to act as a physician, I will not allow you to tie my hands," he said. "I will treat all of the people in this building, or I will treat no one. Do not attempt to deny me access to my equipment again."

"A threat, Doctor?" Kralloch asked, menacing M'Benga with his undeniable bulk.

M'Benga did not waver or break eye contact. "The power of death is in your hands, sir. If I am to be prevented from saving lives, then you might as well end my life first."

Kralloch scrutinized him closely. “I believe you mean it.”

M’Benga held his adversary’s gaze. There was nothing more to say, so he let the silence speak for him.

Kralloch’s tone grew more condescending. He no longer wished to hide his contempt for the weakness of the outworlders. “I will instruct my son not to interfere with you,” he said. “And none will deny you your precious medical equipment. But know this, Physician. I too refuse to tolerate interference. And I do not need to offer my own life as collateral. I have over a dozen lives I might end in order to prevent interference with my plans.”

M’Benga might have said that Lord Kralloch had more than the fate of a dozen odd hostages at his disposal. He also held the lives of his soldiers and his own sons in his hands. The doctor refrained from verbalizing these ideas, however, as he was attempting to master his emotions in emulation of Sarek and other Vulcan philosophers. The outcome of a verbal sparring session mattered little in the face of all of Lord Kralloch’s violent intentions.

M’Benga offered a curt nod and returned his attention to the patient. Lord Kralloch left the room, satisfied that he who’d enjoyed the privilege of speaking last had spoken the greater truth.

Only now did M’Benga realize that Lord Kralloch had scarcely spared a glance on the prostrate form of his wounded son. Clearly the man did not want to be confronted with the evidence of the violence he’d fomented. Still the doctor couldn’t help but wonder if the Drackhan leader had revealed more than he’d intended. In the face of all his apparent fanaticism, it seemed Lord Kralloch would forfeit virtually any life for his cause with the sole exception of his own. M’Benga wanted to know if this idea had ever occurred to the man’s eldest son.

#

It looked not unlike the bridge of a Klingon warship, except a raised platform was at its center, with three massive barrels jutting several meters into the dark sky. Far below tremendous wheels sat

upon the rocks. Their great treads would allow the battery to move over virtually any terrain. The evidence of deep ruts and fallen trees marked its recent passage through the forest.

The enormous apparatus was stationary, at least for the time being, although the weapon was fully active. The disc shaped walkway surrounding the barrels was in constant rotation and the Drackhan technicians who peopled it were forever in motion, manipulating levers and performing diagnostics. Three of the technicians were strapped into reclining seats at evenly spaced intervals along the edges of the platform. They wore helmets and goggles, and plotted coordinates on screens that were all but wrapped around their bodies. Load runners, also helmeted and additionally equipped with thick leather gloves, raced up and down winding metallic stairwells in order to drop live mortar rounds into the wide mouths of the barrels.

It was an efficient operation. Whoever trained the Drackhans had clearly been an expert in advanced weapon systems. A full contingent of Klingon operators could not have proven more effective.

Latourna would have preferred a coordinated burst of phaser fire, with all phasers set to stun. She did not have that option thanks largely to her own decision making. Her Vulcan foster father had often warned her of the pitfalls of hubris. 'Pride goeth before the fall' was Salik's favorite human quotation, and he'd employed it ad nauseum throughout Latourna's teen years. But arrogance was perhaps a prerequisite of violence, and it seemed Latourna would never be entirely free of either one. The stun setting on her phaser cannon could not emit a sufficient burst to incapacitate so many individuals.

She considered employing some of the equipment inside Mr. Ur's silver briefcase, which she had entrusted with Kalok for the time being. Unfortunately those nonlethal weapons were intended for the more controlled environment of confined spaces. If she attempted to utilize them against so many individuals scattered over open terrain they may only serve to sow chaos.

"You will fire one volley," she told her new companions. "And then you will retreat."

"We will retreat?" Kalok asked. "And what will you do?"

“I will deal with the consequences.”

They were crouched upon the edge of a small rise surrounded by a thicket of tree branches. Ti’Tuva’s furry head popped up between them. “There are tannocks nearby,” he warned. “I can smell them.”

“Can you take to the trees in order to escape them?” Latourna asked.

Ti’Tuva looked to Kalok.

“Do not worry about me, my friend,” Kalok said. “I survived the Klingons and my own cousins. I can climb a tree if I must. I’m sure the tannocks will provide all the inducement I need.”

“Please, convey my instructions to your men, Ti’Tuva,” Latourna said. “And line them up along this ridgeline when you are ready.”

The Agmorrans appeared in short order. “One volley only,” Latourna said. “On my signal. And then you will immediately retreat into the forest.”

She crept forward onto open ground and stealthily positioned herself to flank the Drackhans. Her initial phaser blast would seem that much more devastating in the wake of the rifle fire . . . or so she hoped. She looked back over her shoulder, and saw that the Agmorrans had formed a firing line. She raised her hand, took a deep breath, and executed a quick chopping motion.

There was a rapid succession of reports, punctuated by small clouds of black smoke that drifted above the ridgeline. The crude rifles seemed inadequate to the task, yet a number of the Drackhans were felled. Latourna saw one of the loaders who’d been struck in the leg tumble from a high stairway. A few others doubled over in pain. Those who collapsed outright were quite probably dead. This kind of violence was in stark contrast to the mission of the UHS *Mercy*, but Latourna knew she must close her mind to all reservations. She must not be deterred from her task.

Several of the mortar’s operators were still standing. They drew their disruptors, and began firing in the direction of the ridgeline. Fortunately Marshal Kalok and the band of Agmorrans were already deep in the cover of the foliage, beating an apparently hasty retreat as

per Latourna's orders. It occurred to her that these supposedly primitive aliens were more disciplined than many Starfleet officers of her acquaintance.

Latourna rose to a crouch and discharged a sweeping beam of phaser fire that was sufficient to encourage nearly all of the Drackhans to abandon their posts. They dove headlong off the walkway, landing roughly on the stony ground.

Now Latourna concentrated full phaser fire on the engine that controlled the movements of both the mortar barrels and the wheels. Her phaser beam only radiated off the deflector shield that protected the more vital components of the Klingon war machine. She aimed instead at the one of the huge wheels, and succeeded in shredding it so that the battery began to list dangerously.

Two of the remaining operators unstrapped themselves from their chairs and abandoned the weapon as well. Now only two technicians remained. One was strapped into his chair. The other clung to the railing of the upper walkway, taking aim at Latourna with his disruptor.

Latourna threw herself into a barrel roll and sprang up to fire blindly at the technician. Her beam lashed the air above his head and he dropped out of sight. She took aim at another of the wheels, but a score of large animals came charging toward her around both sides of the mortar battery. They appeared to be an extraordinarily large species wolf with long hoofed legs that enabled them to move with a disturbing alacrity. These were undoubtedly the creatures known as tannocks that were responsible for Commander Bishop's gruesome demise.

More accurately the responsibility for the crime lay with the Drackhans controlling the animals, although they were exercising little control at the moment. These soldiers contented themselves with firing disruptor blasts between the stampeding beasts, although the tannocks were unquestionably capable of killing without the assistance of cover fire. The snarling teeth loomed quite large even at the distance of ten meters.

Ten meters and rapidly closing.

Latourna flung herself on the ground and discharged another sweeping beam of phaser fire. The tannock at the front of the pack went down and two others joined it in a head over hooves jumble that ended in broken limbs and howls of pain. The other beasts quickly slowed their advance, opting for a more circuitous approach that would merely delay the rending of their victim's flesh. The disruptor bolts were coming with both greater frequency and accuracy, but Latourna knew she could not retreat and still hope to disable the mortar battery. The Drackhans would only strengthen their defenses.

She rose and resumed firing, ignoring the soldiers and once more concentrating the full force of her phaser blast on the big weapon. One of the soldiers had drawn closer than she realized. He sprang up no more than four meters from her position. She saw the flash of the disruptor muzzle and instantly redirected her phaser cannon.

Phaser beam met disruptor bolt with devastating consequences for the Drackhan who'd fired upon her. His weapon exploded in his hand, taking his arm with it.

Latourna's phaser cannon did not survive the contest either. The energy of billions of colliding particles triggered a chain reaction along the length of the beam. She heard the telltale whine of an imminent overload. She briefly entertained thoughts of using the malfunctioning weapon to destroy the mortar. The impending explosion would prove quite devastating. This plan was made untenable by the rapid acceleration of the overload as evidenced by the increasing intensity of the whine. What's more a veritable fusillade of disruptor bolts were being fired in Latourna's immediate vicinity, with snarling tannocks steadily advancing on both flanks.

She could only retreat. She threw the phaser cannon with all of her mite and dove for cover behind a sizeable rock. It was apparent to the beasts that the hypersonic scream her weapon was emitting did not bode well. They scrambled to distance themselves from it as the soldiers hesitated in confusion.

The clearing was engulfed in the blinding white flash. Latourna glanced back to the nightmarish sight of skeletons silhouetted against the searing intensity of the explosion. The Drackhans soldiers and at

least one of the tannocks had not retreated quickly enough. She ducked down fearful that the flash might damage her eyes. When she looked up again no trace of her adversaries remained. The surviving tannocks had fled into the forest.

Latourna's first thought was that fewer obstacles lay between her and the completion of the mission. She resisted the impulse to dwell on what this implied about her psychological makeup.

There was little resistance as she closed the distance to the mortar battery. The remaining technician fired at her from the walkway. She drew her hand phaser and returned fire as she ran. Her aim was not so precise as to disable the Drackhan, but it allowed her the time to reach the relative safety of the underside of the battery. There was a ladder between the wheels, with a hatch leading to the walkway. She climbed with one hand, firing her phaser upward as she went. She obliterated the hatch and emerged from the burning remains. She hoped the element of surprise would enable her to drive the Drackhan defender from his perch, but a disruptor bolt nearly struck her full in the face. She dropped several rungs down the ladder, hoping to create the illusion that she was freefalling. She used her momentum to spring back up, firing wildly.

The technician returned fire as he retreated around the curve of the walkway. Latourna moved in the opposite direction, blasting instrumentation as she advanced. She heard the pounding of his boots as she rounded the largest of the mortar barrels. Her opponent made the mistake of running with his disruptor extended. Latourna turned and lowered her shoulder. All of the superior strength of the Drackhan was neutralized as his bulk was vaulted over her bent back. He landed hard on the deck plating and only the railing prevented him from sliding from the walkway.

He leapt to his feet faster than Latourna anticipated and slapped the phaser from her hand. She delivered a short kick to his sternum. This backed him toward the railing where his natural inclination was to straighten himself to counter her next attack. Now his head was an easy target for her boot as she leapt and spun 180 degrees. The kick connected and over he toppled, with the railing serving the same

purpose her back had a moment before. He grabbed for a handhold, but found no purchase, and fell several meters to the hard ground.

Other Drackhans were closing on all sides. It mattered little if the technicians were returning to their posts, or if these were additional guards. They were firing disruptor bolts and scaling the sides of the battery. Latourna had mere moments to act.

The nearest instrument panel indicated the mortar was operational in spite of her efforts at sabotage. There was also a live mortar round loaded into each of the barrels. She altered the coordinates, ignored the shrill protest of the alarm, and raced to the next station. Here the technician who hadn't left his post was still strapped into his seat. He'd been shot through the heart. She balanced above the corpse and altered the coordinates on this panel as well. The alarm rose in intensity.

Disruptor bolts sizzled around her as she made her way to the final station. Here she made an adjustment identical to the changes she'd programmed into the other two stations. Elevation: 1,000 Klingon leagues into the Cainian troposphere. Angle of trajectory: 0.00 degrees.

The computer began speaking in Klingonese. The voice protested her actions even above the ever rising alarm. Every panel was alive with flashing red lights.

