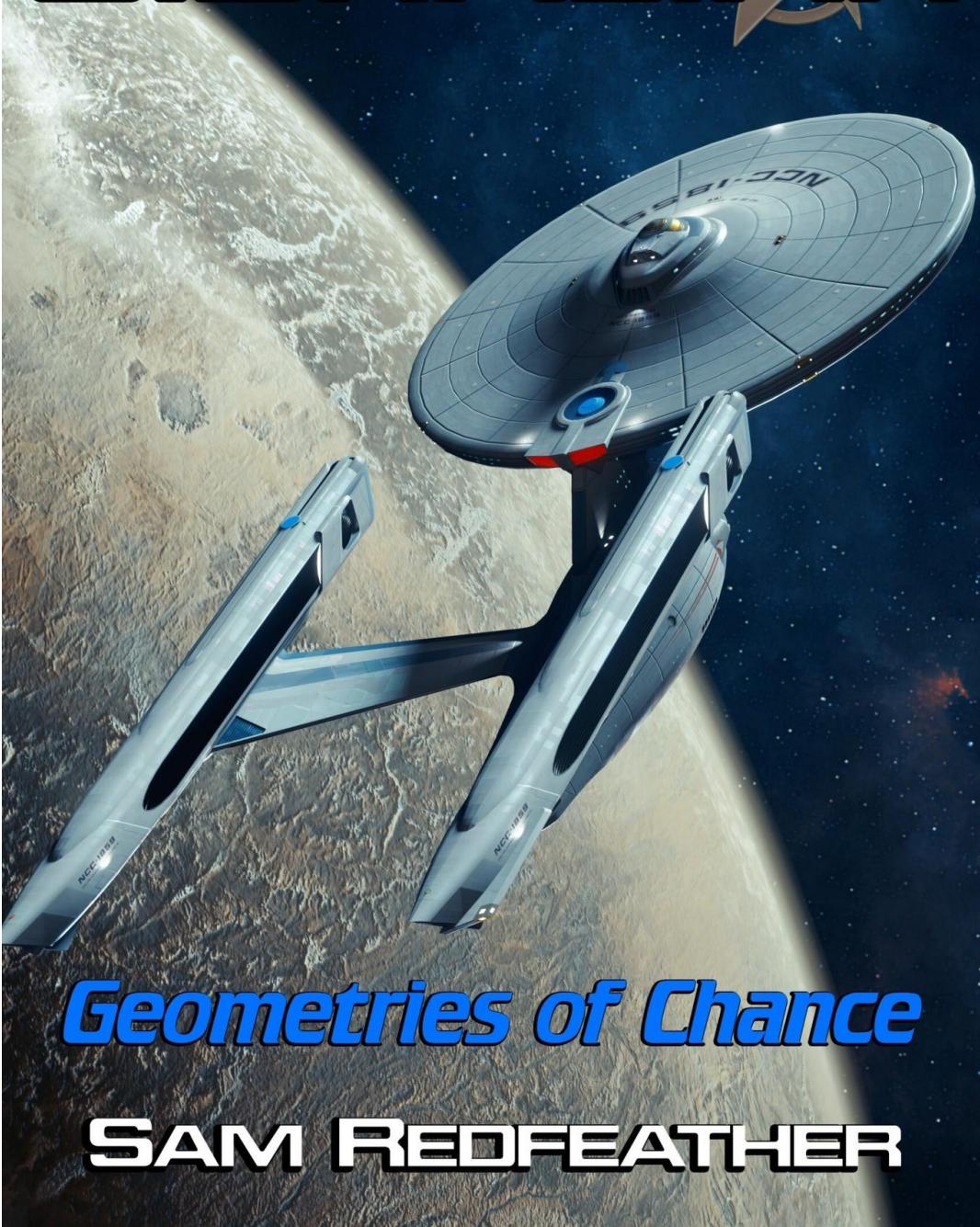


STAR TREK

GIBRALTAR



Geometries of Chance

SAM REDFEATHER

STAR TREK: GIBRALTAR

Geometries of Chance

By Samuel Redfeather

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Chapter 1

Captain's Log, USS Gibraltar, Stardate 53336.9

We've just begun our escort duty to Phersivon VI, one of three starships safeguarding a convoy carrying humanitarian relief for the survivors of the Cardassian settlement on that beleaguered world.

It has been a month and a half since Gibraltar departed dry dock, and our participation in the ensuing disasters at Lakesh. The crew seem to be recovering from those events apace and have begun to mesh into what I can only hope will be a cohesive unit. I anticipate that they will enjoy some much-needed R&R upon the completion of our current assignment and our arrival at Deep Space Nine.

USS *Gibraltar*, corridor intersection 7-D.

The attack had seemingly come from nowhere. The transition from normal shipboard operations to a life-or-death struggle for control of the vessel had been brutally abrupt.

Blistering volleys of phaser and disruptor fire illuminated the dimly lit corridor intersection with brilliant, strobe-like flashes. Terse shouts could barely be heard among the whine of weapons fire and the jolting claps of their impact against *Gibraltar*'s tritanium bulkhead plating. Master Chief Tark, a stout Tellarite security NCO hefted his ungainly Type-III phaser rifle and drove the stock into his shoulder as he inched out around the corner he'd been hugging for cover. "Two of them just headed portside!" he roared to his security team. "They're trying to flank us. Weatherly and Stins, move to junction 7-E double time!" With that, Tark triggered a three-pulse burst of phaser energy towards the shadowy figures lurking ten meters away in the next intersection.

As he darted back behind cover, Tark queried loudly to the woman crouched next to him,

"Dunleavy, where's my damn forcefield?" The petty officer was up to her elbows in an open power relay access hatch.

Dunleavy flinched as an eruption of sparks rained down on her from a disruptor strike overhead. She groused, "This would be delicate work under the best of circumstances, Master Chief." Then, more quietly, "Piss off."

Tark spared Dunleavy an admiring smirk and urged, "Hurry it up or we're going to get overrun." The Tellarite sent another burst of phaser energy screaming down the corridor.

Dunleavy's fingers felt leaden and clumsy as she rushed to swap isolinear chips in the relay control node. The enemy had somehow been able to generate a power surge through the ship's internal defensive systems only moments after inexplicably beaming through *Gibraltar*'s raised shields. Now, the young woman struggled to bypass the primary and secondary power relays while squarely in the middle of a ferocious firefight.

From somewhere to port came the roar of an explosion. Seconds later a wave of hot air laden with debris poured down the corridor and buffeted Dunleavy as she strained to maintain her concentration. One slip and she'd have to restart the bypass cycle from the beginning. Frantic cries for a medic competed with the near-hysterical screaming of multiple wounded, but Dunleavy forced herself to ignore both.

Dunleavy slotted the last of the re-synched chips and initiated the EPS bypass. She breathed a sigh of relief when the small screen flashed a friendly green. She bellowed, "It's up!"

With a growl of approval, Tark lobbed a photon grenade down the corridor. "Raise it!"

Dunleavy activated the field, which snapped into place with a brief flash of ionization. The presence of the forcefield funneled the full brunt of the grenade's explosion down the corridor towards the enemy. Two of the furtive humanoids appeared to catch fire as a third was thrown bodily into a bulkhead and collapsed.

Tark laughed appreciatively as he moved from his position and turned to the assembled security team. "Alright, fan out, teams of four in covering pairs. Advance by bounds and secure your six by erecting shield barriers behind you." The porcine-faced master chief glanced at Dunleavy.

"Saihra, you're on bypass detail."

Dunleavy rolled her eyes as she shouldered her rifle. "Grand." She turned, preparing to follow Ensign Qawasimi's team and came face to face with one of their attackers as the figure appeared to step cleanly through the bulkhead. She tried to yell out a warning, but her breath caught in her throat as the mysterious assailant, clad in black form fitting body armor and helmet, drove its rifle-fixed bayonet into her chest just below her sternum.

Her weapon clattered to the floor as her hands clawed reflexively but ineffectually at her foe's rifle. It didn't hurt as much as she would have thought, and she idly noted the sounds of hand-to-hand struggle around her as the enemy closed ranks with her crewmates. A voice in her head that sounded very much like Tark shouted at her to remember her training and *do something*.

Instinctively, her right hand moved to where her phaser pistol sidearm was holstered. Just as she grasped the phaser's handle her opponent twisted the bayonet savagely which caused her knees to buckle and sent her sinking to the floor. Her killer eased her to the deck with surprising gentleness, and as Saihra Dunleavy lost

consciousness, she could hear the distant sounds of disruptor fire as the enemy soldiers attempted to break Tark's death grip on their comrade's neck.

"Computer, pause program." The words were spoken with a dissatisfied snarl. As their attackers had done so moments before, Lieutenant Pava Lar'ragos emerged from within the seemingly solid wall of the corridor. "Awful. Truly appalling. Everyone *on your feet!*"

Her simulated wounds now in abeyance, Dunleavy scrambled to her feet among a flurry of activity that brought the security team into formation.

Lar'ragos was not a large man, nor was he especially muscular. He was, however, whipcord taut, lightning fast and surprisingly strong. His jet-black hair was tightly curled and cropped short, giving him the look that was so in vogue with the members of the security division right now.

As he looked down his nose at Tark, Lar'ragos' tone dripped with derision. "Situation not as 'under control' as you'd thought, Master Chief?"

The Tellarite bristled as he reigned in his irritation with great effort. He managed somehow to keep his tone civil as he replied, "The enemy has demonstrated some unexpected abilities, sir."

"Really? You don't say? After crippling our ship with their opening volley and beaming through our shields, they took you and your teams completely by surprise by doing something *unexpected?*" The El Aurian lieutenant's eyes narrowed, and his upper lip twitched with the beginnings of a sneer. "I'm shocked. This is my shocked face."

Tark took a deep, steady breath and offered, "I think the team's hit the wall for the day, sir. Perhaps a chance to regroup and come at this again tomorrow?"

Lar'ragos chewed the inside of his lip as he considered that. "Why not? You're all dead, anyway." He deigned to look upon his remaining subordinates. "Go home."

The group shuffled out sullenly, exhausted but clearly displeased with being dismissed so heatedly. The doors to the holosuite parted, and the team left, muttering angrily amongst themselves as the doors closed behind them.

When they were finally alone, Tark grumbled, "You've never refused me the latitude to speak my mind, so I'm going to exploit that tradition." He set the butt of the rifle on the floor and rested the weapon against the wall of the holographic corridor. "You're pushing too hard."

Lar'ragos gave him a sharp look but held his tongue.

Tark folded his thick forearms across his chest. "I'd understand if we were training for a specific mission, but you've been running the security department through these battle drills for weeks with no letup in sight."

Lar'ragos glanced around at the war-torn section of corridor and took note of the scorch marks and blast patterns that had marred the super strong alloys. They seemed a fitting symbol of his present state of mind. "The end of the war was in

name only, Master Chief. The Federation has never been so vulnerable; our enemies are everywhere.”

The Tellarite cocked his head slightly as he scrutinized his superior. “I would agree that we’re living a dark chapter of the Federation’s history, but I don’t subscribe to the notion that we’re surrounded by foes.”