The Drackhans were swarming the walkway as she leapt from the edge. "Abandon it! It's lost!" she shouted as she fell.

They answered her with more disruptor blasts. She landed on her toes and rolled downhill toward the edge of the forest. She regained her feet and moved in a zigzag pattern in order to dodge the disruptor bolts.

The mortar discharged and the shells whistled skyward, but they did not arch. Latourna reached the tree line and turned to see the Drackhans examining the instrument panels in consternation. "Abandon it! Abandon it!" she shouted.

Perhaps they did not hear her over the rising noise of the whistling shells. The whistling rose even as the shells plummeted toward their point of origination.

Latourna cupped her hands about her mouth. “Abandon it!” she bellowed with all of the strength of her lungs. The tree next to her exploded with disruptor fire.

She took cover deeper in the forest. It was too late for these Drackhans.

The shells exploded on impact with the battery. The concussive force made her overloaded phaser cannon seem mild in comparison. Several other shells erupted in a chain reaction, throwing rocks into the air and toppling trees for kilometers around. The tree Latourna had chosen as a place of temporary shelter was not spared. She watched it fly over her head and topple end over end. She was swept along in its wake, and ended in a pile of loose debris with the dust swirling about her.

She blinked several times and attempted to raise her head, but her eyes closed in spite of all her formidable willpower.

Chapter Four

They trudged down the steps, threw open the door and filled the room with their bulk. Something had changed. These Drackhans were visibly angry. It was at this point that M'Benga realized the mortars were no longer falling. The floor had ceased its rumbling several minutes earlier. The stillness was absolute.

The weak light from the high barred windows shone on the surface of the extremists' dark eyes. "Where is the Vulcan?"

There were three Vulcans in the long, low room, but M'Benga understood the extremists were referring specifically to Ambassador Sarek. "The Ambassador is recovering from the wounds you have already inflicted," he said. "You will not disturb him."

"Who is to prevent us, human?"

The doctor maintained his composure. He suspected that nothing short of a rescue at the hands of Starfleet commandos would prevent the eventual murder of all the hostages. But this knowledge would not stop him from defending his patient.

One of the Drackhans, who was nearly as large as

Lord Kralloch, stepped toward the corner where Sarek lay.

The doctor moved to block his path. "No," M'Benga said. "I will prevent you if I must."

Balthun appeared in the open doorway. "Do not be obstinate, Doctor," he said. "You will only worsen your predicament."

The large Drackhan drew his disruptor from his belt and levelled it at M'Benga. "Prevent me now," he said.

M'Benga did not move.

The Drackhan pressed the barrel of the weapon to the doctor's forehead.

"Vent your bloodlust elsewhere, Loktan," Balthun said. "We need this human."

In that moment Loktan did not care if Balthun was Lord Kralloch's son. This impudent human had no right to defy a Crusader of the Light. And certainly no human had the right to seize Loktan's

arm, but that was exactly what this physician had done, although he was clearly not strong enough to wrest the weapon from the grasp of a Drackhan warrior. Still the attempt at resistance was unforgivable. Now Loktan had no choice but to kill the man in the name of the Crusade.

And Loktan would have gladly done so in the face of all Balthun's objections if not for the fact that his finger had ceased to function. He could not pull the disruptor's trigger, nor bend his finger at all. In fact all of the digits of his right hand were loosening so that the disruptor was slipping from his grasp.

M'Benga caught the weapon in his free hand, while continuing to apply pressure to the flexor tendons which controlled the Drackhan's fingers. He quickly shifted his grip on the extremists' arm, and squeezed a nerve in his wrist, forcing the limb down and to the right, so that Loktan had no choice to turn and lower himself onto his left knee. The Drackhan winced, not so much from the discomfort the doctor was causing him, but in anticipation of having his own weapon turned against him.

M'Benga defied expectations once again, however, and released Loktan without turning the disruptor on him. Instead he took several quick steps toward Balthun, who was too shocked to bother with his own disruptor. M'Benga disassembled the weapon as he advanced, separating the twin barrels from the grip and removing the power cell. He presented all the components to Balthun in the palms of his hands like a man bearing an offering.

The other Drackhans had drawn their weapons, with each disruptor barrel now pointed at the back of M'Benga's head.

Balthun raised his hand. "Do not fire!" he shouted.

"I will go in the ambassador's place," M'Benga said, as he passed the dismantled disruptor to Balthun.

Loktan had recovered enough to attempt an enraged lunge at the doctor, while growling out some incoherent threat. M'Benga sidestepped the big Drackhan, who staggered and fell at Balthun's feet.

“Reassemble your weapon, Loktan,” Balthun said, dropping the pieces on the stone floor. “If you failed to kill the doctor with it in your hands, I doubt you’ll succeed with bare hands.”

Loktan seethed, glaring at Lord Kralloch’s eldest son for a long moment. Balthun stared down at him, silently challenging the larger Drackhan to make more than a show of his insubordination. But Loktan’s rage soon gave way to frustration, as he slapped at the components of his weapon and gathered them together. His dignity would not be reassembled so easily.

It was Loktan who’d killed many of the Agmorran negotiators when the crusaders had first seized the dome, exhorting his comrades to participate in the mass execution. Balthun was desperately seeking aid for his wounded brother at the time, and had only been told of the massacre after the fact. He tried to make a jest of it, saying that he wished Loktan and the others had left one of the Aggs for him to strangle. Secretly he was relieved they hadn’t.

For so long he’d believed that killing Aggs and outworlders was what he desired most. But before Martok was injured in the battle, Balthun had succeeded in killing one human with a disruptor beam and had badly wounded several others with a photon grenade. It was not the experience he’d long imagined. There was no great thrill of triumph over such powerful enemies. Only the empty feeling of seeing his brother fall.

This is why he’d allowed Loktan to deal with the Drackhan traitors as well. Perhaps that had weakened him in the eyes of the other crusaders, as did his brother’s injuries. He was certain these things had weakened him in the eyes of his father.

The human doctor was waiting. Balthun could feel the man watching him as if reading his very thoughts. He turned and gestured roughly to the stairs. “Move, Doctor. Time is short.”

M’Benga did not hesitate. He stepped through the door and began ascending the steps.

“Wait, Doctor!” cried the young Vulcan aide named Jadic. “Do not go with them voluntarily. They may execute you. The ambassador needs you.”

M’Benga turned and looked back. “The ambassador needs you as well, Jadic. Keep him comfortable until I return.”

Balthun spoke to one of his men. “Bring two others.”

The Drackhan extremist followed the doctor at a careful distance. “You may regret this decision,” Balthun said. “If you defy my father once too often, he will kill you.”

“And what of your brother?” M’Benga asked.

“It is for my brother’s sake that I give you this warning.”

M’Benga stopped at the top of the stairs. “How long do you believe this situation can continue?” he asked.

“As long as it takes to drive the Federation from our world,” Balthun said.

“I’m speaking of the here and now. Of this very standoff. How long can you continue to hold this dome? At what point must you murder the hostages and martyr yourselves to your cause?”

Balthun wished the doctor would be silent. This earthman reminded him in many ways of Kalok, and he did not want to think about his cousin. Kalok had been a traitor, who’d paid the price for his crimes. This was the truth of the matter, and when this physician outlived his usefulness he would meet a similar fate. There was nothing more to consider. He would not allow himself to become weak. “As I have told you before, human,” he said. “I am prepared to die if the Lifegiver so wills it. We are all prepared to sacrifice ourselves so that the Light of Truth may—”

M’Benga wheeled on him suddenly. Balthun gripped the handle of his disruptor. The doctor’s hands remained at his sides. “I believe you,” he said. “Certainly your brother has demonstrated his commitment to the cause. But I’m not convinced everyone is prepared to die, Balthun. I predict that Lord Kralloch will reveal his true intentions soon. He will speak to you of the future of the Crusade and the indispensability of its leadership. Because without leadership there can be no—”

“Shut up!” Balthun took a step backward and drew his disruptor. “I will not hear you slander a great Drackhan.

My father is here, fighting in the name of the Lifegiver, no different than any other crusader."

"Your father has some hidden means of escape," M'Benga insisted. "He will reveal it to you before the dawning. Ask him if sudden deliverance will be available to your brother as well. I think it more likely Lord Kralloch has decided to sacrifice his wounded son. Permanent physical disability is not a trait prized by megalomaniacs."

Balthun's eyes bulged in their sockets. M'Benga wondered if he'd pushed too hard. He understood if ever the young Drackhan was going to shoot him now would be the moment.

But the moment passed.

"Keep moving, human!" Balthun hissed.

There were more guards awaiting them in the upper chamber. M'Benga and two other hostages were bound and hoods were placed over their heads. Then they were led down a corridor and up another flight of steps. The doctor wondered if there was something their captors did not want them to see, or if the intention was simply to disorient them. At last they reached their destination, where they were made to kneel on the floor.

Balthun spoke in M'Benga's ear. "Have you begun to regret your decision?" he asked.

The doctor said nothing. The darkness was absolute. He heard footsteps and the sliding of table legs against the floor. After several long minutes, the hood was lifted, and M'Benga found himself staring up at the face of Robert Wesley.

The image on the viewscreen was unstable and marred by static. Wesley's lips were moving, but there was no sound. A moment later the audio began to break

through. "Who are . . . and . . . is . . . meaning . . . of this outrage!"

The image came into sharper focus. It was being broadcast on a portable viewscreen that had been setup on a table. A Federation technician was seated next to it. He wore a torn uniform and there was a deep gash on his temple.

"How dare you take hostages in the middle of a peace conference!" Wesley cried from the viewscreen.

It occurred to M'Benga that there must surely be more accomplished peace negotiators in the quadrant, yet it seemed their lives were dependent on Robert Wesley's communication skills.

"If you value the lives of these individuals," began the voice of Lord Kralloch. "Then you will be silent and listen."

M'Benga glanced up to see that Kralloch had donned a mask crafted from some metal alloy, complete with rivets and cylindrical slots through which the Drackhan's eyes blazed. The doctor was not surprised that the terrorist mastermind preferred to conceal his identity. He wondered what Balthun would make of it. Why would a man who was willing to martyr himself be unwilling to show his face?

"I am a Crusader of the Light of Truth," Kralloch proclaimed. "I represent the Drackhan people. Your presence on our world will no longer be tolerated."

Wesley said something that was lost in a burst of static. That was probably just as well given the expression on the commodore's face. He turned and presumably spoke to the *Mercy*'s communication's officer. Then he rose from the conn, and his voice came through, as he said, "Release my personnel and we won't trouble you anymore."

Wesley's tone was well modulated. M'Benga wasn't surprised when he caught a glimpse of Dr. Helen Noel standing beside the conn. He trusted that the *Mercy*'s chief of psychiatry was advising her captain well.

"Is it really as easy as that?" Kralloch asked. "I return your people and you simply fade among the stars."

"It can be that easy," Wesley said. He didn't sound all that convincing. He elaborated, but his words were garbled, as the image began to scramble.

Kralloch turned to one of the guards. The Drackhan pressed his disruptor against the technician's temple. Tears welled in the young man's eyes. "Please, sir," he said. "I'm trying. This radiation would make it difficult to communicate with someone in the next room."

"That kind of incentive will not prove effective," M'Benga said. "Not when the man is already in fear of his life."

The doctor received a slap to the side of his head with a disruptor barrel. He winced but did not cry out in pain.

The images from the *Mercy*'s bridge reappeared on the small viewscreen. Wesley was still speaking, but Kralloch silenced him by raising a gauntleted hand. "Your technology is too complicated for me to trust you. But the solution is simple. You will immediately withdraw from Cainus. Every space vehicle must return to the void. Every human in blue or gold and especially the devils in red must vanish, never to return."