“I suppose you wouldn’t, Chief.”

The stocky noncom glowered at the lieutenant. “Meaning?”

“Bury your head in the sand if you like. You were born on a peace-loving Federation planet and given the end of active hostilities it’s only natural that you’d revert to your innate tendencies.”

Tark blinked, astounded. “Peace-loving? Have you ever *been* to Tellar Prime?”

Lar’ragos continued his tirade, “The scavengers are approaching. They smell our wounds and they’ll be drawn to see just how much of the Federation’s carcass they can take for themselves.”

Lar’ragos shook his head as his expression shifted to one of contempt. “The Talarians, Tholians, Breen, Gorn, Tzenkethi... you name them. Soon they’ll begin encroaching on our borders, testing our defenses, salivating at the chance to add to their little empires by tearing bits and pieces from our great civilization.”

Struck momentarily speechless by this uncomfortable insight into his superior’s psyche, Tark finally conjured up a response. “You really believe that, don’t you?”

“Absolutely.”

Tark shrugged and turned for the exit. “That’s very sad, sir.”

“We’re not done here, Chief.” That stopped Tark in his tracks.

His frame rigid with barely contained rage, the Tellarite pivoted back towards Lar’ragos slowly. “Sir?”

“The security teams, their performance in this round of scenarios was unacceptable.”

Tark snorted derisively, “This isn’t the *Enterprise*, Lieutenant.” It was widely known among the crew that Lar’ragos had passed up an opportunity to serve aboard the *Enterprise-E* under Captain Picard in order to take his current post aboard *Gibraltar*.

Lar’ragos stepped forward, bridling at the implication. “Beg pardon?”

The Tellarite snuffled humorlessly. “Forget I mentioned it.” He abruptly turned and stormed out.

Lar’ragos directed a surly, “Dismissed,” at the master chief’s retreating back.

USS *Brahmaputra*.

Patrol grid Alpha-Epsilon 3 Federation/Cardassian Border.

The cockpit of the *Danube*-class runabout *Brahmaputra* was the last place Lieutenant (junior grade) Olivia Juneau had expected to find herself. Strangely, however, the decidedly claustrophobic confines of the small ship were proving a welcome distraction from the emotional turmoil that had thus far marked her lackluster Starfleet career. She didn't believe she was a bad officer, not really. The grueling workload and rigorous testing of Starfleet Academy were usually sufficient to weed out those individuals who would otherwise prove incapable of the day-to-day tasks required of a Starfleet officer. Granted, she had graduated in the bottom third of her class, but she *had* graduated.

Juneau busied herself with routine administrative tasks while Petty Officer Duane Shaver piloted the craft. She was settling into her first genuine command, getting a taste of what some more ambitious officers strove their entire careers for. At the encouragement of Lt. Commander Ramirez, the executive officer aboard Juneau's current posting, she had accepted a temporary detached assignment to the sector's Reconnaissance and Patrol section. It was, as Ramirez had put it, an opportunity to explore her command potential that might not otherwise be available to her for years. *Or decades*, Juneau thought soberly.

Juneau wouldn't go as far as to say she and the others aboard had melded into a seamless whole. However, two weeks into an assignment whose most defining feature was the nearly absolute lack of personal space and privacy and they had yet to get on one another's nerves. It was a good start.

Her first commission consisted of herself and a crew of three, tasked with routine patrol and light escort duties along the Federation/Cardassian border. At times *Brahmaputra* pulled convoy escort duty with other Starfleet vessels, and alternately engaged in solitary patrols. The Fleet's runabout assets also served as mobile sensor platforms, giving Command more reliable real-time data about the region than could be gleaned from long-range sensor arrays or fixed satellites.

The hum of the replicator station behind her announced the arrival of Ensign Kuenre Shanthi, the ship's young science officer. Barely four months out of Starfleet Academy, Shanthi had forgone a berth aboard a *Galaxy*-class explorer as a third-string science technician in order to double as both science and communications officer aboard a patrol ship. It was an incongruous posting for the youngest son of revered Starfleet Fleet Admiral Thuosana Shanthi. Nevertheless, he eschewed any connection to his mother's lofty station, and claimed that he sought only to make a career and name for himself.

Juneau felt a swell of envy towards the man. Shanthi was here because he had chosen to be. She was here because her superiors felt she needed remedial instruction in basic leadership. Nevertheless, she bent over backwards to be civil to the man, if for no other reason than his political connections within the Fleet.

“Good morning, Kuenre.” She glanced over her shoulder from the copilot’s seat, favoring him with a smile.

Shanthi’s first reply was a barely audible grunt of acknowledgement. Following an experimental sip at his steaming mug of what Olivia presumed to be coffee, he muttered something unintelligible that ended in ‘sir.’

Juneau laughed softly. “Sorry, I didn’t catch that. Your universal translator must be inoperative.”

Shaver looked up from punching navigational waypoints into the helm console long enough to give Shanthi a conspiratorial smirk. “Morning, sleepyhead.”

His mug still tilted to his lips, Shanthi took a draught of the steaming liquid. He held Shaver’s gaze a second longer before he remarked dryly, “I thought the field bunks we had at academy away mission training were uncomfortable. They were nothing compared to the coffins onboard this tub.”

Olivia shrugged lightly. “Well, if you weren’t so tall...”

“I’m Zulu, Lieutenant. We’re built tall, can’t be helped.”

Shaver tossed him a data padd, which Shanthi fumbled while trying heroically not to spill his coffee. “I thought you’d find this interesting. We picked these up on the overnight long range sensor telemetry.”

Shanthi squinted at the padd and looked befuddled. “Weird. This looks like some kind of energy spike.”

“Aye, that’s what the computer thought,” Juneau replied. “Only there’s nothing in the Pierosh system that should be producing anything like that.”

Shanthi slid into one of the unmanned auxiliary stations and activated the console. “Does the Federation have any assets in that system? I’m not familiar with it.”

Juneau shook her head. “Only one. An old meteorological survey station on the second planet that was abandoned three months before the war started.”

“Is Pierosh II Class-M?” Shanthi queried.

“Barely. More like a Class-K having a really good day.”

Shanthi set to work, accessing the sensor logs and compiling an initial science report based on the gathered data. “Give me a few minutes to crunch the numbers, sir. I’ll have something for you before too long.”

“Take your time, Ensign,” Juneau coached. “I’d rather have complete facts as opposed to conjecture.” She glanced at the pilot and said, “Mister Shaver, come to course 284-mark-19. I’m putting us on an oblique trajectory across the stellar plane of the Pierosh system.”

Shaver raised a curious eyebrow while he input the new coordinates. “Not waiting for new orders, sir?”

Rather than chafing at the petty officer’s implicit questioning of her command as she might have done two weeks earlier, Juneau patiently tolerated the inquiry by her subordinate. “We haven’t seen anything out of the ordinary out here

in the past week. Command will take one look at the ensign's report and send us for a look-see. This way, when the order arrives, we'll already be halfway there."

Shaver nodded but still looked unconvinced. "If you say so, sir."

Juneau tried to look authoritative and couldn't quite pull it off. "I do."

Pierosh II.

The scientist intoned a calming mantra over and over, forcing himself to relax. The realization of his life's work was only minutes away, and he fought to maintain his composure at this most critical of junctures. *'Be still. Become the stillness. Emotion is entropy, anticipation courts disharmony. Revelation comes only unto still waters. Be still...'*

The pieces were all in place. Equipment was functioning at capacity and repeated computer modeling indicated that their probability of success was high. He looked around the room and saw the others just as excited and anxious.

These men and women, all undeniably brilliant in their own right, had foregone notoriety within the scientific community in order to toil here in obscurity with him. It was both a measure of their individual dedication to the project, as well as the importance of their work.

Once the initial breakthrough had occurred, then and only then would the skeptics and charlatans seated on the Science Council admit the brilliance and necessity of what they had accomplished. Time and again his requests for approval and resources had been denied. *Too dangerous*, they'd said, *too many unknown variables*. They had raised the specters of the Genesis experiments and the tragedy of the Omega molecule. Finally, in despair and anger, he'd cut his ties with the apostates of the Federation's science community and struck out on his own.

Fortunately, he had found a benefactor, an individual who seemed to grasp how utterly essential his research was to pull back the curtain on the multiverse. The necessary deceptions and guile that had followed troubled him greatly, but they had proved instrumental in safeguarding the existence of the project.

It was now out of his hands. Either their calculations were correct, or they weren't. One of his assistants handed him a padd containing updated information on the countdown sequence.

"Seventeen minutes, Doctor," the young man noted eagerly.

Chapter 2

Lt. Commander Liana Ramirez liked it quiet. The normal, subdued atmosphere of daily bridge operations was much more preferable, in her opinion, to the din of alarms and flashing alert lights. That being said, five weeks straight of convoy duty had Ramirez yearning for something to break the tedium. She sat in the captain's chair, idly inspecting a padd containing a multitude of fuel consumption logs, division status reports, personnel fitness reports, and anything else anyone aboard had thought necessary to forward to the command division.

Gibraltar was part of a three-ship contingent assigned to escort a flotilla of gargantuan *Continent*-class supply ships to and from occupied Cardassian space. The ungainly behemoths had been utilized during the Dominion War to transport ground troops into battle, and to ferry civilian refugees away from planets in the path of the Dominion's advance. Now laden with medical supplies, foodstuffs, and industrial replicators, these vessels spearheaded Starfleet's growing humanitarian relief effort for the Cardassian people.

Though undeniably boring, the relative peace of their ongoing escort duties had given Ramirez the opportunity to reflect on the recent loss of her first command, the ill-fated starship *Phoenix*. She had been assigned by Captain Sandhurst as the vessel's acting commanding officer after *Phoenix*'s captain and two-thirds of his crew had been struck down by a neuropathogen visited upon them by Cardassian insurgents. Ramirez's command had been short lived. Two days after assuming the post, the starship had been destroyed in combat with insurgent vessels. Her escape from the collapsing bridge in a life pod had been a very near thing.

Six weeks later, Ramirez was still experiencing sleepless nights, and a gnawing, nameless anxiety. On those occasions when she was fortunate or exhausted enough to succumb to sleep, her dreams were haunted by the dead.

On any other assignment, these obstacles would be difficult enough to overcome. Here, onboard a ship she didn't feel she belonged on, Ramirez felt as though she had nowhere to turn. She had been strong-armed into the executive officer's post aboard *Gibraltar*, victim to the machinations of Captain Sandhurst and his old friend, Rear-Admiral Monica Covey. It first it was only to be a single mission; then Covey had dangled the carrot of her own command in front of her to compel Liana to agree to a year's tour aboard the old *Constitution*-class.

What's next? she fumed internally. If Covey doesn't keep her word, do I end up spending the rest of my days here, momentum stalled, watching my career slip through my fingers like so much sand?

"Incoming message from *Trafalgar*, Commander," announced Ensign Browder from the Operations station, interrupting Ramirez's morose reverie. "It's Captain Littlefoot."

Ramirez smiled at the mention of the acclaimed captain's name. "Put him on screen, Ensign." She stood in deference to her superior and raised her diminutive frame from the command chair. Despite being small in stature, Ramirez had a reputation for being both tough and decisive, and woe be unto anyone who dared underestimate her abilities.