"I can make that happen," Wesley said. "I'll begin the process as soon as possible. But what will you give me in return? I need to know that I can trust you. If you were to release just a few of the hostages—"

"Then I would be a fool," Kralloch said. "You will remove all traces of your Federation from the surface of Cainus in one hour or I will begin executing the hostages."

"It is logistically impossible for me to meet that demand," Wesley said. "You must know that. Even one of your hours is too—"

"For each hour that so many as a one Starfleet soldier lingers," Kralloch said. "Another hostage will die. The executions will be broadcast on this frequency for the edification of your people."

Wesley's response was lost in a burst of static. The technician was menaced anew, but Kralloch waved his hand. "It does not matter," he said. "The message has been received."

The large Drackhan removed his mask, crossed to the bank of windows, and peered out above one of the tables that had been upended to form a makeshift barricade. Balthun joined his father. They watched as Starfleet shuttlecraft circled on the horizon.

"Are they fleeing, Father?" Balthun asked.

"I doubt it," Kralloch said. "Without the Klingon weapon, these humans are free to rule our skies. But they are not the only ones who can pilot flying machines."

"What do you mean?" Balthun asked. "Has the Crusade managed to procure Klingon flying ships as well?"

There was a long pause before Kralloch responded. "No, my son. Of course not. I was merely speaking of our glorious future. One day

the Drackhan people shall be the ones to rule the sky if the Lifegiver so wills it." Balthun said nothing.

M'Benga remained in an undignified position on the floor. He did not hear what had passed between father and son. Perhaps Lord Kralloch was revealing his own cowardice. Perhaps not. Certainly there was something on the horizon the Drackhan leader was dreading. The doctor could only hope that the seeds of doubt he'd planted in Balthun's mind had begun to sprout the fruits of disobedience.

#

She was conscious when they found her. She was sitting atop the rubble. Her wounds were superficial, but that always seemed to be the case. Latourna's first commanding officer often told her she had a knack for walking unscathed through fire fights. She thought he was calling her a coward, so she'd strived to be in the thick of virtually every fight. Still nothing touched her as friends and colleagues perished around her.

She knew it was more accurate to refer to them merely as peers. They'd called her Ensign Redskirt, using the term strictly as a pejorative. Sexism had been eradicated nearly everywhere on Earth, but not in deep space among the rank and file of Starfleet security officers. Yet she had borne the insults and risen through the ranks to wear the gold, while so many others lay buried beneath alien soil or drifted atomized through the vacuum of space.

"Atomized," she said aloud. It was like the punchline to a tasteless joke.

The Drackhan named Kalok asked Latourna to repeat herself. He was standing above her. She did not look up to meet his gaze.

It was so simple to take lives. She had just killed a dozen or more sentient beings in a space of time shorter than the few minutes she'd spent seated upon these very stones. And she owed her mastery of fighting techniques not to her Starfleet Academy training, but to the man who'd murdered her parents. It was the cold fury Salik had warned her not to repress. She certainly hadn't repressed it today.

She had yet to see the face of the man who was behind these acts of terrorism. Yet she knew him. He wasn't human, but he would be a man—cold, calculating and willing to sacrifice thousands if not millions in order to feed his own insatiable ego. He would have the face of a Drackhan, although he might just as easily be a Klingon like Colonel Krow, or a human like Governor Matthias Hess of Deneba VII.

Her parents' only crime had been in saying 'no.' They had refused to renounce the Federation or betray their colleagues on the deep space survey team. But Hess had wanted total independence for his oligarchy, with no interstellar law to challenge his supreme authority, and no regulations to restrict his dilithium mines.

Latourna realized that Marshal Kalok had been speaking for some time, asking variations of the same question. "What now, Commander?" he repeated, taking her gently by the shoulders.

Ti'Tuva and the other Agmorrans were gathering around them, gazing at Latourna as if she'd just fallen from the stars, which in a sense she had.

Latourna looked at Kalok for the first time. "Why should he be allowed to live while so many others die in his name?" she asked in all sincerity.

Kalok studied her face for a moment and offered a tentative smile. "If you are speaking of the Drackhan who is the true architect of this madness," he said. "Then you are not the first person to pose that question."

"But you do not have an answer," Latourna said.

"I think it is a universal question," Kalok said. "Perhaps it is as old as the word for general in 10,000 alien languages. Not that a field marshal is one so unsullied." "Nor a lt. commander," Latourna added.

"You've accepted more than your share of risk for an outworlder," Kalok said. "My people owe your people too much already. But can your troops storm the dome now that you have destroyed the Klingon weapon?"

"Not without losing several hostages. It would be impossible to disable the Klingon deflector shield without alerting the extremists."

“We may be able to help you there.” Kalok turned to the Agmorran leader. “Isn’t that right, Ti’Tuva? Tell Commander Latourna about the tunnels.”

The Agmorran hesitated.

“It’s all right,” Kalok said. “I think the commander is one outworlder we can trust.”

Latourna raised her eyebrows. “There are tunnels beneath the dome?” she asked.

“There are always tunnels,” Kalok said. “They run under the whole of the capital city. Would this Klingon deflector block us from entering beneath the dome?”

Latourna considered. “That seems unlikely. The portable deflector screen they are utilizing has a limited penumbra.”

“Good,” Kalok said. “The only challenge then is in navigating the labyrinth. For that we have a great resource in Ti’Tuva.”

Latourna waited for the marshal to elaborate.

Ti’Tuva spoke first. “Many of my brothers have worked and even lived in the undercity,” he said. “And I have great familiarity with the Dome of the Drackhan Lifegiver. I know it from those tunnels that lay beneath it to the bells that adorn its high towers.”

“How did you come by this knowledge?” Latourna asked. “Were you imprisoned in the dome?”

Ti’Tuva barred his square teeth in an apparent smile. “Not quite, Commander,” he said. “But I mopped its floors for many years. And occasionally I was called upon to ring the bells.”

Chapter Five

Balthun watched as the doctor administered to Martok. M'Benga was examining the young Drackhan with a small device that flashed brighter than a crystal in the sun. Balthun had been on his guard from the moment the human surrendered himself to the Crusade, yet he saw no indication that the physician was treating Martok with anything but compassion. The doctor's devotion could be no greater if the patient was his own brother as opposed to the mirror image of his enemy. And there was no doubt that M'Benga and Balthun were enemies and would remain so for as long as they lived

The only question was how long they might expect to live.

As long as the Lifegiver willed it, of course. It did not matter. Balthun believed their lives were equally insignificant, and his only hope was to die fighting for the Crusade of Light.

These were the thoughts that prevented him from realizing that Lord Kralloch was standing behind him.

"It is time we spoke, my son."

Balthun started at the sound of his father's voice. Lord Kralloch appeared a little disappointed at this. He expected his eldest to be strong in all things, no less so when they were steeped in death. "Of course, Father," Balthun said. He could feel the old Drackhan's gaze upon him.

Why does he never look at Martok? Balthun wondered. *Is the pain too great or has he truly disavowed his wounded son?*

"Our time is running short," Lord Kralloch said. "Gather the outworlder hostages. Tell them they will be released."

Balthun was perplexed. "Why should we tell them that? Are there signs that the Starfleet troops are leaving?"

"No," Lord Kralloch said. "Quite the contrary. We have every reason to believe they will never leave of their own volition. We must demonstrate our resolve and erase all doubt from the minds of these invaders. We must show them we will not tolerate occupation or hegemony." Lord Kralloch studied his son's face intently.

“We will kill them all then?” Balthun asked.

“The executions will be righteous and just,” his father said. “The Lifegiver so wills it.”

“And then what?” Balthun asked. “Do we rush forth and attack the Starfleet men in the city, or do we make our final stand here?”

Lord Kralloch gripped his son by the shoulders. “We shall fulfill the prophecy, Balthun. Do you recall the words of the Lifegiver? ‘And the Drackhan people shall know glory twenty seven cycles after the collapse of the great dome.’”

The more his father explained matters, the more confused Balthun became. He had always understood that ancient prophecy to refer to the Mountain Dome, which did inaugurate the Age of Glory upon its destruction countless cycles ago. “Are you saying the Starfleet men will destroy the Dome of the Lifegiver?”

“Yes, my son,” Kralloch said. “This temple will burn, but we shall rise from its ashes as will The Crusade of Light.”

Balthun suspected that his father was speaking of a quite literal rising. “How, my lord?” he asked.

Kralloch revealed all forty two of his teeth. “Lightning weapons are not the only things the Klingon’s left behind?”

Balthun was astonished. “You have sky ships after all?”

“Only one,” Kralloch said, as if this distinction lessened the lie of his earlier denial.

Balthun looked away and said nothing.

“Do not look so disappointed, my son,” Kralloch said. “We will die gladly if the Lifegiver wills it. But it seems He has another purpose in mind for his humble servants. We must be stewards of the future.”

Balthun nodded. “Yes, of course. I will inform the crusaders. We will gather the condemned.”

He turned away, but Lord Kralloch seized his arm. “Wait. Be careful what you tell the other crusaders. The Klingon vessel is regrettably confined.”

“Then only we will escape?” Balthun asked.

“The others will go to glory,” Kralloch whispered. “It is for us alone to continue the struggle beneath these leaden skies. But we will

not be alone for long. We will lead scores of eager young Drackhans to the light."

Balthun felt numb. He dreaded what his father might say next, but he had to understand all of Lord Kralloch's plans. "I will order M'Benga to remain with Martok," he said. "We will need the doctor's help to transport my brother to the Klingon vessel."

Lord Kralloch's face became expressive of a great sadness. "Balthun," he said gently. "We must resign ourselves to the inevitable. Your brother has made his sacrifice. Eternal glory is within his grasp. I will not dishonor him by placing him in the hands of a human. We must consign him to the embrace of the Lifegiver."

Balthun's heart shriveled within his chest. He could do nothing but fix his gaze upon the toe of his own boot. How could Dr. M'Benga have predicted his father's actions with such accuracy?

"The way of the Light is hard," Kralloch said. "I am sorry."

Balthun slowly nodded his head. "I will gather the hostages."

"And it is time to dispatch the human doctor as well," Lord Kralloch said. "I suspected all along that he was merely an agent of espionage. I know he has spoken heresy to you, Balthun. Do not give me any reason to doubt your piety. Put an end to his sedition."

Balthun responded with the two words that he'd spoken all of his life. "Yes, Father."

#

Latourna did not imagine that Commodore Wesley would be pleased with the progress of the mock retreat. She understood that the crews from the *Lexington*, *Excalibur* and Copernicus need only convince the extremist leader that they were conducting a massive evacuation, but the armored and heavily armed personnel were hardly making a show of it. If anything it looked like the troops were massing outside the city in preparation for a siege.

Latourna suspected this was Captain Bradley's doing. There was no doubt in her mind that the man preferred the sledge hammer blow to the surgical strike. Would the captain of the *Lexington* be altogether

displeased if the initial rescue attempt ended in calamity? It would certainly bolster his ability to justify his own actions. His disastrous decision to fire the *Lexington*'s phasers at the planet might seem less excessive in the wake of a wider conflict.

She preferred to believe that no individual with such illogical and self-serving motives could hope to rise to the rank of a starship commander. Yet she could no more dismiss her suspicions than she could abandon her cares to the meditative Vulcan rites of Kolinahr. It seemed that both fleet politics and the Plateau of Tai-la would have to wait, however, as the crisis at hand was what demanded her immediate attention.

She saw her counterpart from the *Lexington* and called out. "Commander Ellsburg!"

The lanky young man was addressing a cordon of security officers. He turned to face Latourna as she approached. "Good to see you, Commander," he said. "Don't take this the wrong way, but you look as though one of those tannock creatures mistook you for its chew toy."