The image of heavily laden supply ships in tight formation was replaced on the main viewer by the impressive form of Captain Marcus Littlefoot, CO of the *Akira*-class starship *Trafalgar*. The giant, barrel-chested Native American looked uncharacteristically somber. "I'm afraid I've got a new mission for you, Commander. Is Captain Sandhurst about?"

Ramirez unconsciously brought herself to her full height in the presence of the prominent officer. To her, Littlefoot represented the kind of notable captain she would relish serving with. "He's otherwise occupied, sir. May I be of assistance?"

Littlefoot bobbed his head once in assent. "I'm tasking *Gibraltar* to investigate the possible disappearance of a Starfleet runabout. One of our sector patrol ships, the *Brahmaputra*, reported detecting some anomalous energy signatures emanating from the Pierosh system. They were dispatched to reconnoiter the situation and haven't been heard from since. As of now, they're a little over five hours late for their scheduled check-in."

Damn, Ramirez thought darkly. That's Olivia's runabout. I recommended her for that command... Outwardly she replied, "Understood, sir. I take it we're the closest ships in the area?"

Ramirez was uncomfortable with the idea of abandoning the convoy. Three starships as escort were already an insufficient number to protect as inviting a target as twenty-one of the mammoth supply ships. For all they knew, the mysterious energy signature and the disappearance of the runabout were insurgent tactics designed to pry one of the escorts away from the convoy.

"Unfortunately, yes. With the recent insurgent attacks on Epsilon station and Starbase 375, we're stretched even more thinly than usual out here."

To his credit, Littlefoot didn't voice the obvious conclusion. Of the three starships escorting the convoy, the ninety-year-old *Gibraltar* was the least well-armed, and thus the most logical to be spared for the new mission. "I'm sending over all the data we have on this so far. Hell, I wish we were going. It's got to be more interesting than slogging along the trade routes at warp five."

Ramirez nodded curtly. "We'll get the job done, Captain." As an afterthought she added, "*Nia'ish*," in Littlefoot's native Cheyenne.

The large man cracked a smile and allowed himself a moment's amusement. "I'd forgotten you were a linguist, Ramirez. You're welcome." And with that, the transmission ended.

She settled back into the command chair as ominous scenarios spun in her mind as to what could have happened to Juneau and her tiny crew. *If she got in over*

her head and made the wrong decision, I'm ultimately responsible. Not just for her, but for all of them.

She turned to Ensign Lightner at Helm and ordered, “New course...”

Captain Donald Sandhurst was in agony. The lungs within his heaving chest burned without respite and he had lost nearly all sensation in his legs. Sweat coated his body and his parched throat begged for reprieve. Despite the worst his enemy could throw at him, Sandhurst refused to surrender. He would not and could not back down. He was a starship commander, a man responsible for the lives of one-hundred and seventeen people, and he would be damned if he allowed his present circumstances to best him.

With a torturous slowness, the counter on the treadmill ticked away the meters towards his goal of five kilometers. Cursed by an aging body of average height, Sandhurst yearned for the days when he could eat and drink with impunity, confident in his body’s metabolic prowess. Those days were long over. He was carrying at least twenty-five unnecessary pounds, weight that *Gibraltar*’s chief medical officer had told him needed to come off. And so, with the towering Bolian engineer Lieutenant Ashok as his personal trainer, Sandhurst had embarked on a fitness regimen designed to reduce his waistline and improve his health.

“Can I...” he huffed, “...stop now?” Four-point-six kilometers was sufficient, wasn’t it? He felt his resolve begin to waver.

From an old-fashioned free weight bench nearby, the booming voice of Ashok replied in absolute deadpan, “Pain is weakness leaving the body, sir.”

Sandhurst gasped noisily in response as he soldiered on and only just bit back a reply that involved a fervent wish that Bolarus IX had been a priority target for the Dominion.

“*Bridge to Captain Sandhurst.*” He had rarely been as happy to hear his exec’s voice.

Sandhurst planted his feet on either side of the still moving treadmill and tapped the comadge affixed to his workout shirt. He tried not to sound out of breath and failed miserably. “Go... ahead.”

“*We’ve new orders from Captain Littlefoot, sir. I’ve adjusted our heading and increased speed to Warp 7. Our destination is the Pierosh system.*”

“Acknowledged. On my way.” Sandhurst stepped gratefully off the sadistic device and grabbed his towel. He wiped down his head and neck as he made a beeline for the exit. “Apologies, Lieutenant. We’ll have to pick this up later.”

As he stepped out into the narrow corridor, Sandhurst nearly stumbled into Lar’ragos. It appeared the lieutenant was in the middle of dressing down one of the junior-most security officers aboard, Specialist Sharpe.

“The next time you sweep the back of another team member’s head with your rifle’s emitter during a tactical exercise, I’m going to have you pulling armory detail for a month!” Lar’ragos snarled.

The younger man stood ramrod straight, eyes locked ahead of him. “Yes, sir!”

“Each member of this team has to depend on one another. They have to *trust* one another. Part of that trust is the absolute knowledge that the person behind you in a tactical formation *isn’t* going to blow the back of your head off.” Lar’ragos glanced over his shoulder at the captain and waved the specialist away. “Go and sin no more,” he growled. Sharpe moved off down the curving corridor at a brisk pace.

Sandhurst raised an eyebrow that prompted Lar’ragos to set his jaw tightly. “What?” The El Aurian’s tone was very similar to the one he’d used with Sharpe.

“I wasn’t aware I’d said anything,” Sandhurst said with a frown.

“Didn’t have to.” Lar’ragos gestured to his ears. “Remember?”

As he draped his towel over his shoulder, Sandhurst made a point of scrutinizing his old friend. “Have we been infiltrated by doppelgangers again?” The captain leaned in and appeared to study the smaller man’s facial features. “Really magnificent work, though. If it weren’t for all the yelling and frothing at the mouth, I’d really have believed it was my security chief.”

Lar’ragos rolled his eyes and muttered, “Please desist, sir, lest you wound me further with your rapier wit.”

“Seriously, Pava, what’s going on? I’ve been hearing mutterings that your department is about ready to stage a revolt. Mind you, most of those complaints get filtered out at Ramirez’s level, so that fact that I’m hearing anything about this means it must be bad.”

Lar’ragos cocked his head to one side and frowned. “We’re not dealing with the cream of the Fleet here, sir. Some of those in my department seem to be under the impression that a posting to *Gibraltar* was going to be a pleasure cruise. Now that I’m working them hard, they’re whining to whoever will listen.”

Sandhurst nodded. “I give my senior officers wide latitude in how they run their departments, Pava; you know that. I’m willing to give you the benefit of the doubt. However, I seem to recall that many of these people that you’re accusing of being dead weight were also the ones that rescued the away team from Lakesh and carried out a successful assault on an insurgent firebase.”

“I’m not concerned with what they did last month, Captain,” Lar’ragos answered as he stood his ground. “I’m worried about tomorrow.”

Sandhurst shook his head in resignation. “Suit yourself. Just be careful you don’t alienate your whole department while you’re whipping them into shape.”

Lar’ragos offered him a little salute. “Aye, aye, my captain. Will that be all, sir?”

A mischievous smile formed on Sandhurst's lips. "As a matter of fact, no. Lieutenant Taiee sent me a memo this morning saying that you still haven't reported for your initial medical screening."

"I've been busy." It sounded petulant, even to Lar'ragos.

"How nice for you. Make yourself un-busy and report to Sickbay immediately."

Lar'ragos crossed his arms. "And that would be..."

"Yes, Pava. That would be an order." Sandhurst came about and started off down the corridor in the other direction. He slowed his pace and called back to his friend, "And I want you to calculate the odds that I'm going to follow up on this to see that you got there."

With a weak smile, Lar'ragos murmured, "Naturally."

One quick shower and clean uniform later, Sandhurst strode onto the bridge. Ramirez moved to rise from the command chair, but the captain waved her off. "I'm just here for an update, Commander."

"Yes, sir." She resumed her seat and handed him a padd. "This is the mission order brief from *Trafalgar*."

As he scanned the contents, Sandhurst's brow furrowed. "*Brahmaputra*, isn't that—"

"Juneau's ship," she finished for him. "Aye." She pointed to the padd. "And it gets better. Check the names on the crew manifest."

Sandhurst scrolled down. "Shaver, Osterlund, Shan—oh, *frinx!*"

Now it was Ramirez's turn to be impressed at another's linguistic proclivity. Despite the seriousness of the situation, she smirked. "Sir, the Bajoran Prophets would be appalled."

His eyes still fixed on the padd, Sandhurst nodded glumly. "So would my ex." He sighed deeply, handing the padd back. "This complicates things."

"Just slightly."

Sandhurst stepped back and leaned against a support for the bridge well's safety railing. "ETA?"

"Thirteen hours, twenty-six minutes at present speed."

He pondered that for a moment. "Step it up to Warp 8.2 for as long as the engines can handle it. I know it'll only buy us a few hours grace, but if this proves to be something other than a comms failure..."

Ramirez inclined her head. "Understood, sir."

He moved to the upper deck and spared a glance at the ship's chronometer as he headed towards the lift. "Have the senior staff assemble for a briefing at oh-five-hundred and keep me apprised of any significant updates." With that, Sandhurst

stepped into the turbolift as he wondered if he would be the one to have to tell the Fleet Admiral that her son had died in the line of duty.

That's right, Donald, he berated himself, make it all about you.

Lar'ragos entered Sickbay with deliberate reluctance. Like most others, he considered the obligatory start-of-tour checkup to be a burdensome necessity, one best avoided for as long as possible. However, in his case it went deeper than that. His medical exams invariably sparked questions from his doctors that were, in his opinion, better left unasked.

Chief Medical Officer Lieutenant (j.g.) Taiee looked up from where she was calibrating a diagnostic sensor wand from a medical tricorder. Usually, that type of busy work was the province of junior nurses or medical technicians, but Lar'ragos had noticed that Taiee seemed willing to share in the tedious grunt work needed to keep the medical department running smoothly. She was a compact woman who, with her utilitarian bobbed haircut and matter-of-fact style, somehow generated nearly limitless quantities of cheer. For a ship with no official counselor or morale officer, Taiee served as both with equal aptitude.

A forced smile plastered to his face, Lar'ragos said, "Good morning, Doc." The title served as both a running joke with the senior staff, as well as a statement of their confidence in her abilities. Taiee was a nurse practitioner by trade rather than a full-fledged physician. Regardless, the crew was more than satisfied with her formidable talents as a healer.

Issara Taiee answered his insincere smile with a more genuine one of her own as she set down the scanner and moved to the exam bed. She patted the surface of the table. "Well, you've *finally* reported as ordered." Taiee shook her head, her amusement evident. "And it only took a month and a half."

"I was unavoidably detained?" he offered lamely as he scooted up and onto the biobed.

"Sure, sure." Taiee gently moved him to lay down with mild pressure applied to his chest. "C'mon now, Pava. A big bad security officer like yourself acting as though a routine exam is worse than being sentenced to Rura Penthe."