"And what is the right way to take that, Oscar?" Latourna asked, although she was unable to muster a smile. "I must rendezvous with my response team. Please walk with me."

"Very well," Ellsburg said. He nodded to his men and reluctantly fell in step with Latourna. "You've had a difficult day. That much is clear." There was at least the hint of an apology in his voice.

"My day is far from over," Latourna said. "And it appears that you are doing nothing to make it less difficult."

"You could call it a day right now, if it was up to Captain Bradley. We could blast through that deflector and make a direct assault on the dome."

"Fortunately it is not up to Captain Bradley," Latourna said. "Such a direct assault would inevitably result in death for the majority of the hostages."

"If they aren't dead already," Ellsburg said.

"Commodore Wesley's orders were implicit. You are endangering the hostages merely by massing these troops so close to the city gates."

"The hostages have been in danger from the moment they were taken," Ellsburg said. "Like I said, we would have stormed the dome as soon as the mortars stopped falling. If the circumstances were different, the majority of the hostages might be safe and sound as we speak. You can't prove otherwise."

Latourna was in no mood for petty squabbles, let alone a turf war. "But the circumstances never differ from the reality of the moment. Do they, Commander?"

Ellsburg forced a smile. "Unfortunately not. We were ordered to wait for you, so we're waiting. The dome is all yours."

Latourna nodded curtly. "We will end the situation as efficaciously as possible. There is an emergency medical response team from the *Mercy* standing by. Please conduct them into the building as soon as you receive my signal." "I'll give them a personal escort," Ellsburg said.

Latourna realized that someone else had fallen in step with them. Mr. Ur was only half a pace behind her. The sallow skinned Arcturian appeared almost contented now that his silver briefcase had been restored to him. "Hello, Mr. Ur," Latourna said. "I am glad to see that Marshal Kalok was kind enough to return your equipment." "As am I, ma'am," Ur said.

Ellsburg cast a dubious glance in the Arcturian's direction. Ur did not notice this suspicious reaction to his presence and Latourna made no introductions.

"How is Lt. Marko?" she asked.

"Back on board the *Mercy*," Ur said. "Recovering well according the report I received from ESM Lazenbee."

"I am pleased to hear it."

A second officer soon caught up with them. He was another member of the *Mercy*'s security detail, and he carried a phaser cannon. This officer was presumably a replacement for the wounded Lt. Marko. Latourna recalled that the man had something of a spotty service

record, with an equal number of commendations and demerits. If she was not mistaken, his name was Levant.

"Do you have room for one more, Commander?" the man asked. "I left the doc in that dome because he ordered me to do it. He didn't say anything about getting him out again, so I thought I'd take the initiative."

"You may join the response team," Latourna said, "If you are willing to follow my orders without question."

Levant nodded. "Aye-aye, ma'am."

A small and hirsute creature marched alongside them for several paces before anyone noticed him.

"May your skies be forever sunny, Ti'Tuva," Latourna said, addressing the Agg leader with a common Cainian greeting.

"And may the stars brighten your dreams, Commander Latourna," Ti'Tuva responded.

The others looked down at the diminutive alien with expressions of bemusement and, in Ellsburg's case, mild distaste.

"Marshal Kalok and my men await us before the underworld gate," Ti'Tuva said.

Levant blinked and looked to Latourna. "Is he speaking in code?"

"Unfortunately not, Lieutenant," Latourna said. "You could say we are entering a few levels beneath the ground floor."

They rounded a corner of the city wall, and the Agmorran began to lead them down into a steep gulley. Ellsburg paused on the high ground with an uncertain expression on his face.

"This is where we leave you, Commander," Latourna called up to him. "If you do not hear from us summarily, you may do what you deem most judicious."

For a moment Ellsburg looked as if he might take the plunge and join the response team in spite of whatever orders he may have received to the contrary. He had always respected Latourna and for a fleeting instant he wished they had time to exchange something other than mild insults and veiled threats. There were things he would tell her—genuine warnings he might offer—if only he could summon the courage.

Latourna looked back up at him. “Commander Ellsburg? Was there something more?”

He shook his head. “I only wanted to wish you luck, Lorraine.”

“Thank you, Oscar,” she said and descended the slope.

The mouth of the tunnel appeared to be a massive drainage pipe jutting from the damp soil at the base of the gully. The city walls towered high above it, with the tallest of the grey stone buildings rising higher still until their rooftops were lost in the swirling mists of Cainian skies. Marshal Kalok and the Agmorrans stood huddled before the tunnel entrance, with several muscle bound security redshirts acting the part of their unlikely companions.

“We all know why we are here,” Latourna said. “And we understand the urgency of this mission. But many of you are civilians. It would be presumptuous of me to insist that you accompany us beyond this point.”

“I’m afraid there are no civilians on Cainus at the moment,” Kalok said. “Not until this crisis is resolved.”

Ti’Tuva drew himself up and spoke to Latourna with tears in his eyes. “I once stood inside that dome, cowering while the greatest Agmorran I have ever known was assassinated by a Klingon tyrant. Now a Drackhan tyrant wants to murder many of your people. The very people who helped rid us of the Klingons. You need me to lead you to the dome, and lead you I shall. But Marshal Kalok is still recovering from his injuries.”

“I’m fine, Ti’Tuva,” Kalok insisted. “If I fall behind, then leave me behind. But I won’t neglect my duty either.

Not anymore.”

“Very well,” Latourna said. “Let us proceed.”

At a signal from Ti’Tuva, two of the Agmorrans removed some of the rusted bars that blocked the mouth of the tunnel. And one by one the members of the small expeditionary force clambered into the darkness where they were greeted with the squeals of grong and the trickling of fetid water.

#

It was clear to Balthun that he had given the human doctor too much liberty to do as he pleased in the name of his vocation. Now the man would not cease pestering him with endless questions. “Where is Lord Kralloch? And where have the other guards gone? When will I be free to check on the hostages again?” It seemed there would be no end to it until the physician had been dealt with, but still Balthun hesitated. To kill this human was to admit that his twin brother would soon be dead as well. Surely Martok would spend eternity in the embrace of the Lifegiver, but he’d be no less lost to his family.

And the hostages would soon be gathered for the slaughter. Balthun had sent Loktan to retrieve them. His father’s orders would be carried out without question. Loktan was ever eager for bloodshed, and as he had been made to look foolish by the human doctor, he was unlikely to let his guard down a second time.

“This will end sooner or later,” M’Benga said, intruding on Balthun’s thoughts once more. “It’s up to you how it ends. With your world at peace or in turmoil. With your brother alive or dead.”

Balthun poked his long finger in the doctor’s face. “Do not attempt to prevent me from fulfilling my sacred obligations.” He tried to sound menacing, but his voice was flat and lifeless.

It was M’Benga who was becoming passionate. “There is nothing sacred about the mass murder of innocent people. Anyone who uses faith to justify atrocities renders that faith up as so much genocidal propaganda.”

“Be silent, human,” Balthun said wearily. “You know nothing of what you speak.”

“If I know so little,” M’Benga taunted, “then how did I predict your father’s words so precisely? Or can you tell me I was mistaken?”

Balthun laid a hand on his disruptor. M’Benga wasn’t certain if the gesture was deliberate or unconscious, nor could he have said which boded worse. The doctor understood that he was experimenting with a risky procedure. He considered disarming Balthun, but there were other armed Drackhans in the room. Many of the guards had disappeared on a mysterious errand, but at least three remained. It

wasn't difficult for M'Benga to imagine where the others had gone. He decided to continue on the same perilous course of goading Balthun, as it was evident that time was running short for the hostages.

"I ask you again," he said. "Where is Lord Kralloch? Has he left you to do his blood work?"

Balthun would no longer allow this stranger from another world to slander his father. He drew his disruptor. "That work can begin with you," he said. The human had somehow divined his father's words—even before Lord Kralloch spoke them—so that the truths of the Lifegiver might be twisted and presented as lies. This devil's trick would not work.

M'Benga had grown accustomed to having guns pointed in his direction. The weapon did nothing to sway him. "And what of Martok?"

Only now did Balthun begin to seethe with anger. "Do not speak of him," he said. "You will not exploit his weakness in order to break my resolve."

"You once told me I'd share your brother's fate," M'Benga said calmly. "And now Martok has begun to recover. How long do you think his recovery will last if you continue on this path of insane destruction?"

"My brother was always prepared to die. But he will not die before you!"

M'Benga had only been vaguely aware of the other extremists. They were behind him now. They seized his arms and forced him to his knees.

Balthun could not prevent his hand from shaking as he aimed his disruptor at the doctor's head. "It is now clear to me that you are here as an agent of espionage. You have spoken naught but sedition and heresy. And I condemn you to death in the name of the Lifegiver."

M'Benga did not flinch. "Then you are nothing but your father's puppet. His words pour from your mouth. You condemn your brother alongside me. And how many others? You're all puppets to a man who lacks the courage to play witness to the murders he incites."

"You will be silent, or I will silence you!" Balthun warned.

“You mean you’ll kill me with the outworlder weapon in your hand,” M’Benga said. “Where do you imagine your father acquired so many Klingon weapons, Balthun? Did the Klingons simply leave them lying around?”

“The Klingons were driven away thanks to Drackhans like my father,” Balthun insisted.

“The Klingons were driven away by Federation troops,” M’Benga said. “And why would the Federation authorities fail to confiscate such advanced technology? I believe it was already hidden when they arrived. Your father had possession of Klingon weapons while the Klingons were still on this planet. And there’s only one way he could have achieved that.”

Balthun was becoming apoplectic with rage.

M’Benga’s own father had often told him he didn’t know when to quit. Apparently the doctor’s final moments of life were to be no exception. “There’s only one way Lord Kralloch could have received so many Klingon weapons,” he shouted. “They were your father’s payment for capitulation and the outright betrayal of his own people!”

Balthun screamed incoherently and struck him repeatedly with the barrel of the disruptor. M’Benga reeled and his vision blurred. He had pushed too hard, and he feared this truly was the end of his life. Perhaps he had overestimated Balthun’s devotion to his twin brother. More likely he’d underestimated the near total mind control Lord Kralloch exercised over his eldest son.

He took a deep breath, searching for inner peace among the roiling sea of autonomic responses surging up and down his central nervous system. His pulse rate and blood pressure had reached levels dangerous enough to rival the impending burst of disruptor particles. This was an exaggeration, of course. Maybe the absurd notion was the closest he could come to meditation in that terrifying moment—something to control the violent shaking that had gripped his limbs. Measure your own BP without a tricorder or so much as an antique cuff and gauge and win first prize: distraction from your own imminent demise. Would it make the near instantaneous implosion of every cell in his body any less excruciating?

He stared into the disruptor barrel and awaited the blast of immolating particles. He looked into Balthun's eyes, which were twin voids and devoid of all mercy.

Then somewhere beyond the Drackhan's left shoulder, he saw the tall man in the soiled, emerald stained robes. The Vulcan was being half supported, half dragged by a pair of guards, but he appeared no less dignified for the rough treatment. "Let that man live," Sarek said. "And I shall give you something that will prove more valuable to your cause than ten million such executions."

Chapter Six

There were fires burning beneath the city. Ragged Agmorrans stood gathered around makeshift stone hearths, seeking warmth and shelter from the conflict above. They tracked the progress of the response team with disinterested eyes.

Ti'Tuva led the way, with Latourna at his side, setting an increasingly rapid pace. They moved swiftly and in silence along the winding, intersecting tunnels. Each member of the team was spurred on by motives both personal and universal.

Latourna felt deep concern for Dr. M'Benga, Ambassador Sarek and the other hostages, yet she couldn't stop thinking about the Drackhan man called Lord Kralloch. She wondered how many lives he'd destroyed earning such a ludicrous title. She didn't know if he'd be among the extremists in the dome, but she felt certain the killing would only end once the despotic leader was dead. Perhaps that was too simplistic and another fanatic would quickly fill the power vacuum as was historically the case with terroristic organizations.