Lar'ragos grumbled good-naturedly as Taiee initiated a scan via the overhead sensor node recessed into the ceiling. She moved to the large wall mounted viewscreen and activated a display of the El Aurian's physiology. Taiee sifted through multiple layers, skin, musculature, skeletal, internal organs and circulatory system, making the occasional notation on an oversized medical padd with a stylus.

Though giving no outward sign, she was startled by the massive amounts of scar tissue and internal damage the scans registered. Much of it had been cleaned up, fairly recently and by Federation medical science, or so she guessed. But the sheer

volume of evidence indicated that Lar'ragos had been the victim of multiple internal injuries, dozens of broken bones in varying degrees of severity, as well as wounds from an assortment of weapons both primitive and modern. *Who did this to him?* she pondered darkly.

Taiee took into account Lar'ragos' extended longevity; his service record listed him as being four-hundred-and-twenty-seven years old. Still, even compensating for age, most humans never accumulated even a fraction of this kind of trauma and lived to speak of it.

Taiee returned to the biobed and found Lar'ragos looking uncommonly self-conscious. He glanced over at her. "So... we done here?"

She smiled patiently. "Scans can only tell me so much, Pava. We've got a treadmill stress test and some other hoops for you to jump through before I can let you go."

He nodded hesitantly. "Sure."

Taiee placed a friendly hand on his upper arm. "Seriously, this won't be so bad. A few more things and I'll have you out of here and back to duty."

True to her word, Taiee released him after a brief, monitored run on the treadmill. After he towed off, Lar'ragos pulled his mustard-hued uniform shirt on over his tank-top undershirt. Taiee was making a final series of notations on her padd and glanced up as the lieutenant slipped into his jacket.

"Anything you'd care to discuss, Pava?"

He suddenly appeared to be focusing an inordinate amount of concentration on zipping up his jacket. Lar'ragos feigned ignorance. "Such as?"

"Well, offhand I'd say the results of your physical show someone who's in overall good health. However, you're also demonstrating some conditions which are symptomatic of prolonged stress and fatigue." She crossed her arms and tapped the padd idly against her side. "In the short term this won't affect your health to any great extent, but if the root causes of these symptoms aren't addressed, your health *will* be impacted."

Again, Lar'ragos donned a saccharine smile and shrugged indifferently. "Things are tense right now, Doc. Being stuck on convoy duty doesn't help." He tugged at his uniform jacket, straightening it. "Why, you trying out for counselor now, too?" It was a cheap shot, and he knew it.

Taiee met him head-on. "I don't have to be El Aurian to know bullshit when I hear it, Lieutenant. If you need to talk, I'm here for you. If you don't, and you want to let whatever's eating at you affect your job performance, that's on you." She turned her back on him as she pretended to fiddle with a medical display module. "We're done here."

Shamed, Lar'ragos wanted to do something to repair the breach his thoughtless comment had made, but he didn't know what else to say. He strode mutely out of Sickbay, now hating the routine exam process all the more.

Chapter 3

***USS Brahmaputra.* Pierosh System.**

The survival mask helped to filter out most but not all of the acrid smoke that choked the shattered cockpit of *Brahmaputra*. Olivia Juneau seethed with impotent frustration and beat her fists against the darkened console interface at the pilot's station. She had tried every technique she knew to restore primary, auxiliary, or even partial battery power to the panel. It was all in vain. The runabout was dead in space, and unless rescue appeared quickly, she and her crew were sure to follow.

Behind her on the floor were her two surviving comrades, Chief Petty Officer Osterlund and Ensign Shanthi. Both men were encased in the runabout's only two undamaged EVA suits. They were injured, and though Juneau had treated them to the best of her abilities using the ship's emergency medical kit, she feared they would succumb to the runabout's life support failure long before expiring from their injuries.

The shockwave that overwhelmed them had seemingly come from nowhere. It had been a paltry seven seconds between when they had first detected the oncoming wall of chronometric energy and when it crashed through their pathetically insufficient shielding. Now, drifting without power at the far edge of the Pierosh system, Juneau wracked her brain trying to come up with some kind of solution to their predicament.

What would Ramirez do in my place? Her mind straddled the razor's edge between palpable fear and outright panic. I can't lose it. If I come unglued, we're all done for. I'm the only thing separating us from certain death right now. Juneau looked down at her shaking hands and wondered idly if terror or oxygen deprivation was to blame. She couldn't think, couldn't move, and felt the clutching hand of dread tightening around her heart. I don't have any options. I'm going to die... here... now.

And just like that, the fear was gone. It was as if someone had thrown a switch inside Olivia's head. The Juneau who had been about to let herself be overcome by indecision and panic was banished to a small, dark corner of her mind. Taking her place was someone not entirely different, but who answered to a higher calling and held very definite priorities, survival being foremost among them.

Her hands now steady, she crept gingerly through the smoke-shrouded cockpit and into the compartment beyond where she located an engineering systems control hatch. She removed the hatch cover and set to work on repairing or diverting damaged systems that by all rights she should have had no knowledge of. Her fingers moved with the practiced delicacy of an experienced engineer, and within minutes she had managed to restore sufficient power to get minimal life support back online. She then shunted just enough energy to arm and launch the runabout's emergency distress beacon.

As the atmospheric pumps labored to clear the smoke from the air, Juneau replaced the hatch cover and returned to the cockpit. She checked to make sure the beacon was safely away and broadcasting, then took her place on the floor alongside Shanthi and Osterlund. When the Starfleet rescue response arrived, they would find her barely conscious, with no memory of what had happened here. Hell of a way to live, she mused. She allowed herself one final thought before releasing control of her mind to its rightful owner. Whatever this was, and whoever is responsible, this should prove of interest to us.

Sol System, Sector 001 Luna, Mare Moscoviene Department of Temporal Investigations Headquarters Sub-Level 9 – ‘The Vault’.

The history of this subsurface facility was relatively recent, though as any of the agents, technicians, and scientists in the employ of the Federation’s enigmatic Department of Temporal Investigations could tell you with no small amount of irony... time was relative. Founded nearly a century earlier by the Federation Council following a series of near disastrous time-travel experiments conducted by a naively reckless Starfleet Command, the DTI had begun as no more than a communal think tank staffed by some of the Federation’s more eccentric intellects of the period.

Rumors had abounded since the dawn of the Federation of a ‘Temporal Cold War’ that supposedly raged across entire eons, but whose combatants were shrouded in mystery. However, such repositories of knowledge as the Daystrom Institute and the Vulcan Science Academy still argued that time travel was at best impractical and at worst impossible. That argument had held fast right up until Starfleet had gone and done it.

The men and women of the nascent DTI had plotted and planned, studied the philosophy and ethics of time travel, and had written paper after paper on the dangers and benefits of purposefully violating the integrity of the known time/space continuum. The ultimate result of their work had been the Temporal Prime Directive, the corollary to Starfleet’s Directive Number One. It forbade any Federation official, researcher, or Starfleet member from intentionally tampering with the existing timeline in any way—and included strict provisos against time travel.

Over the past century, DTI researchers and investigators had scrutinized hundreds of purported cross-temporal incidents. Everything from oddities at the sub-atomic level to events that spanned multiple sectors of Federation space were explored. Various curiosities had been collected, documented, studied and eventually warehoused at the DTI’s headquarters on Earth’s moon. But by and large, the DTI

existed simply to investigate and report, advising the Federation Science Council on such things as fell within their purview.

The second Borg assault on Sector 001 in 2373 had changed all that. Employing temporal technology in an attempt to undermine the Federation's very founding, this effort had come far too close to success. Such intentionally destructive temporal incursions had been theorized by DTI's personnel for decades, but Federation leaders were unwilling to take costly and largely theoretical preventative measures in the face of an indefinite threat.

No longer. Fearing that the growing Dominion threat might attempt to utilize similar tactics, the Federation Council had granted the DTI the equivalent of temporal wartime powers. The agency's resources, influence and authority had thus grown exponentially in the past three years. Agents whose inquiries once had been a minor inconvenience to Starfleet officers were now feared. A negative review of an officer's participation in a cross-temporal event, however unintentional, could now result in the ending of a career, if not outright incarceration.

The physical embodiment of the agency's new proactive stance was the Temporal Inversion Stasis Complex, known simply as the Vault. Equipped with largely experimental chronometric shielding, it had been designed as a self-sufficient bunker against any detrimental changes in the existing timeline. Theoretically, even if the Federation itself ceased to exist, the personnel within the Vault would remain immune to those changes. For that reason, in addition to the technicians, researchers, and regular agents assigned to three-month rotations, the Vault also contained specially trained response teams of scientists and Special Forces operators whose unenviable task it would be to restore any alterations in the timeline that threatened the Federation.

Aquinas Devonshire looked up from his dog-eared hardbound copy of *Past Prologue*, the definitive work of the historic author Jacob Sisko. The young man stared incredulously at the beeping console in front of him, momentarily at a loss for what to do despite the months of exhaustive training required for a three-month tour in the Vault.

“You have something, Devonshire?” queried G’rukian, the Betelgeusian watch officer.

Aquinas shook off his fleeting paralysis and went to work, gleaning critical information from a river of scrolling data. “Yes, sir. It’s reading as... well, either a temporal or spatial incursion of some kind.”

“Which is it?” G’rukian replied brusquely.

“I... uh, it appears to be both, sir.”

Aquinas' supervisor moved quickly to his side; his colorfully billowing Eknoa vestments swished softly with the effort. G'rukian inclined his head, which Aquinas imagined couldn't be an easy gesture as the being wore a large and ornate headdress. "Location fix?"

His confidence returned, and Devonshire's hands moved swiftly over his console as he narrowed sensor fields and tweaked output parameters. "It's along the Cardassian border with the Federation, Sector 21509. Looks to be the Pierosh star system." He had to recheck his figures before he announced, "And by the looks of these readings, it's a level seven event, sir." It wouldn't sound so harrowing to an outsider unfamiliar with DTI's rating system, Devonshire thought, until you informed them that a supernova only registered as a level eight.

If it were possible, G'rukian looked even more solemn than usual. "Do we have any agents in that region?"

Devonshire cross referenced DTI's current deployment roster. "No, sir. The closest team in the field is Barnaby and ZinZil. They're currently investigating a possible level two incident in the Rudyard Colonies. That's twenty-three lightyears away from Pierosh."

"Very well. Send this upstairs to Directorate-O with a recommendation to alert Starfleet, though I'd be surprised if they hadn't detected this already. Also compile a brief for the quarantine response team."

"Right away, sir." As he began to carry out his assigned tasks, Devonshire became aware that G'rukian was still hovering over him. The Betelgeusian reached forward and ran a pale green finger along the spine of Aquinas' book.

"Devonshire, where did you get this?"

The human winced, then turned his head hesitantly towards his superior. "I—uh, borrowed it from the research library, sir."

G'rukian grumbled with distaste. "This book will not be written for another seventeen years, Mister Devonshire. It is a classified artifact, not a souvenir. I should not have to remind you that the Temporal Prime Directive applies doubly so to we here in this facility."

Devonshire sighed. "Yes, sir."

USS Gibraltar.

En route to Pierosh star system, Warp 8.

Ramirez arrived at the briefing room unusually early, breaking with her habit of sliding into their senior staff meetings with only seconds to spare. Sandhurst, who was invariably the first to arrive, was already seated, perusing the latest information gathered on the Pierosh system on a padd.

As she took her usual seat at the table, she fixed her gaze on him until he looked up and noticed the displeasure written on her face. “Problem, Exec?” He amended, “Other than having to drag yourself in here at oh-dark-hundred?”

She nodded and held up a padd of her own. Ramirez summed up the situation in a single word, “Lar’ragos.”

The captain’s expression soured, and a small sigh escaped his lips as he settled back in his chair. “What now?”

“More complaints from members of the security division. And this isn’t just petty grumbling about shift rotations or duty posts. There are some very damning accusations in here.” She activated the padd and read verbatim, “Lieutenant Lar’ragos has in past weeks become verbally abusive towards staff, repeatedly haranguing subordinates about even minor infractions of accepted security protocol. This behavior, coupled with an accelerated program of high-impact holographic scenarios during which the actions of security personnel are repeatedly disparaged has seriously undermined the morale and effectiveness of division personnel. This, in turn, threatens departmental cohesiveness and could translate into critical errors committed in life-or-death situations that would likely result in unnecessary casualties.”

Sandhurst winced. “Damn. Who’s that from?”

“Master Chief Tark, Captain.” She met his gaze. “Tark’s a service lifer, sir. He’s as crusty as they come, but he’s also loyal to a fault.” She tossed the padd onto the tabletop where it slid to a stop in front of Sandhurst. “If he’s actually lodging a formal protest against Lar’ragos, things down in the security division must have deteriorated badly.”

The captain shook his head unhappily but made no move to pick up the other padd. “I’d hoped he would get past whatever’s troubling him, but it doesn’t appear that’s happening.”

“I know he’s your friend, sir. Have you tried speaking with him about this?”

“Tried and failed.” Sandhurst leaned forward and pushed the padd back towards Ramirez. “Personnel issues are your territory, Commander. I’ll back whatever decision you make regarding this matter. Friend or no, I won’t have him endangering the lives of his people because he can’t hold his temper in check.”

The conversation ended with the arrival of the chief engineer, Lieutenant Ashok. The large Bolian entered and gave the captain and XO cursory nods before assuming his seat. The rest of the senior staff soon followed. Lt. Commander Elisto Plazzi, the aging science officer, Lieutenant (j.g.) Tailee from Medical, and Lieutenant Lar’ragos from Security/Tactical. Ensign Browder stood in for the absent Juneau at Ops, and flight control officer Ensign Lightner was also on hand.

Sandhurst looked to Plazzi, who was sipping from his ever-present beverage mug. “What’s the probe’s ETA, Elisto?”

Plazzi referenced a running timer on his padd and replied tiredly, “Seven minutes, thirty-eight seconds, Captain.”

Sandhurst scanned the faces of his senior officers, many of whom were just coming off shift or who’d had precious little opportunity for sleep. “Thank you for being here so early. I know it’s inconvenient, but we’re only two hours out from Pierosh. We’ve launched a Warp 9 sensor probe ahead of us to reconnoiter the area.”

He then polled the officers, each of whom gave a brief recitation of their departments’ preparedness. Sandhurst turned back to Plazzi and prompted, “While we’re awaiting the probe’s telemetry, why don’t we get some background on the Pierosh system.”

Plazzi toggled the LCARS interface at his seat and activated the large viewscreen set into the inner bulkhead. The image of a medium-orange star surrounded by the concentric circles of its five planets’ orbital paths sprang to life on the viewer. In his rich voice, Plazzi began narrating the diorama unfolding before them. “The system anchors on an unremarkable K-type star. Of five planets, only the second is marginally Class-M. The atmospheric oxygen content is primarily the result of geo-thermal venting, as the biosphere supports only a limited variety of Phylum Bryophyta; essentially complex mosses and lichens.”

The image centered on the second planet and closed in, revealing a dull grayish-white surface devoid of large bodies of water or apparent terrestrial vegetation. Plazzi continued, “What makes this planet of interest to Federation science is its unusual weather patterns. Due to a little-understood confluence of the world’s magnetosphere, gravitational field, and orbital inclination, Pierosh II exhibits some of the most exotic and unusual weather patterns ever recorded on a habitable planet.” He paused to draw another wake-inducing sip from his mug. “A meteorological survey station was established sixteen years ago to study these phenomena. Data gathered from the subsequent observation has helped Earth, and a number of other Federation worlds, make significant upgrades to their planetary weather modification networks.”

Ramirez interjected, “What’s the status of the survey station?”

Lar’ragos fielded that question. “It was evacuated in the months leading up to the Dominion War, when it became apparent that Starfleet couldn’t safeguard smaller outposts and colonies along the DMZ.”

The exec focused on Plazzi. “Is there anything in that planet’s atmosphere which could have produced these energy signatures?”

“No, sir. No known meteorological phenomenon could produce power readings on that scale.”

Ensign Browder’s padd beeped insistently. He activated the device and scanned its contents. “Ops has patched in new information from Starfleet Command, Captain.”

“Let’s hear it, Ensign.”

“Yes, sir,” Ensign Browder replied crisply, displaying none of the self-conscious hesitation that was a hallmark of his predecessor, Juneau. “Whatever happened in that system created a Level 3 shockwave. Sensor records gathered from several civilian ships within scanning range indicate that the wavefront dissipated some point-zero-four lightyears out from its point of origin.” He frowned and looked to the captain. “If *Brahmaputra* was nearby when that event occurred, something of that magnitude could have easily destroyed a lightly shielded craft like a runabout.”

Sandhurst nodded soberly. “Hope for the best, but plan for the worst.”

A flashing icon appeared in the corner of the viewer display. Plazzi announced, “Incoming data from our probe, sir.” He took the captain’s nod as permission to proceed and switched from the image of Pierosh II to active sensor telemetry from their probe.

A graphical representation of the Pierosh system took shape with a text overlay as various points of interest were identified and labeled. In an affront to their expectations, the system appeared conspicuously devoid of either widespread destruction or obvious anomalies.

Ramirez held her breath as she anticipated the discovery of a small debris field marking the final resting place of the *Brahmaputra* and her crew.

“Sensor contact, sir,” Plazzi noted. “Reading a subspace distress beacon, transmitting *Brahmaputra*’s registry.” He highlighted the region in the immediate vicinity of the beacon and enhanced the resolution. “We’ve got her, Captain. *Danube*-class runabout... I’m seeing diminished power signatures and serious structural damage.” He directed a relieved expression at Sandhurst. “But they appear to be largely intact. I’m detecting three life signs, weak but stable.”

Sandhurst looked intensely at Ashok. “Lieutenant, I need Warp 8.4.”

The Bolian shifted uncomfortably in his seat. He replied hesitantly in his deep, basso voice, “Captain, we’ve already had to throttle back from 8.2. We’ve been redlining the engines for the past six hours. I strongly recommend against—”

For that brief moment, it seemed to Sandhurst as if only the two of them existed in the room. He leaned forward in his chair and cut the engineer off in mid-sentence. “Lieutenant, I’d remind you that not only is our Lieutenant Juneau aboard that ship, but the Fleet Admiral’s son as well. Two hours may as well be an eternity if we arrive too late to save them.”

The towering Bolian stood, his frame taut with anger and embarrassment. “I’ll do what I can, sir, but I won’t promise what I can’t deliver.” With that he walked stiffly out of the room.

An awkward silence followed, which was broken with the captain’s query, “Any information on the source of the energy readings and shockwave, Elisto?”

Plazzi tapped at his interface and centered the viewer squarely on Pierosh II. “We’re seeing slightly elevated radiation signatures coming from the planet, Captain.”

The older scientist squinted at the viewscreen, clearly perplexed, “And chronometric energy readings... along with Q-particle emissions.”

Tahee frowned. “Q-particles?”

Still engrossed by the onscreen images, Sandhurst replied without looking at the CMO. “Any energy particle that the computer can’t identify is designated a Q-particle, Doc.”

Plazzi looked at the captain, his expression one of grave concern. “Such unidentified particles are most often encountered in the vicinity of spatial rifts or extra-dimensional incursions.”

Sandhurst looked nonplussed. “Lovely.” Turning to look at the remaining senior staff members, he asked, “Anything else for the good of the order?”

No one replied in the affirmative, and the captain took the opportunity to bring the meeting to a close. “I want Medical prepped for those casualties from the runabout, and an away team on standby for a surface investigation. Lar’ragos, make sure we’ve got ample security escort, no telling what we’re going to find down there.” He turned to the ship’s young helmsman. “Mister Lightner, make sure you have multiple egress routes plotted; we may have to break orbit at a moment’s notice.”

As the respective officers acknowledged his orders, he stood. “Let’s make it happen, people.”

The senior officers filed out, most scribbling notations onto their padds as they left. Sandhurst and Ramirez remained behind. Still seated, the exec studied the display on the viewer. “Little harsh with Ashok, weren’t you?”

Sandhurst gave her a sidelong glance. “No, actually. He needs to learn the difference between what the specs say is possible, and how a ship will actually deliver beyond those expectations.”

“And if he doesn’t?”

Sandhurst stretched and looked perturbed. “Then I’ll go down there and squeeze 8.4 out of those engines myself.”

Chapter 4

Pierosh II.

It boiled into space, seething like a living wave of purest rage. It was free, and yet it wasn't. Its intellect was still fragmented; its sense of self and purpose remained jumbled and tenuous. It continued to feel the agonizing cage of its imprisonment, which should not have been possible if it was truly free. As for where it was, it could not fathom. Its awareness of its surroundings became clearer, and it discovered something that might satiate its aching hunger. Still tethered as it was to its former/current prison, it would not be easy... but it was so very hungry.

Orion Merchantman *Sethret* en route to Pierosh star system, Warp 9.8.

Ahmet Kutav's fortunes had just improved, and unexpectedly so. Long months of running cargo, both legitimate and illicit, from place to place in the former Demilitarized Zone had proved dangerous and decreasingly profitable. The Cardassians were desperate, and desperation bred betrayal. Even when making officially sanctioned cargo runs on behalf of Federation relief agencies, his ship had twice come under attack. The would-be thieves had discovered, to their short-lived regret, that *Sethret* was no mere cargo carrier. Her speed, weapons and shielding made her a formidable foe.

"Status of the distress beacon?" Kutav stared at Vanei as the bulky Orion squirmed in his acceleration couch. It usually amused the *ahmet* to watch his larger cousin flail in the decidedly too-small seat, but now was not the time for such distractions.

After he drew in a frustrated breath, Vanei replied, "The signal remains strong and consistent."

"And the Federation starship?"

Vanei shifted to toggle the sensor interface, grumbling as he did so. "It is still on an intercept course with the scout vessel, holding at Warp 8.3. We will arrive at the scout's coordinates a full thirty minutes before the starship."

Kutav stroked his neatly trimmed beard thoughtfully. "Have they detected us yet?"

"No, *Ahmet*. Their sensors are in passive mode. They are relying on the long-range probe they sent ahead to be their eyes in the system." He turned to study the engineering readouts. "Even with their sensors actively searching, our subspace field modulations would prevent them from seeing us until we were much closer."