Latourna did not care.

Kralloch could not be allowed to simply walk away from his crimes. The man who'd murdered her parents had escaped, only to kill again. That would not happen today. If it was within her power to do so, Latourna would avenge the victims both known and unknown by killing Lord Kralloch without hesitation.

"We are near the deepest sub-chamber of the dome," Ti'Tuva whispered. "We must climb the Slope of Blood and Tears."

The Agmorran gestured to a natural crevice in the rock face above them. "Many of my people were tortured in the dungeons beneath the dome. You can still hear the blood and tears trickling down into this underworld. My ancestors considered this place to be hell. Now it is a sacred place."

Latourna stepped forward to examine the geological formation. The gap was several meters long but narrow enough to force the response team to crawl upward at roughly a sixty degree angle. She

did hear the sound of water trickling down the slope. This was presumably runoff from the lowermost chambers of the Dome of the Lifegiver. It did not seem impossible that such effluvium had at times included the blood of the unfortunate.

Latourna hoped this was not such a time.

She motioned for Mr. Ur to move forward. “A stealth probe might prove effective,” she said.

Mr. Ur laid his silver case on the rocky floor and selected a cylindrical object the size of a plum. It glowed silver until he made an adjustment and the device reflected the yellow tone of his flesh, rendering it all but invisible as it rested on the palm of his hand. A second later, the stealth probe rose into the air, instantly assuming the shadowy greys and browns of the tunnel walls. Ur entered some coordinates on his tricorder, and Latourna noticed only a slight disturbance in the air as the probe made its way into the crevice and up the Slope of Blood and Tears.

Ur spent the next several moments staring intently into his tricorder screen. Latourna resisted the urge to remind him of the need for alacrity. The readings were vital. They must know what obstacles lay above.

“The stealth-sphere has reached the lowermost chamber of the dome,” Ur said. “No life form readings. But the radiation makes it difficult to be certain that the device isn’t malfunctioning.”

“Is the passage wide enough to accommodate us?” Latourna asked.

“I believe so.”

“Very well,” Latourna said. “Let us begin the ascent.”

Ti’Tuva proved as nimble as an acrobat. He pulled himself up with one arm and scrambled into the gap in the rock face. Latourna seized his ankle just as his feet were about to disappear into the darkness above. “Please wait,” she whispered. “I am better armed. I need to go first.”

She glanced back at Kalok, who instantly read the expression on her face. “Don’t worry, Commander,” he said. “I don’t intend to slow you down. I will follow at my own pace, or simply wait here if I must.”

“Thank you for your assistance, Marshal,” Latourna said. “I hope we meet again.”

Kalok nodded. “My people owe you more than I can express.”

Latourna turned from him and pulled herself into the crevice alongside Ti’Tuva. Her uniform was instantly coated in mud and lose gravel. She reached up to get a better handhold and her fingertips found what she took to be two oddly symmetrical holes in the rock. She glanced up and, in the low light from below, she saw that the holes were the eye sockets of a skull that was imbedded and halffossilized inside the crevice. The skull was humanoid and small enough to be that of a child. Latourna assumed these were the remains of an Agmorran victim of the dome’s once active dungeons.

Her suspicion was confirmed by Ti’Tuva. “It was not merely the blood and tears of my people that ran down this slope. The bodies of countless slaves were cast into the crevice.”

Latourna removed her hand from the skull. “I am sorry,” she said. “I did not realize there would be remains.”

Much to her surprise, Ti’Tuva grinned at this. “Do not be sorry, Commander,” he said. “It seems my ancestors wish to offer us swift passage.”

Latourna nodded with as much reverence as she could summon, yet she carefully chose another handhold. The other members of the response team soon followed them into the crevice, and they climbed as rapidly and quietly as could be managed inside the steep, narrow passageway. Latourna saw a faint light high above. She looked up every few meters only to feel slightly disheartened that the light appeared no closer.

She redoubled her exertions, surpassing even the nimble Ti’Tuva. The minutes felt like hours, but she reached the top at last, where her hands found the bars of an iron grating. She removed her phaser from her belt and adjusted the weapon so that it would emit a thin beam. She whispered to Ti’Tuva and the Agmorran leader descended in order to warn the others to be mindful of the sparks.

Latourna winced at the intensity of the orange glow her phaser emitted, but from what she could tell the chamber above was empty at

least of the living. She quickly succeeded in cutting through several of the bars, and emerged slowly into the long, low room. The stone walls were stained with tracks of brackish water that ran down from the dome's higher levels.

Then she saw what was in the center of the chamber and nearly cried out in shock. Several humanoid bodies hung by their necks from the rafters of the ceiling. Their hands were bound, but a tricorder reading told Latourna that their necks had not been broken. Instead they'd slowly asphyxiated with legs jerking and feet kicking two meters above the stone floor. It was apparent their executioners had wanted them to die horribly. They were all Drackhans and the great betrayal that had earned them such a terrible fate was their desire to reach a peace accord with the Agmorrans who shared their planet. For this Lord Kralloch had condemned them to death.

Mr. Ur's stealth-sphere hovered among the bodies as if it might detect some sign of the countless lives that had been ended in this dungeon. But if there were such things as vengeful ghosts, the device could not detect them.

Ur was standing beside his commanding officer before Latourna realized he had joined her in the chamber. He stared at his tricorder screen as if they were engaged in a mundane survey mission on an uninhabited planet. But Latourna knew he was as disturbed by the sight of the bodies as she. The stealth-sphere assumed the color of the stone walls and flew from the room in a blur. A few moments later Ur indicated to Latourna through a series of hand gestures that there was a contingent of Drackhan extremists on the level above them.

The other officers were being assisted through the grating by the ever helpful Ti'Tuva. The large redshirts were a little bemused by this unexpected addition to the response team. One by one they were confronted with the hanged Drackhans, but they were experienced soldiers, and did not allow the gruesome sight to distract them from the mission at hand.

Latourna relayed the numbers and relative positions of the Drackhans on the next level. Then they performed a final weapons check and proceeded up a winding stairwell. Latourna crouched on the

landing above. Extremists were pacing back and forth in the main chamber beneath the dome. There was no sign of the hostages. She motioned for

Ur once again.

The Arcturian already knew what his commander wanted. He carefully removed a disc shaped object from his case. This probe was larger than the stealth-sphere and it appeared to have no cloaking capability. It floated into the chamber spinning and flashing a multitude of colored lights. The Drackhans were instantly drawn toward the strange object. They were quite baffled and did not think to so much as point their weapons at the stun probe.

At a signal from Latourna, Mr. Ur pushed a button on his tricorder. Even from the cover of the stairwell, they saw the blinding flash. Every Drackhan in the immediate vicinity of the stun probe collapsed. But an instant later Latourna heard the sound of heavy footfalls. More extremists were pouring into the chamber. “Phasers on full stun,” she ordered.

She spun around the corner, firing at the first sign of movement. One Drackhan was felled by her stun beam, then a second and a third. The rest of the response team quickly followed her lead and a number of other extremists were stunned unconscious. Unfortunately two of them had managed to fire disruptor bolts that struck the stone walls of the dome.

Everyone inside the structure must surely have felt the reverberation. Latourna saw two extremists disappearing through a doorway on the far side of the chamber, escaping into the east wing of the building. There was no doubt in her mind that they would instinctually flee toward the room where the other terrorists were holding the hostages. She also understood that if they reached their destination several hostages would die.

She sprinted after them, trusting her team to stay close on her heels. “Find a different route,” she called to

Mr. Ur. “Try to cut them off.”

#

All of the hostages were assembled, kneeling with their heads bowed. M'Benga was not exempt from this treatment. His status as Martok's personal physician no longer carried any weight in this the eleventh hour.

It was now Sarek who was calling on his own considerable professional skills in an effort to spare their lives. He was employing every rhetorical technique at his disposal and appealing to Lord Kralloch's twisted sense of justice.

The Drackhan leader had rejoined them at last. He could not resist the chance to hear the Ambassador's apparent confession. M'Benga had always understood that Vulcans did not lie, yet they seemed quite capable of dissembling when confronted with an inherently illogical reality.

"As I told your son, Lord Kralloch," Sarek said in a weary but irresolute tone of voice. "I shall make a confession of all my crimes against your people. I will submit myself to your justice."

"But you are only one man," Kralloch said. "The Federation is a conspiracy of hundreds of worlds, ruled by thousands of criminals such as yourself."

"I am the Federation's chief representative on this world. As such it was my sole duty to force your people to capitulate."

It sickened M'Benga to hear Sarek debase himself by confessing to false crimes. He understood the ambassador was stalling for time in the hope that a rescue party was drawing near. Yet he did not doubt that Sarek would sacrifice himself if there was no alternative. He might die knowing that millions despised him for reasons that were based on twisted truths and outright lies. He was the kind of man who would do so willingly in order to save the lives of his subordinates.

"Allow these people to leave," Sarek said. "And I will make whatever confession pleases you. You may record it here or you may drag me before your Assembly."

"The Truth of the Lifegiver is all that pleases me," Kralloch said. "But how do I know that you won't simply refuse to speak the truth once your cherished followers are free?"

“You have only my word,” Sarek said. “But I swear upon my ancestors that I will do what I have spoken.”

M’Benga could tell that the Drackhan was tempted by the offer. A high ambassador who was willing to renounce the Federation would make for a powerful propaganda tool. He suspected that Lord Kralloch was trying to devise a means by which he might convince Sarek that the hostages had been released, only to murder them in secret. But whatever thoughts the Drackhan was harboring were soon interrupted by the rumbling of the floor.

There were two reverberations in quick succession.

Kralloch turned to one of his men. “Go see,” he ordered.

#

Latourna was following the two extremists up another stairwell. One of them stumbled and she hit him in the back with a stun beam. His unconscious body tumbled down the steps. She vaulted over it and kept climbing higher. Mr. Ur had taken another route into this section of the building. She hoped the Arcturian would succeed in cutting the terrorist off and blocking his path. The sound of phaser fire coming from above told her the lieutenant had succeeded. The answering disruptor fire indicated that Ur’s aim had not been perfect.

“You are trapped,” she called up the stairwell. She hoped her voice did not carry too far. “Surrender yourself or die!” She didn’t intend to kill this brainwashed foot soldier unless it was unavoidable, but she thought it would be more effective to make an extreme threat. She hoped to interrogate this terrorist in order to discover the current location of the hostages. Mr. Ur’s stealth-sphere was still roaming the building, but there were many rooms to search.

Unfortunately her plan was not well considered. Like many terrorists, the Drackhan trapped on the stairs above her was quite willing to die for his irrational cause. The sound of a disruptor on overload was similar to that of a phaser in the same altered state. She rushed up the steps two at a time.

The Drackhan had contorted his body into a tight ball with the disruptor hidden beneath his bulk. The building intensity of the overload filled the air with a piercing noise. Latourna might set her phaser to vaporize the Drackhan, but she feared that would only trigger the disruptor to explode that much sooner. She attempted to turn him. It was ludicrous, like trying to wrestle an overgrown child into obedience. She doubted she could wrest the weapon from him in time.

"Commander," Mr. Ur called from above. "Please remove yourself."

She rolled out of the way as he leapt from the upper landing. At first she did not recognize the object in the Arcturian's hand. It was a nearly transparent cube of energy that expanded to cover the Drackhan's prostrate form the instant Ur clapped it against the man's back. The terrorist rolled over at last and attempted to push his way free of the deflector bubble, but he did not succeed. His disruptor subsequently exploded, turning him into a shapeless lump of biomass covering the interior of the portable deflector screen.