“Why would they do such a thing?” Kutav already knew the answer, of course, but Vanei was family, and destined to one day command his own corsair. It was Kutav’s responsibility to ensure that the younger man knew his opponents’ strengths and weaknesses. Piracy and predation were no trades for the foolish.

“Standard Starfleet intercept protocol, *Ahmet*. They too wish to approach as stealthily as possible.”

Kutav smiled. “Very good, Vanei. Maintain course and speed.” He brought his communicator to his lips and activated it. “Dobros, ready your boarding team. We’ll be in transport range in twenty-seven minutes.” A double-click from his subordinate’s comms device indicated Kutav’s message had been heard and understood.

The *ahmet* settled back into his chair, an anticipatory thrill beginning to build in his stomachs. The Cardassian insurgency would pay a hefty sum for captured Starfleet personnel. Even if the prisoners had little in the way of vital tactical knowledge, they could still be made to serve as game pieces in the insurgency’s campaign against the allied occupation of Cardassian territory. And to snatch such a prize right from under the noses of Starfleet would not only prove a welcoming diversion from the mundane cargo handling duties of late. It was an action worthy of a pirate. Worthy of an Orion.

Chained as it was to its prison, it was still able to reach far enough into space from the planet’s gravity well. It was upon them quickly, and they were completely unaware. No device they possessed was calibrated to detect its presence. Wherever it was, the corporeal beings inhabiting this place had no knowledge of it, or its abilities. In the past it had not been given to acts of subtlety, but it had learned much patience during its long confinement. It would test the limits of its control, a nudge here, an errant impression there, and it would observe how easily these creatures could be manipulated. It sensed the approach of yet another vessel, containing even greater numbers of potential quarry...

Ahmet Kutav fidgeted uneasily in his seat; his earlier excitement having inexplicably evaporated. Now he felt angry. *The Federation*, he seethed silently. The sanctimonious, bloated superpower had spread across the quadrant like a plague, destroying commerce and free enterprise and leaving a supposed utopian economic vacuum in its wake. His people, renowned for countless generations as traders, raiders, thieves and slavers had been practically emasculated by the stultifying presence of the UFP and its laws.

The Orions had even been pushed into the background of interstellar politics. Once an undeniable force to be reckoned with in the quadrant, they were now a second-tier power. As for the formerly legendary merchant princes of Rigel, they had become someone people turned to if the rapacious Ferengi were not interested in doing business. It was beyond humiliating, and Kutav had suffered enough.

"Alter course. Set intercept trajectory with the approaching starship. Activate defenses and arm weapons."

Far from sounding alarmed by the order, Vanei and Gult both grinned maniacally as they acknowledged the *ahmet*'s command.

Vanei sounded a cautionary note, however. "*Ahmet*, despite its age and size, the starship still outguns us three-to-one."

Kutav settled into his seat. His nerves tingled with the anticipation of a frontal assault. Never before in his life had he attempted something so bold. "Prepare the subspace charge."

Purchased from the Son'a, Kutav's nasty little surprise was an isolytic subspace weapon, a device used to tear a hole in the fabric of subspace. Never intended as an offensive weapon, Kutav had acquired the device as a last-ditch escape diversion. Now, however, he planned to use it to level the playing field. The charge was dangerously unpredictable, of course, so much so that its use had been outlawed by numerous treaties between the great powers. *Too bad no one had thought to make the Syndicate a signatory*, Kutav thought pitilessly.

"Beginning buildup to detonation. Warhead will be armed in six minutes. ETA to weapons range with Federation starship... six minutes, eight seconds."

Warp 8.3 was all Ashok had been able to coax from *Gibraltar*'s overtaxed engines. Sandhurst decided it would have to be enough. That last percentage of propulsive energy would have been purchased at the cost of his chief engineer's reputation, and the captain was not yet prepared to upstage the lieutenant in front of his department.

Sandhurst's last posting had been aboard the *Galaxy*-class starship *Venture*, first as chief engineer and finally as the ship's executive officer. Were he now in command of such a vessel, he and his crew would have been in the Pierosh system hours ago, and in possession of sensors and defensive systems capable of identifying and coping with nearly any contingency.

He was not ashamed of *Gibraltar*; far from it. However, Sandhurst refused to delude himself about the ship's capabilities. He and his crew would have to be smart, avoiding trouble where possible and thinking their way around situations that larger, more durable vessels could fight their way out of.

After the third time Sandhurst had asked for an updated ETA, Ensign Lightner at Flight Control had quietly added a small chronometer window in the corner of the viewscreen. That had prompted a raised eyebrow from Ensign Browder seated next to him at Ops, and had made the captain smile despite the mounting tension on the bridge.

The assembled staff were unusually quiet as they approached the system ahead, muted voices making inquiries and giving status reports. When Plazzi addressed the captain, there was a tinge of concern in his voice. "Sensor contact, Captain, bearing 301-mark-228. Reads as a transient object moving at warp speed. Contact is sporadic."

Sandhurst turned in his chair to face the Science station. "Projected course of the object?"

Plazzi's fingers danced across the console as he made adjustments and attempted to compensate for the meager sensor return. He raised his head from his monitor and looked to Sandhurst. "Intercept course with us, sir. It's moving at Warp 9.6 or better."

Sandhurst fought the sudden urge to stand from the command chair and move about. He was gradually learning the importance of monitoring his own nonverbals in the presence of his crew. "Time until intercept?"

"Roughly two minutes, sir. Impossible to be more precise than that considering the sporadic sensor readings."

As he glanced behind him at where Lar'ragos stood at the Tactical station, the captain inquired, "Status of shields, Lieutenant?"

"Shields on hot standby, sir." Lar'ragos' expression was unreadable, though his movement seemed unnaturally laconic. "If you want them raised, we'll have to reduce speed."

"Agreed, sir." This from the chief petty officer manning the bridge's Engineering station.

Sandhurst did not hesitate. "Red alert. Tactical, raise shields and arm defensive systems. Helm, reduce speed to maximum sustainable with shields at full. Science, sensors to active scanning."

A chorus of confirmations echoed his orders. The captain watched Plazzi patiently as the older man illuminated the approaching object with *Gibraltar*'s full sensor suite.

"Ahmet, they are scanning us."
"Hold course and lock target."

“Yes, *Ahmet*.” Vanei locked the targeting reticule onto the starship. A brief moment of hesitation took hold as some part of his mind screamed out that this course of action was madness, certain suicide.

Kutav felt it as well. The enemy target was seductive, but a growing sense of wrongness began to permeate his awareness. As his mind flirted with lucidity, he reached out to toggle the override control on his armrest. Something unseen seemed to grip him in an iron vise. His mouth opened, and he slurred the words, “Open fire,” even as he struggled mightily to trap them in his throat.

At the weapons board, a plaintive wail escaped Gult as his hands moved of their own accord and launched the isolytic charge.

Seconds groaned past as the crew awaited Plazzi’s verdict. Sandhurst kept his gaze fixed on the viewer to avoid staring expectantly at the older man. Still absorbed in his sensor display, the science officer announced, “Orion corsair, *Zumschao*-class—”

“They’ve locked weapons on us,” Lar’ragos finished for him.

An electric charge seemed to race the length of Sandhurst’s spine at Pava’s proclamation. Still, he took an extra second to ensure that when he spoke his voice was calm and authoritative. “Helm, drop to impulse and take evasive action. Ops, hail them and identify ourselves. Tactical, launch countermeasures and prepare to return fire if fired upon.”

He spared a glance at Ramirez, who was monitoring sensor information at the exec’s seat in the lower well. Even from where he sat, he imagined that he could feel her bridled energy, her impatience. She was a person of action, and though having to sit idle as another gave commands in a dynamic situation pained her, she hid it well.

Lar’ragos launched two sensor drones from the aft torpedo bay, both set to mimic *Gibraltar*’s warp signature and energy emissions. They peeled away in opposite directions, one accelerating as the other slowed.

At Helm, Lightner thrilled to the words, ‘evasive action.’ To him, such a command was a blank canvas, begging to be filled by as wild and unpredictable maneuvers as he could muster.

Plazzi, forgoing all pretense of remaining calm, shouted, “They’re firing!”

Sandhurst snapped around in his chair more quickly than intended as the ship’s inertial dampeners struggled to keep pace with Lightner’s erratic course adjustments. He focused on Lar’ragos at the Tactical board. “Lieutenant, return the compliment.”

“Aye, sir. Four photon torpedoes away; they’re not yet in phaser range.”

At Ops, Ensign Browder announced, “Torpedo inbound... warhead yield indeterminate.” He squinted at the wavering image on his sensor readout. “It appears to be tracking the accelerating drone, sir.”

“Well, thank goodness for small fav—”

The thought went uncompleted as the image on the main viewer was washed away by a brilliant flash of light. Before their eyes the fabric of the universe was rent asunder, sending out a cataclysmic shockwave, the second the Pierosh system had suffered in as many days.

Sandhurst activated the command chair’s automated restraint harness as he shouted, “Emergency power to shields!” His hand moved for the public address toggle on his armrest.

Ramirez beat him to it. Her voice rang out throughout the ship, *“All hands, brace for impact!”*

Chapter 5

Two of *Gibraltar*'s four torpedoes had struck *Sethret* amidships, which caused serious hull buckling despite the craft's sturdy shields. Their own isolytic detonation finished the job as it crashed through their weakened deflectors and fried every multitronic component in the ship. The once-graceful Orion blockade runner now drifted, defenseless, a victim of her own intrigues.

Ahmet Kutav sat helpless as he watched Vanei writhe spasmodically in his seat. It was not mere discomfort this time, but an exposed EPS relay in his console that caused the man's charring corpse to thrash wildly.

He had inexplicably thrown caution to the wind, endangering and ultimately dooming his ship and crew, and for the life of him Kutav could not say why. The *ahmet* fumbled for the key dangling from the chain around his neck and forced it into the locking mechanism on his chair's armrest. His shaking hand strained to turn the key as he opened a small compartment housing a single green button. *I have failed my family, my crew, and the Syndicate*, he reflected bitterly. *At the very least I can die like an Orion*. Kutav pressed the button that activated the explosive charges set at critical junctures throughout the ship. His last thought was of his younger cousin, who would never know the joys and privileges of his own command. *Apologies, Vanei...*

If it could have, it would have screamed. It had grossly misjudged its ability to control the corporeals in this place. After it had provoked them into attacking the other vessel, they had launched some manner of weapon whose detonation had caused the rift back to its place of imprisonment to fluctuate. Despite lacking any physical substance, it was not immune to pain, and this disturbance wracked the creature with an agony that made its eons of confinement pale in comparison.

Weakened and hurt, it recoiled back into the planet's gravity well. There it would lick its proverbial wounds until its strength returned. It reasoned that it must find a way to break itself free from this place. If not, it would be forever chained to this world, subject to the torture of being able to see its prey passing almost within reach, but forever prevented from feeding.

The din grew louder until it intruded upon his peaceful solitude and became so distracting that he was forced to open his eyes. Blood red emergency lighting greeted Sandhurst's swimming vision. Voices had awakened him, along with the sounds of computer systems restarting. He saw Ramirez as she moved purposefully

from station to station on the intact bridge, rousing those crew still incapacitated by the shockwave.

Sandhurst cleared his throat, and then croaked, "Report... Commander."

Ramirez leaned across the Ops board to toggle a control as she gently shook Ensign Browder awake with her other hand. "Trying to determine our status, Captain. We're obviously still here, so I'm taking that as a positive sign." She moved to the upper level of the bridge and eased past the duty engineer's still unconscious form to check the ship's status. "Looks like the computer core shut down automatically to prevent a complete systems collapse, sir. It's rebooting now, and main systems are coming back online in sequence."

Sandhurst rubbed his face dazedly. He felt as though he'd just awakened from a long slumber. "Any idea what that was, or how long we've been out?"

From the Science station, Plazzi answered. He sounded as groggy as Sandhurst. "Backup power remained on through the core shutdown, Captain, so the chronometers kept running. It's been less than a minute since the detonation. As for what exactly hit us... I'll have to review the sensor logs. Give me a few minutes." The older man looked haggard but turned to his console and set to work.

Sandhurst did a full rotation in his chair to assess the condition of the bridge and crew. He saw Ramirez kneeling next to where Lar'ragos lay sprawled at the base of the Tactical console. Ramirez shook the El Aurian gently, but he did not respond. She detected a strong pulse in his carotid artery and met the captain's expectant stare evenly. "He's fine sir, just out." She tapped her compin with her other hand to order a medical team to the bridge.

Her triage complete, Ramirez stood and manned the Tactical console. She addressed the captain in a murmur quiet enough that only Sandhurst could hear, "I would remind you that the ship that attacked us is still out there, and we're both blind and defenseless at the moment."

Sandhurst directed a patient smile at his exec. "I haven't forgotten. One thing at a time, Commander." He turned back to face the viewscreen as he ordered, "Get me a position fix on the threat vessel as soon as sensors come back online. Tactical, status of shields and weapons?"

The XO replied from behind him, "Shields are still up, holding at sixteen percent. Weapons systems and targeting sensors still offline."

Sandhurst resisted the urge to call down to Engineering. Doubtless, Ashok was working feverishly to restore primary systems, and having the captain nipping at his heels wouldn't make his job any easier.

The wait for sensor capacity to be restored was agonizing. The captain sat quietly and tried not to fidget. He imagined that any second their opponent could deliver the killing strike. *Now I understand the reasoning behind all the simulator time at Command School*, he thought. *Staying calm during an exercise is one thing, but no matter how 'real' your instructors make the scenarios, you're always aware*

that you aren't in any actual danger. They wanted me to be ready for this moment, where I have to sit here, otherwise useless, and still be the steady pillar of leadership for my crew. Sandhurst actually shook his head and smirked at the thought, which drew a curious look from Ramirez who had resumed her station in the well.

Finally, the chief petty officer at Engineering breathed a sigh of relief. "We have partial sensors, Captain."

As he craned his head around to look behind him, Sandhurst inquired, "Tactical?"

Ensign Qawasimi had taken Lar'ragos' place at the Tactical station, while the lieutenant lay off to one side being examined by a medical technician. Qawasimi checked his board. "Sir, I'm reading a debris field, approximately eight hundred-thousand kilometers from our position. Mass and constituents would appear consistent with the Orion vessel."

The tightness in Sandhurst's gut seemed to ease just a fraction at that news. "Status of the runabout?"

"Unchanged, sir. It appears to have been outside the range of the shockwave."

Sandhurst swiveled in his chair to face the Science officer. In response to the captain's gaze, Plazzi announced, "I believe I have some answers for you, sir." Plazzi was beginning to look a bit better, and the color had returned to his features. "I'm seeing residual byproducts of a localized subspace disturbance, Captain." He drew his bearded face away from his display, his expression troubled. "I think they fired a subspace charge at us."

"Then how are we still here?" Sandhurst tried to calculate the potential destructive force unleashed by such a hellish weapon.

"It appears to have been a relatively low yield weapon, sir. The rift it created lasted only a fraction of a second before it collapsed." Plazzi called up some data on another display while he nodded distractedly to himself. "That might also explain why we blacked out, sir. Subspace disturbances have been known to interfere with the neural pathways of carbon-based lifeforms."

"What would have been the result if the weapon had struck us directly?"

Plazzi replied dourly, "We'd have been completely annihilated, sir."

The captain nodded somberly and intoned, "Very well." Sandhurst turned to Ramirez. "Exec, take a rescue team by shuttle to *Brahmaputra* and recover the runabout's crew. We'll hold position, effect repairs, and screen you from any additional insurgent attacks."

"Aye." Ramirez stood from her station and gave Sandhurst a curious look. "So, you're sure this is another insurgent operation, Captain?"

"No, but that's the assumption I'm working under for the time being. It certainly looks like the mysterious energy emissions and the attack on the runabout were meant to lure us into an ambush." He gestured to Browder at Ops. "Hail DS9

and update them on our status, then contact *Trafalgar* and warn them the convoy could be facing an imminent attack as well."

"Aye, sir."

As she moved for the turbolift, Ramirez tapped her combadge, "Lieutenant Taiee, meet me in the shuttle bay for a rescue detail." She stepped into the car. "Ensigns Qawasimi and Lightner, you're with me."

Lightner abandoned his station with a broad grin and joined the exec, excited at the chance to pilot the shuttle.

The captain fixed a serious look on Ramirez as the doors closed. "Bring them back to us, Commander."

Pierosh II.

The dark figure stood alone, silhouetted against the lavender sunset of the local star as he cursed the fates. He drew his heavy cloak around him for warmth against the frigid wind that blustered across the barren, rocky landscape as he plotted his next move. On some level he could appreciate the irony of his situation. Decades of planning and effort had gone into this, and on the cusp of his greatest victory, he had been thwarted. Not by any man or army or nation, though. That he could have made allowances for. After all, he had been defeated by others in his long past, lessons that he considered as painful as they had been valuable. But this time... this time it seemed as if the very fabric of the universe had conspired against him.

From within the folds of his cloak he withdrew an amber colored, teardrop-shaped crystal that filled the palm of his hand. He passed his other hand over it and watched the flickering lights and patterns play across its facets before they coalesced into a steady stream of information that only he could decipher. There were others nearby. Loath though he was to admit it, he would need the assistance of outsiders to complete this burdensome task.

He traced a design across the face of the crystal with one finger which caused a door to appear before him as though out of thin air. He stepped through this portal without hesitation, his mind filled with dark thoughts. He mused to himself as he crossed the threshold, *the best laid plans of mice and men...*

Chapter 6

Her eyes fluttered open then snapped closed immediately at the bright lights overhead. A familiar voice called to her soothingly, "It's alright, Lieutenant. You're back aboard *Gibraltar*." It was Lt. Tailee.

Olivia Juneau tried to sit up, only to find she was secured beneath a restraining field. She opened her eyes again cautiously against the glare and saw Tailee's face appear above her, smiling warmly. "Don't struggle, Olivia. Everything's fine, you're home."

Her throat was dry, her mouth parched, but somehow Juneau managed to form the word,

"Crew?"

A brief flicker of concern passed over Tailee's face. "We can discuss that later. For right now all you need to be concerned with is that you're alright and in good hands."

Juneau nodded weakly and ceased straining against the field. She couldn't recall anything after the shockwave had struck *Brahmaputra*. She wanted to insist that Tailee tell her the fate of her crewmates, but she was so exhausted that it took every ounce of strength she could muster to even remain awake.

Just beneath the surface of her conscious mind, her alter ego lurked, watching and waiting. There was an opportunity here, something much more suited to her abilities than planting experimental devices in the ship's engineering section, as she had been tasked to do prior to the Lakesh mission. Whatever was happening in the Pierosh system was clearly a threat to Federation security. When the opportunity arose, she would contact her handler and request instructions. Until then, she would play her part, and allow the angst-ridden Olivia to wrestle with the aftermath of her first, abortive command.

Tailee injected Juneau with a mild sedative that sent the young woman to sleep. Her injuries were serious, but not life threatening. Smoke inhalation and some bruised organs were the worst of it, and she was in far better condition than her two surviving comrades from the runabout.

Fortunately, Tailee was not only good at her job, she was practical enough to call for help when someone's condition was beyond her capabilities. She had activated one of the ship's two Emergency Medical Holograms and assisted as the photonic doctor repaired the more severe injuries sustained by Ensign Shanthi and CPO Osterlund. Every time she worked alongside the EMH she learned something new, and today had been no different. She pitied those physicians who were so

insecure that they could not bring themselves to activate the holograms for fear of calling their own abilities into doubt.

She walked over to another biobed, this one containing the enigmatic Lar'ragos. He had collapsed along with ninety-five percent of the crew following the subspace shockwave that had engulfed *Gibraltar*. Despite the best efforts of the med-techs on the bridge as well as her own attempts, Lar'ragos had resisted being revived and was now under observation in Sickbay.

Tailee had checked the Starfleet medical database, the interlinked archive accessible by every ship and outpost in the Fleet. El Aurians were a mysterious people, and although the workings of their various internal organs were known to medical science, their special psionic abilities were still an unknown variable in their makeup. She found a single reference, from a Doctor Beverly Crusher of the *Enterprise-D*, that suggested the El Aurian civilian assigned to that ship may have been hypersensitive to changes or disruptions in the immediate time/space continuum. The notation had been flagged for future inquiry by Starfleet Medical, but it appeared that no further research into this area had ever been done.

Her scans of his brain indicated that his neurotransmitter levels had increased by twenty percent, but she couldn't localize the activity to any one section of his neural structure. The EMH had recommended a broad-spectrum anti-inflammatory and a mild neurotransmitter inhibitor. Tailee loaded a hypospray and injected Lar'ragos, then patted his shoulder gently. "Pava my dear, you are a *mess*."

She hoped that some prolonged rest might give his body a chance to decompress from its hypervigilant state. Whatever was tormenting him, Tailee surmised that it had surfaced recently after *Gibraltar*'s first mission.

As Lar'ragos slept, he dreamed.

Vot'u-Shay City Planet Dabroth, Ig'Vean Principalities Delta Quadrant Circa 1983 A.D., Terran Calendar.

It was the textbook definition of a backwater planet, the fifth such world that the 507th Royal Fusiliers had been assigned to in the past three years. A technological mélange of the ancient and state-of-the-art, Vot'u-Shay City was the headquarters for Dabroth's merchant warlords. These men trafficked in all manner of goods: narcotics, weapons, slaves, and even did a brisk business in the sale and transport of humanoid organs into the quarantined and blockaded Vidiian Sodality.

The subahdar leaned against the side of the crumbling tenement, shrouded in the suffocating multi-layered robes that were worn by the natives to protect against Dabroth's glaring sun and churning sandstorms. He was hot, itchy, and irritable. His plasma pulse rifle was dangling from a shoulder harness beneath his robes, but even

if the locals could have seen it, they'd have given him little notice. Everyone here was armed; it was a society whose only laws flowed from the gun barrels of the warlord elite.