Latourna turned away, disgusted by the gruesome sight. She was much relieved that the ever resourceful Mr. Ur had produced yet another lifesaving gadget. But if the hostage takers had not been alerted before, there was no question they must know by now that the dome was under attack. The mission was proceeding much too slowly.

"Do you have any additional readings from the stealth-sphere?" she asked.

"The radiation is complicating matters, I'm afraid,"

Ur said. "My tricorder has lost contact with the device." The rest of the response team had caught them up. There was no alternative but to continue the ascent. Latourna ran as fast as she could, listening for the telltale sound of disruptor fire.

Chapter Seven

"Kill them!" Loktan shouted. "We must execute them all while there is time."

Balthun was holding up a hand as if the gesture was sufficient to prevent his fellow crusader from making good on the threat. His eyes were locked on Lord Kralloch, who was quickly backing out of the room. "Where are you going, Father?" he called. "Do you not wish to see that your orders are carried out?"

"I will carry them out myself," Kralloch said and drew his own disruptor.

He took deliberate aim at Ambassador Sarek.

M'Benga shoved the extremist nearest him and leapt in Sarek's direction. Several disruptor bolts were fired at once. The only one that struck a living being had been intended for another target. M'Benga succeeded in wresting Sarek to the floor, but Jadic had no way of knowing that his mentor was out of harm's way. He stepped into the line of fire and Lord Kralloch's disruptor bolt caught him in the chest. He screamed in agony as the red glow enveloped him and melted his body to nothingness.

"Do as Loktan has ordered!" Kralloch shouted as he continued to distance himself. "Kill the rest of them."

Sarek could only stare in shock at the vacant spot where his protégé had stood an instant before.

M'Benga kicked at the extremist nearest him, and succeeded in knocking the Drackhan to the ground. He knew it would not be enough.

The firing began. M'Benga closed his eyes and tried to attain serenity in death. But death did not come. He opened his eyes, and saw that the Drackhans were concentrating their fire not on the hostages but on unknown targets down the long corridor. An answering barrage of phaser fire came from that direction, and Drackhans began falling one after another.

The terrorists attempted to turn the hostages into living shields, but the willingness of the Starfleet commandos to use stun beams

played to their advantage. It was less likely that the hostages would be permanently injured by friendly fire. The doctor had treated a slew of stun wounds, but the patients had always made complete recoveries.

Lord Kralloch disappeared through a door on the opposite side of the room. M'Benga crawled in that direction, with phaser beams buzzing over his head. He rose at the last instant and vaulted through the door. He did not see Balthun following his path.

#

Latourna was the first to cross the threshold. Only one hostage taker was still standing. He was holding a human male in front of him, with the barrel of his disruptor pressed to the young man's temple. "Lower your weapon!" the Drackhan shouted.

Latourna did so. That is when the terrorist made the mistake of pointing his weapon at her. Levant spun into the room and fired a stun burst from his phaser cannon. The beam struck the terrorist full in the face. His disruptor hit the stone floor at the same instant as his unconscious body. The hostage was stunned as well. Latourna checked the human's vitals as the rest of the response team rushed into the room.

Sarek tried to stand, but Levant placed a gentle hand on his shoulder. "A medical team will be here shortly, sir," he said. "It's better if you don't move until they check you out."

"He murdered Jadic," Sarek said.

"Who murdered Jadic?" Latourna asked.

"Lord Kralloch. He was aiming for me, but Jadic stepped into the line of fire. It is illogical for the young to die for the sake of the old."

There was at least one other notable absence among the hostages. "Where is Dr. M'Benga?" Latourna asked.

"He followed Lord Kralloch through there," Sarek said and pointed to the door. "Balthun has gone as well." Latourna burst through the door and disappeared.

"Commander," Levant called. "Wait. Let us get your back." He didn't know Latourna especially well, but he knew it was out of

character for her to break with mission protocol. He started after her, but was delayed when an injured hostage reached out to him in supplication. Levant soothed the young woman as best he could, assuring her that a medical evac team was on its way. He wished they'd hurry.

#

M'Benga climbed a ladder that led him through a trap door in the ceiling. He flung the door open and ducked back down, wary of Lord Kralloch's disruptor. When there was no disruptor fire, he emerged more slowly and found himself on a flat rooftop. The dome was like a great overturned bowl on his right. Not far to the left, the east wing of the building ended in a sheer drop high above the streets of the capital city.

There was no sign of Lord Kralloch.

The Cainian night had fallen at last. The darkness was near absolute. M'Benga stood motionless and listened. There was a humming of machinery. It seemed to be coming from the far side of the dome. His eyes adjusted more slowly than his ears, but the doctor eventually made out a humanoid figure working its way around the edge of the dome. *It seems you parked in the wrong place, Lord Kralloch,* he thought.

The ledge that ran around the dome was perhaps 10 centimeters wide. M'Benga preferred not to look down, but he estimated the ground to be a good 100 meters below. He could only assume the Drackhan's feet were larger than his own size nine boots. That was one advantage. Being unarmed and almost certainly suffering from a concussion were at least two significant disadvantages. But the doctor did not feel dizzy in spite of the mother of all migraines, and he'd never been one to suffer from vertigo.

He was not trained in advanced combat techniques, nor would he ever be a great warrior, but M'Benga could not allow Lord Kralloch to escape. The man had murdered Jadic before his very eyes. The Drackhan would not glide away in some cloaked Klingon ship.

M’Benga would see him in the dock at a war crimes tribunal or die in the attempt.

He made good progress around the ledge. He managed not to look down. His headache actually served to keep his mind off the precipitous height. Slide right foot, slide left foot—it wasn’t so different from one of the academy exercises that many a disgruntled physician had been made to suffer through upon admittance into Starfleet.

M’Benga didn’t look down, nor did he think to look up. His only warning was a slight scuffling sound. Then he saw Balthun a few meters above him. The Drackhan was prostrate, sliding down the dome, aiming his disruptor with one hand and trying unsuccessfully to control his descent with the other. *The son is a bigger madman than the father,* M’Benga thought.

It was all the doctor had time to think before Balthun collided with him.

#

Latourna emerged from the trapdoor and immediately recognized the sound of a spacecraft preparing for takeoff. She did not need to take a tricorder reading to know it was coming from the far side of the building. There was a ledge around the dome, but she opted instead for a direct ascent. Scaling the steep dome would doubtlessly prove more hazardous than working her way around the ledge, but it would afford her the high ground and possibly the element of surprise.

She climbed swiftly. The stone was pitted and scarred like the surface of a small moon, and it offered easy handholds. When she reached the summit, she rose to a crouch and scanned the rooftop below. The west wing appeared to be empty. She did not see Dr. M’Benga, Lord Kralloch or anyone else. Yet there was a slight atmospheric disturbance, as if something was creating a molecular displacement in the far corner.

She slid down as it was impossible to climb without leaving herself open to attack. This made her descent more precipitous. She

landed hard on the flat roof, and her knees buckled. She immediately sprang to her feet, drawing her phaser. She adjusted the weapon to emit a more devastating beam and fired into the center of the atmospheric disturbance. The energy radiated off the apparently invisible target, forming a glowing circle which rapidly increased in size and intensity. There was a flash of blinding light. The spacecraft flickered and became visible at last.

Latourna recognized it at once as a Toron class Klingon shuttle pod. It was approximately four meters long, bulky and wedge shaped with disruptor beam and photon torpedo capabilities. Her phaser beam hadn't caused much damage beyond disabling the cloaking device.

She rushed forward and leapt upon the hull without a moment's hesitation. She had known and respected Jadic. He was an honorable Vulcan. The man who'd disrupted every cell in Jadic's body, erasing all but his memory in the blink of an eye, was hiding inside this ship. She attempted to pry the hatch open with her hands. It was an impossible task, so she stepped back and took aim with her phaser.

She saw a streak of light and threw herself backward on instinct. The disruptor bolt shot past, but it came close enough to burn her hands. She lost her phaser and rolled down the opposite side of the shuttle pod.

She had been too eager in her zeal to find Kralloch. It was a mistake to assume he was already inside the shuttle. She suspected that he'd lain in wait, concealing himself by hanging over the side of the rooftop. It was an enviable tactical maneuver, and one that had resulted in her becoming disarmed and vulnerable.

#

M'Benga clung to the ledge, dangling some 100 meters above the ground. He tried to pull himself up only to receive a kick in the leg from Balthun. The Drackhan was beside him, also dangling with only the strength of his fingers to prevent him from plunging to his death. This had been the result of their collision. They had nearly lost their lives in freefall, yet Balthun hadn't lost his disruptor. It was just above

them on the ledge, nearer to the Drackhan extremist than the Starfleet physician.

M'Benga began to pull himself up again. This time it was worth the price of the kick as he managed to boost himself into a seated position on the ledge. He looked down at Balthun and reluctantly offered his hand. The Drackhan chose instead to grab the doctor's leg in an effort to wrench him from the ledge. M'Benga responded by doing something he'd only done once before in his life. He balled his fist and struck Balthun on the proboscis. The brittle bones just below the nasal cavity made for one of the most sensitive places on a Drackhan's body. M'Benga heard a crunching sound, and Balthun dropped down, barely grasping the ledge.

"That was damned foolish," M'Benga said.

The doctor was astounded and a little more confounded by Balthun's response. The terrorist managed to snatch up his disruptor, aiming it at M'Benga while clinging to the ledge with just one hand. The Drackhan's eyes were filled with tears of rage.

"All right, Balthun," M'Benga said and leaned back on the dome in weary resignation. "You have a clear shot with no Vulcan ambassador and no Starfleet Security to stop you from pulling the trigger. You might not even need me to keep your brother breathing anymore. Go ahead and shoot. Keep perpetuating the endless cycle of violence and repression. It's what your father demands, isn't it?"

Balthun's hand trembled and the tears ran down his cheeks. "It's supposed to be simple," he said. "You're an invader. You represent darkness and lies. And we shall defeat you with the Light of Truth."

M'Benga said no more. He didn't need to pose any more questions about Lord Kralloch. The corruption and duplicity of the Drackhan leader was now apparent even to his son.

"The Light of Truth," Balthun repeated. "Will defeat you."

"Just throw the bloody gun away," M'Benga said. "I know your arm is getting tired. Your bicep muscle is twitching like a Thalassian eel."

With a groan of despair Balthun did as the doctor ordered, and flung his weapon into the abyss. M'Benga offered his hand a second

time, and Balthun grasped it in his own. The doctor slowly pulled the Drackhan up to sit beside him on the ledge, and waited patiently while the extremist sobbed.

He glanced to his left and saw a familiar face edging toward them along the ledge. This time Lt. Levant was wearing his proper red tunic. M'Benga had never been so relieved to see someone dressed in the uniform of a Starfleet security officer.

#

Latourna was penned behind the shuttle pod, with her boots hanging over the edge of the rooftop. She saw her phaser lying several meters distant with nothing to provide cover if she made a lunge for the weapon. She heard the sound of footsteps approaching from the rear of the shuttle. She did not hesitate and wriggled her way toward the nose. The bow of the spacecraft made for a natural ramp, and Latourna charged silently upward, bounding over the hull and springing into the air behind the shuttle.

She'd made her best guess based on the general direction of the footsteps. Kralloch looked up at the last instant, but he didn't have time to take aim with his disruptor. Her timing was not ideal, yet she managed to land enough of her weight on the Drackhan's arm to make him drop the weapon. Unfortunately this allowed him to seize her by the neck. She drove her knee into what would have been his solar plexus if he were human. His grip loosened for an instant, and she delivered three simultaneously slaps to the sides of his face with her open hands. She followed this disorienting tactic with a quick strike to his nose from the heel of her hand. The satisfying crack told her she'd broken something. He howled in pain, but still he did not release her.

Lord Kralloch was possessed of considerable physical strength. What damage Latourna had done— injuries that might have sent another foe to his knees in withering pain—had only served to further enrage the Drackhan elder. He throttled her to prevent her from striking again, and then began adding his greater weight to his superior strength.

Latourna was bent backward, with her vision beginning to blur. She estimated that she would be rendered unconscious in 45 seconds. She saw her parents' faces as they'd appeared just before the execution. They'd been so serene, but even then she'd understood that was for her benefit. They hadn't fought because they'd believed she might be saved in their surrender.

But she would not be serene in death. She clawed at Lord Kralloch's face, and found his eye sockets. He shut his eyes as tightly as he could manage, but her cracked fingernails dug into his flesh. All of her Starfleet training was forgotten. The fight had become entirely primal—a base struggle for survival.

It soon became apparent that Kralloch would pay a high price for murdering her. And even temporary blindness would make it impossible for him to pilot the shuttle pod. He flung her as far as he could and made a clumsy dive for the disruptor.

She allowed her momentum to expend itself, drawing precious air into her lungs. Then she was on her feet, moving toward him in a zigzag pattern as he fumbled with the disruptor and attempted to wipe the blood from his eyes. Her Starfleet training had reasserted itself. The advantage was hers as she exploited her greater agility, kicking and striking the Drackhan in half a dozen vulnerable places and leveraging him into a position where she could twist his wrist and take the disruptor.

Before she could point the weapon at him, he spun around and swung his fist like a hammer. A strike to the head would render her unconscious, so she opted to lean backward and the force of the blow broke her collar bone. In spite of the pain she managed to leap into the air and deliver a kick to his midsection with both boots. She did not delude herself that this would finish him, but it did serve to propel her backward a few meters.

When they both rose again, Lord Kralloch found himself staring down the barrel of his own disruptor, with a glowing surge of energy emanating from within. He crept backward in the general direction where the phaser lay.

Latourna said nothing. She did not gloat over her victory, nor give any indication that she expected the Drackhan to surrender himself. There was fear in Lord Kralloch's eyes, but he did his best to appear smug and self-satisfied.

Latourna understood the Federation would feel compelled to extradite him to the Drackhan authorities, and there was no guarantee they could hold him. Conniving men like Lord Kralloch always had allies in every level of government. He would find some means of escape and kill again. He was so like Governor Hess. A cold-blooded mass murderer. And she knew he was guilty of dozens of other capital offenses. Universal crimes against humanoid kind.

She had the right. She had every right. She would be his executioner.

Her finger tightened on the trigger.

And then she heard a familiar baritone. "Commander Latourna, you are a Starfleet officer. You must act accordingly."

She'd been eager to see Dr. M'Benga among the rescued hostages, and quite devastated when she discovered him missing. But she did not wish to see him at this moment, nor listen to his unfailingly logical rhetoric.

"Go back inside, Doctor," Latourna said. "Tend to the hostages. I will be there shortly."

"And will you be bringing Lord Kralloch with you?" M'Benga asked. "As a prisoner of the Federation?"

"Certainly not, Doctor," Kralloch said. "Can't you read the hatred in the female's eyes? She intends to kill me."

Latourna glanced over and saw M'Benga standing with an apparently unarmed Drackhan. Levant was there as well, with Mr. Ur making his way around the ledge behind them.

Lord Kralloch saw them as well. "Have you surrendered, Balthun?" he called to the Drackhan. "Well, I have not. I am an instrument of the Lifegiver, and my fate is as ever in His hands" He moved a step closer to Latourna's phaser.

"Don't move again," Latourna said, thrusting the barrel of the disruptor closer to his face.

Kralloch smiled, yet he stood quite still.

"We have lost, Father," Balthun said. "Your Klingon ship cannot save us. We will go to the gallows, and from there I know not where."

"How weak you are in the end, Balthun," Kralloch said. "Such a disappointment. Perhaps Martok was always the stronger. His faith would not be shattered so easily."

Levant moved toward Lord Kralloch. "Should I take him into custody, Commander?"

"No," Latourna said. "Remain where you are." She need only apply a modicum of pressure on the disruptor's trigger in order to avenge countless victims. The weapon had no stun setting. Levant and M'Benga could say whatever they liked at her court martial. She did not care.

"Does a female have the courage that my own son lacks?" Kralloch asked. "Perhaps I would have been wise to spend more time educating my daughters in place of my sons."

"Shut up!" Latourna said. "Don't speak again."

"Commander," M'Benga said. "This man has been the instrument of great destruction. Please don't make him the instrument of your own destruction."

"He murdered them!" Latourna said. Her voice broke, but her hand was steady. "He was supposed to be a leader. A protector. But he only cared about himself. His wealth. His power. He can't walk away." Her determination and barely controlled rage were apparent in the tone of her voice.

"He won't walk away."

It wasn't the doctor who'd spoken. It was the Drackhan called Balthun. "I will confess all of my family's crimes even if my father refuses to speak the truth. I will betray all of Lord Kralloch's secret allies. I will go to the gallows as a penitent."

"Now I have lived to see my son become a traitor as well as a coward," Kralloch said. "I am neither. I will die a martyr's death if that is the will of the Lifegiver." He stretched his arms wide and began to shout. "Shoot! Shoot!

Pull the trigger and commend me to glory!"

Latourna was half blind with rage. She swore she saw not a Drackhan male standing before her but a human named Matthias Hess, former Governor of Deneba VII. Both of her parents could be avenged in one disruptor burst. She could erase the evil bastard just as he'd erased Mommy and Daddy.

Daddy. Dad. Father.

The synonyms passed through her mind, conjuring an image of her Vulcan foster father. Salik had always stressed the importance of meditation in times of extreme duress. She performed a breathing exercise and her mind cleared.

The man standing before her was not Governor Matthias Hess.

"No," she said. "I will not kill you. As a representative of the United Federation of Planets I am placing you under arrest on behalf of the people of Cainus IV."

Kralloch made a gesture of dismissal. "I will not die on my knees. Your phaser weapon is within my reach. I will die a martyr after all. At the very least I may succeed in killing you or my pathetic son."

Latourna considered Lord Kralloch for a long moment. She saw him quite clearly now. In spite of his theatrics he did not wish to die. He hadn't realized how close she'd come to killing him. He'd always assumed the doctor would prevent her.

"I will die a martyr," he said with less conviction.

"I think not," Latourna said. "I believe it is you who lacks the courage of your convictions." Then she lowered the disruptor and dropped it on the rooftop.

Levant and Ur appeared slightly alarmed at this. They pointed their phasers at the Drackhan elder.

"Lower your weapons, gentleman," Latourna said to the security officers. "You may take Lord Kralloch into custody at your leisure. He is not prepared to die." "Commander?" Levant asked, uncertainly.

"You heard me correctly, Lieutenant," Latourna said. "You may lower your weapon. This Drackhan is no longer a threat."

Reluctantly, Levant and Ur did as they were instructed.

Kralloch shook with rage. "I will kill you for that, woman!"

Latourna revealed the palms of her empty hands and shrugged ever so slightly.

Kralloch glared at her, and clutched at the air as if he might strike her down with an invisible weapon, yet he made no attempt to seize the very real and potentially deadly weapon that lay at his feet. The risk to his own life was too great.

Latourna turned her back and walked away.

Levant and Ur came forward to bind the Drackhan's hands with an energy band. Lord Kralloch did not resist even as his eldest son looked on in silence.

Chapter Eight

Latourna sat in a small treatment pod on the ICU deck of the UHS *Mercy*. She gazed through the glass partition into the medical bays that stretched clear around the curve of the massive starship's inner hull. She saw patients representing four separate species, with physicians and support personnel representing half a dozen more. The Andorian Dr. Vormin was operating on an Agmorran. The Ambidextrians Ganede and Nantine were tending to no fewer than three Starfleet security officers. Dr. Blenheimer was setting Ambassador Sarek's ribs as nurses and technicians from worlds as diverse as Rigel II and Antares V moved to and fro, maintaining surgical support frames and monitoring vitals.

In the center bay Dr. M'Benga was performing surgery on a Drackhan insurgent named Martok. Latourna understood this was the twin brother of Balthun and the second son of Lord Kralloch. M'Benga had been among the first patients when he'd been treated for concussion scarcely an hour before, and he would perform procedures and advise his staff for hours to come.

The doors swished open and Dr. Helen Noel joined Latourna in the pod. Noel was clearly tired, yet her skin appeared to glow with an ethereal beauty. Latourna hardly looked her best, with bruises and lacerations covering half her body, but she didn't resent Noel. She'd given up measuring herself against other women shortly after her Academy graduation more than a decade before.

"Hello, Commander," Noel said. "I haven't administered so much first aid since medical school. But it's all hands on the ICU deck today. I hope you'll trust a head doctor to set your collar bone."

Latourna smiled through the pain. "Of course, Doctor."

"Oh, please call me Helen," Noel said. "There's entirely too much formality on this ship."

"Very well," Latourna said. "As long as you call me Lorraine." She wished Noel would dispense with the pleasantries, as she was in no mood for small talk.

The psychiatrist brandished a hypo. “This is filled with a combination analgesic and calcium concentrate,” she said and pressed the instrument to Latourna’s collar bone. “Now let’s set it, and we’ll clean up some of these bruises and cuts.”

She gently set the bone and wrapped a silver compress around Latourna’s shoulder and neck. “There. How’s that?”

“It’s fine,” Latourna said, sounding more terse than she’d meant to.

Noel selected a second hypo and gently pressed it to Latourna’s cheek. There was a not unpleasant tingling, and Latourna felt her bruises begin to subside. Noel applied a sealant to her cuts and the sharp physical pain was immediately dulled.

“All you need now is a good night’s sleep, and you’ll be fit for duty in the morning,” Noel said. “Or maybe the day after. I’d say you’ve earned the right to skip a shift or two.”

Latourna didn’t respond at first. She was watching Dr. M’Benga work to save yet another life. “I’m afraid I must resign my commission and leave this vessel,” she said at last. “I am not fit to serve aboard the *Mercy*.”

Noel tried to conceal her shock. “That’s the kind of statement that demands explanation.”

Latourna looked to the psychiatrist. “Has this evolved from a medical treatment to a psychological evaluation?”

“It doesn’t have to, Lorraine,” Noel said. “I promise not to make you look at any ink blots if you don’t describe any erotic dreams.”

Latourna smiled in spite of herself, but then the tears broke through. “I killed so many of them. I told myself it was necessary. That every second counted if the hostages were to be saved. But there had to be a better way.”

“There’s always a better way,” Noel said. “But it isn’t up to you to discover it all on your own. The terrorists you killed made their own choices. There’s nothing in Drackhan physiognomy that precludes free will. You killed them in self-defense and in defense of others.”

“But it didn’t end with the armed extremists,” Latourna insisted. “I came so close to killing Lord Kralloch after I’d disarmed him. I

would have enjoyed it, Helen. Nothing would have given me greater pleasure. And that's what makes me unfit to serve on the *Mercy*. Dr. M'Benga doesn't require the services of a cold-blooded assassin."

"I know something of the biographies of all the senior officers on board this ship," Noel said. "I can't imagine what it was like for a child to experience the horrors of the Deneba colony. But I wouldn't have to be a psychiatrist to have some idea how it makes you feel when you encounter men like Lord Kralloch. Frankly, I'm impressed that you didn't pull the trigger. And I happen to know Dr. M'Benga credits you with preventing a wider conflict on Cainus IV in addition to saving the hostages, as do we all."

Latourna said nothing as she knew better than to argue with an expert on the human mind.

"Will you consider talking to me again before you make a final decision?" Noel asked.

"A more formal consultation?" Latourna asked.

"If you prefer," Noel said. "Or simply another conversation." Latourna nodded.

"Maybe you'll consider this as well," Noel said. And then she hesitated before adding, "I killed a man once. And he'd been completely robbed of his free will. He'd been brain washed by a once brilliant psychiatrist that I trusted and admired. A man who exploited his position to turn a mental health facility into a true madhouse—his own private purgatory."

"And you saw no other option than to kill?" Latourna asked.

"My captain was being held against his will and tormented," Noel said, gazing as if into the past. "I was trying to cut off the power. A technician who'd been reduced to little more than a zombie tried to stop me. I didn't intend to kick him so hard, but he fell into the generator with the juice flowing at full power. Only a moment later, the first officer beamed down armed with a phaser. He might have put a stop to the insanity without killing anyone. Maybe if I'd waited . . ."

"But you couldn't have known that Mr. Spock was beaming down," Latourna said. "Or that Captain Kirk could stand even another instant of the agony that Dr. Adams was subjecting him to."

Noel looked up. This time she could not conceal her surprise. “I see I’m not the only one who’s interested in the biographies of her fellow officers.”

Latourna stood up and moved to the doors. She turned back even as they slid open. “Thank you, Helen. Physical wounds have never been a great inconvenience to me. I am fortunate in that. Perhaps we can discuss wounds of a more permanent nature when time permits.”

“I’d like that, Lorraine,” Noel said. “I hope we can have many conversations before this voyage is through.”

Latourna stepped through the doors and made her way down the corridor away from the surgical bays where dozens of bodies were being repaired.

#

M’Benga hadn’t a clue what time it was when he returned to his quarters. He only had to ask directions from two separate crewmen. It felt like nothing short of midnight, but he knew it might just as likely be noon.

The door barely slid shut behind him when the chime announced a visitor. There was no one he wanted to see before he managed at least seven hours shuteye, although an image of Helen Noel did pop unbidden into his mind. He opened the door and saw not the lovely face of Dr. Helen, but the craggy and unsmiling countenance of Commodore Robert Wesley.

“I know you must be exhausted, Doctor,” Wesley said. “But I thought you might like a nightcap just the same.” He proffered the bottle of Saurian brandy he was holding.

“You know my weakness, sir,” M’Benga said and gestured the *Mercy*’s captain into the room.

“Some weaknesses are universal,” Wesley said.

He made himself at home in the most comfortable chair, while the doctor searched for a couple of glasses. M’Benga soon discovered that his quarters came equipped with a small bar.

Wesley glanced around as if in search of a conversation piece. He didn't seem to know what to make of the doctor's Vulcan fire hollow or the collection of leather-bound books. He decided to simply skip the small talk. "Well, our first mission didn't exactly come off as planned," he said. "In fact it was something of a disaster."

M'Benga nodded and poured two fingers of brandy into each glass. "But it was a mitigated disaster thanks in no small part to you and Commander Latourna. I must admit you surprised me, Bob. I would have expected a heavier hand."

"Did you expect me to do something crazy?"

Wesley asked. "Like say fire ship's phasers at the planet or go off halfcocked and volunteer myself as another hostage?"

"I'm only guilty of the latter," M'Benga said and took more than a sip of the brandy.

"And it's the former that worries me the most," Wesley said. "I'm going to do everything in my power to get Bradley court-martialed, but he has a lot of friends who wear a lot shiny medals on their chests."

"His kind almost invariably does," M'Benga said.

"The Starfleet is nearing a turning point, Doctor. Relations with the Klingons and the Romulans have rarely been worse. There are a lot of warmongers sounding trumpets and pounding drums."

"And you?"

Wesley made an expansive gesture with his hands. "I guess you'll have to judge me by my actions, Doctor."

M'Benga smiled. "I have, Bob. And you might as well call me Geoffrey. Most of my friends do."

Wesley tipped his glass and managed a small smile.

The men were sinking into their chairs, and sharing a not altogether uncomfortable silence, when the door chimed again. "Allow me," Wesley said and rose to answer it.

Dr. Helen Noel beamed in the open doorway with her dimples on full display. "Oh, Captain," she said and blushed. "I thought these were—"

“If you thought these were Dr. M’Benga’s quarters,” Wesley said, stepping aside. “Then you weren’t wrong. The doctor and I were simply conducting a mission debrief.”

“I see,” Noel said, noting the bottle and glasses on the table. “Well, I . . . I brought a visitor who wishes to speak with Geoffrey—with Dr. M’Benga.” She hurriedly stepped aside and motioned to her companion.

Sarek moved into the doorway. “May I join you, gentlemen?” he asked.

M’Benga stood up. “Of course, Ambassador. And Helen. Please come in. Make yourselves comfortable.”

They settled themselves around the fire hollow as M’Benga retrieved two more glasses from the bar. He filled three of the glasses, but before he could settle himself, the door chimed once more. He shrugged and hit the release.

“Hello, Doctor,” Lt. Commander Lorraine Latourna said. “I understand that you must be tired, but—”

“Not at all, Lorraine,” M’Benga said, stifling a yawn.

“By all means. Join the party.”

The Saurian brandy was nearly exhausted before Wesley thought to offer a toast. “To those who lost their lives on Cainus,” he said, somberly.

“To the lost,” M’Benga said.

They all repeated the phrase and clinked glasses.

“It is a peculiar earth custom, this toasting of the dead,” Sarek said. “But I understand that humans feel words must be spoken. Some sentiment to fill the void of silence, which by its very definition can never be filled.”

“You might say that we find even inadequate words preferable to silence,” Noel said.

“Yes, of course,” Sarek said. “And the need to say ‘thank you’ is also quite strong among humans.” He looked to Dr. M’Benga. “I also feel that need, Doctor. Your actions were most commendable. The future of Cainus IV would be most bleak if not for your efforts. As well as those of Commander Latourna and Captain Wesley.”

“I only wish we could have saved Jadic,” Latourna said. “Among so many others.” Her voice trailed off and her eyes revealed she was thinking of more than those who were lost on Cainus IV.

“I do mourn him,” Sarek said. “As I mourn all of the lives cut short on Cainus. It seems the young inevitably perish in wars stoked by their elders.”

“But the mission on Cainus is far from over, Ambassador,” M’Benga said. “We have forestalled a larger conflict. Now we may resume the relief effort.”

“And I will resume the peace negotiations,” Sarek said. “I have a new aide it seems. A Drackhan named Kalok. And Ti’Tuva has agreed to lead his people back to the negotiating table as well.”

“What of Lord Kralloch?” Latourna asked. “Has he been remanded to the Drackhan authorities?”

“He has,” Wesley said. “He’s been charged with over ten counts, including high treason, murder and the assassination of a minister of state. His son made a full confession and gave up all of the political cronies too. The trial should be quite a show.”

“Of that I have no doubt,” Latourna said.

“I have to be honest,” Wesley said. “And, Mr. Ambassador, you need to understand that I’m a typical humam. But if I’d been in Latourna’s place, I’m pretty sure I’d have vaporized the bastard. They’d never have courtmartialed you if you had, Lorraine.”

It occurred to M’Benga that the captain had consumed the larger portion of the brandy. “I believe the lt. commander was tempted,” he said. “As any of us humans would have been. But in the end I think she came to the same conclusion that you would have reached, Captain. That it was more important to show the Drackhans and even the Agmorrans that we believe in the rule of law. Men such as Kralloch should be dragged into the light so that all may see they are not giants to be feared but only petty tyrants who can be brought to justice.”

He glanced at Latourna. “But feel free to correct me if I’m wrong, Commander.”

Latourna shook her head. “You are not wrong,” she said.

It was not long before the bottle ran dry. Helen Noel was the first to rise. “Well, I think we’ve prevailed on Dr. M’Benga long enough,” she said. “Please allow me to escort you to your quarters, Ambassador.”

“Yes, Doctor,” Sarek said. “Please. I believe we are all most fatigued.”

Wesley followed them out.

Latourna lingered for a moment.

“Was there something you wanted to ask me?” M’Benga said as they stood near the door.

Latourna hesitated. “Nothing that can’t wait,” she said. “This is to be a long voyage, after all.”

M’Benga nodded. “Let us hope so,” he said.

“Goodnight, Lorraine.”

“Goodnight, Geoffrey.”

The door swished shut for what M’Benga was convinced would be the final time. He collected the glasses and placed them in the sanitizer. He was half way up the steps to the loft where his bed awaited . . . when the chime sounded yet again. He sighed. He was tempted to ignore it, but it seemed a chief of medicine was fated to be forever on call.

Levant grinned sheepishly as the door slid open. “Hey, doc,” he said. “I know you must be beat.”

“Hello, Lieutenant,” M’Benga said. “As a matter of fact . . .”

“I’ll keep it short, I promise,” Levant said. “I just had to find out how the redshirt from the *Lexington* is doing. I don’t have to tell you how chaotic it is down in the ICU. And you know how stuck up those blueshirts can be. They won’t so much as give you the stardate unless your guts are spilling out on the deck plating.”

M’Benga wasn’t sure how to take this comment.

“Oh, sorry, doc,” Levant said. “Present company excluded, of course.”

M’Benga laughed aloud perhaps due to the lateness

of the hour. “That’s perfectly all right, Lieutenant,” he said. “I suppose there will always be some professional distance between us blueshirts and you redshirts as you say.”

There was a brief silence. “So the redshirt?” Levant pressed. “Human woman. South Asian ancestry. I beamed back to the ship with her after you gave her first aid in front of the dome, right after everything went sideways. She was in bad shape. Just a kid really. From the *Lexington*.”

M’Benga considered. “Yes. Ensign Mung. You’ll be pleased to know that she’s going to make a full recovery.”

Levant swallowed hard and his eyes misted. “Thanks, doc. That’s a load off my mind. She owes you her life. And she isn’t the only one.”

“She owes her life as much to you as me,” M’Benga said.

Levant nodded, almost reluctantly. “Yeah. I guess that’s because I didn’t work against you, huh?”

M’Benga reached out and gripped the man’s shoulder. “No, Mr. Levant. It’s because we worked together.”

Levant nodded some more, but averted his gaze. He cleared his throat. “Well, thanks again, doc. I’ll let you get some sleep.”

He hurried down the corridor before the doctor could bid him goodnight.

M’Benga dimmed the light, and made his way up to the loft at last. His bed was a revelation, somehow both warm and cool, like the soft blue illumination that colored the walls and ceiling. He grew drowsy almost at once.

Then he thought of Helen Noel. Perhaps he shouldn’t be surprised that the *Mercy*’s lovely chief of psychiatry had a way of slipping into his half-conscious mind. But there was something she’d said when she first showed him the room. Something about a button he should press only once he was in bed. He saw it, glowing on the console above his head. *Why not*, he thought. *What’s the worst that can happen? I haven’t had a massage since Argelius II.*

The bed did move, but only vertically. It rose higher just as the ceiling slid apart to reveal a great portal. The doctor soon found himself inside the domed transparency which was nearly as large as the one that crowned the bridge. The massive bulk of the *Mercy* lay below him with merely half the cosmos above. He saw galaxies

spiraling through infinity, spilling their stars across the universe. He saw the violet and umber iridescence of distant nebulae and the amber glow of closer planets as reflected by the light of Cainus IV's setting sun. He imagined a million other worlds drawn to their stars by that most basic law of gravity and peopled by thousands of species sentient and undiscovered. A physicist might remind him that it was all slowly drifting apart so that one day in the distant future an individual marooned upon a planet and gazing into the night sky would see no stars but only the darkness of distances unfathomably vast.

But M'Benga was fortunate enough to float among the stars. He was inevitably reminded of an unhappy boy who'd once floated in a row boat upon Lake Armstrong. The stars had seemed distant then. They were much closer now that he had come home.