The city stretched out to the horizon. It was a decaying, fetid mishmash of multistory mud-brick hovels interspersed with stark glass and metal towers which looked as though they had been intentionally misplaced here by some capricious deity. There were few straight avenues, and much of the city was a rabbit's warren of interconnecting roads and alleyways. Some of the streets had been paved centuries earlier, but now they consisted of dirt and the ever-present blowing sand. Above the buildings was a crazed web of electrical power lines that crisscrossed the skyline and created a confusing buzz of electromagnetic interference that played hell with Hekosian scanners.

The people here, clad in the ubiquitous *shaura* robes moved with the slow deliberation of those without hope for the future. Chaos and squalor were all they knew, and for them there could be no other way.

The Empire had come to change all that.

“Unit One to Lead, we’re in position.” The message crackled in the earpiece of his comms headset.

The subahdar accessed the chronometer displayed across the special contact lens in his left eye. T + 1 minute. They were running late. He keyed his mic, “Copy, standby. Awaiting confirmation of target’s presence.”

“Boss, the skimmer’s idling. They can’t hang there much longer without attracting attention.”

His voice took on a stern edge. “Copy. I said *standby*.”

He sensed someone approaching and instinctively grasped the handle of his combat knife in the sheath on his leg as he turned to confront the new arrival. It was only Nellit. The man waggled his eyebrows expressively at the subahdar; the gesture spoke volumes even though only his eyes were visible through his layered *shaura*. “Greetings, boss. Aren’t we about due to start spreading hate and discontent?”

“We’re on hold,” the subahdar hissed.

Nellit’s impatience was evident in his stance. “He’s not in there, Pava. We’ve got solid intel that he’s spending the night in Lort, and you damn well know it. Wishing on all the stars in the night sky won’t make it otherwise.” Nellit reached out a hand encased in a thick tactical glove and grasped the subahdar’s arm. “I know you were hoping for a shot at the old man himself, but that’s not the Op.” His grip hardened, conveying conviction as well as mounting anger. “Either give the word or scrub the mission.”

After a moment, 1st Subahdar Pava Lar’ragos gave a terse, reluctant nod. In response, Nellit fumbled with something bulky beneath his robes and began moving towards the main entrance of the warlord Jebrosk’s multistory compound. He keyed the comms and Lar’ragos barked, “Sandstorm! Repeat, Sandstorm! All teams go!”

Instantly, a dozen of the shrouded, shuffling figures in the streets surrounding Jebrosk's dilapidated palace surged into action. They cast aside their robes in favor of the desert-patterned camouflage and ballistic armor hidden beneath. The soldiers charged the building as they freed their plasma rifles and laser carbines and scanned the vicinity for prospective targets.

A series of loud snapping noises overhead heralded the deaths of the warlord's rooftop spotters on the surrounding buildings, eliminated by the 507th's pre-positioned snipers. One of the spotters, felled from the roof above Lar'ragos, thudded into the dusty street just meters away from the subahdar.

Nellit dropped to one knee in the middle of the street, flinging his *shaura* away from him and hefting a menacing looking tetryon cannon to his shoulder. He took careful aim and fired. The weapon sent a white-hot bolt of energy into the main entryway of the building, obliterating the massive and ornate wierwood doors, as well as the four bodyguards the team knew to be stationed on the other side.

The scream of the skimmer's engines announced its arrival as the squat craft, bristling with weapons ports and studded with missiles, flared out to hover above the target building. The aft hatch dropped open, and a squad of fusiliers jumped down onto the roof and engaged the few surviving roof sentries with short, controlled bursts of fire. Using shaped demolition charges, they blew their own entry points through the ceiling and stormed the top floor, catching the defenders who lurked near the stairwells to the roof by surprise.

The ground level assault team blasted through the building's reinforced first story windows, then hurled concussion grenades inside that detonated with muffled thumps. The raiders lined up in entry team formation to one side of the now shattered main doorway, then rushed inside, covering preassigned quadrants of fire.

The fight for control of the compound was brief, and ridiculously one-sided. They took the structure floor by floor, exercising speed and violence to overcome the remaining guards. Within five minutes it was over. The sounds of battle from within the building began to wane, and moments later Lar'ragos observed a line of civilians, hands atop their heads, being marched out of the entryway and into the street.

The fusiliers had them kneel in the street, and the prisoners dropped reluctantly to the scorching sand and gravel. These were Jebrosk's wives, children, cousins, courtesans, retainers, and a handful of his security detail who'd chosen the humiliation of capture over certain death at the hands of the 507th.

Lar'ragos motioned to one of his men, who lowered his rifle and raised a holocamera. He focused on the subahdar with the captured civilians arrayed behind him in the background. Pava pulled the hood of the *shaura* back to expose his face to the camera. "Iton-mai Jebrosk, the Hekosian Empire approached you with the hand of friendship. We offered you trade and the promise of greater influence for your clan with the off-world commerce guilds. In return for your fealty, the Empire would have awarded you the protection of our laws and the soldiers who enforce

them.” Lar’ragos spat theatrically into the sand at his feet. “You dismissed our entreaties and executed our envoy.”

He stepped aside to allow the camera to pan across the faces of the prisoners. “Now your family and loyal followers are in our hands. They shall remain safe and healthy, so long as you sign our treaty in good faith and abide by its provisions.” The camera zoomed in on the El Aurian’s severe expression. “If you refuse, we’ll send them back to you, a piece at a time.”

Lar’ragos made a cutting motion at his neck, and the soldier ceased recording. He activated his comms and the subahdar ordered, “Fusiliers, we are leaving!” He swung his arm in a circular motion above his head as a sign for his men to assemble for exfiltration; it was an anachronistic gesture, a throwback to the days when the Hekosian military used rotary aircraft for troop transport. The skimmer roared overhead and then settled slowly into the street to collect the platoon and their prisoners.

Taking the camera’s holodisk from his subordinate, Lar’ragos stalked across the road to the side of the building. He pulled a plasma flare from his tactical vest and ignited it. With swift, brutal strokes he carved a crude representation of the Hekosian Royal Crest into the wall, and then dropped the holodisk on the sand beneath the smoldering graffiti.

The departing platoon hustled the prisoners aboard the skimmer, pushing or dragging those who resisted. Lar’ragos lagged behind to cover their egress with a handful of troopers until he was the only one remaining. He took a last look around, then spat again into the shifting sands of Dabroth as he bid the miserable planet farewell. He stepped up onto the landing ramp as he shook his head. *For honor...for empire*, he thought wryly as the whine of the powering engines drowned out the sounds of whimpering hostages.

Chapter 7

USS *Gibraltar*, Transporter Room 2 in geo-synchronous orbit of Pierosh II.

Ramirez hadn't realized how much she'd missed the bustle and camaraderie of away team prep. This was her first away mission in six weeks, and as she and the rest of the team geared up, she felt a momentary twinge of nostalgia for those bright, naïve days before the Dominion War. Exploration, diplomacy, science; such things had been given short shrift during the bloody conflict.

She regretted that Lar'ragos was still confined to Sickbay. Despite whatever recent issues he might be having, his tactical abilities in the field made him a welcome addition to any landing party. In his stead, Master Chief Tark would be leading the team's security contingent, comprised of three additional security personnel. Tailee and a medical technician would render aid to any injured discovered on the surface. Plazzi and Ashok rounded out the team.

Loaded for bear with phaser sidearms, tricorders, field jackets, and various specialized equipment, the team stood ready. Ramirez briefly inspected them to make sure everyone had a full complement of gear. "I'll beam down first with the security team to ensure the landing zone is safe. Once we signal things are clear, we'll bring the rest of you down." She turned to Tailee. "Lieutenant, you're sure about the radiation danger?"

"Yes, sir," the nurse practitioner replied. "The hyronaline boosters I've given the away team members should suffice to offset any moderate elevation in radiation levels encountered on the surface." Ramirez had wanted to avoid encasing the away team in the bulky, cumbersome radiation-hardened EVA suits. If an ambush awaited them on the planet, she didn't want the team facing the threat with the added disadvantages of poor visibility and decreased mobility.

Ramirez directed an appraising look at Plazzi. "And we're not going to get fried by some unexpected radiation surge. Right, Commander?"

The older scientist shrugged awkwardly as he struggled into his field jacket. "Latest sensor readings show that the ambient radiation levels have gone back down to near normal." He fastened the jacket, made an irritated face, and busied himself rearranging the placement of his gear for the third time. "Since we don't know what caused the radiation spike and the shockwave in the first place, I can't tell you if or when it might recur." He gave the XO a blasé smile. "But that's okay. I'm in Starfleet. We live for danger."

Tark snorted, Tailee chuckled, and Ramirez rolled her eyes. "And on that note..."

Ramirez stepped onto the transporter dais, followed by the master chief and his security team. They assumed a tactical beam-in formation, all five facing

outwards with phasers rifles at the ready. She nodded to the transporter operator. “Energize.”

Pierosh II, Meteorological Research Station Aristotle.

Wonderful. It's Planet Shale. That was Ramirez's first thought as she looked out across the featureless landscape surrounding the survey station. It appeared as if the entire surface of the world had been littered with the chipped away refuse from some gigantic rock quarry. No vegetation, no water, no distractions of any kind to break up the monotonous vista. The flat, loose stones stretched out in all directions and gave the planet a chillingly desolate feel; a world of crushed rock under steel gray skies.

“Charming,” Ramirez quipped. “Now that I've seen it, I'll have to cancel my next trip to Risa.”

She glanced at the sensor window displayed on her rifle's scope. “Clear on my side. Master Chief?”

“Same here,” Tark affirmed. The other three offered identical reports. They broke out their tricorders, which had greater range and sensitivity than their tactical scanners. The security team probed for hidden traps or devices but found nothing.

Ramirez tapped the combadge affixed to her survival jacket. “Ramirez to *Gibraltar*. All clear planet-side. Send down the rest of the team.”

A moment later, Plazzi, Ashok, Taiee and Medical Specialist Yoichi materialized. Taiee frowned and zipped her jacket to the top in deference to the biting wind that whipped across the plain.

Plazzi's eyes lit up upon seeing the surrounding panorama, the geologist in him thrilled by the forces that created this environment.

The exec ordered the security team into a perimeter around the specialists, and headed off towards the survey station, some two kilometers distant. The station was nearly as dreary as its surroundings. It was comprised of a series of boxy, two-story structures interconnected by elevated walkways, a cubist's dream. Plated with drab green weather resistant tritium sheeting, the buildings had long, narrow windows and nests of antennae and sensor arrays extruding from their roofs.

As they approached, Plazzi noted, “No power signatures, Commander. When the facility was operational, it was supposed to be run on four mega-wattage fusion reactors, one in each structure.”

“Radiation levels?” the exec inquired.

“Nominal for the moment. I am, however, reading slightly elevated gamma emissions from the southeastern most building.”

In response, Ramirez turned to Taiee. The nurse looked up from her own tricorder to meet Ramirez's eyes. "Still within safety parameters, sir."

"Then that's where we'll headfirst."

With half the security team taking point and the other half bringing up the rear, they cautiously entered the structure. Not only was the building without power, it appeared every electronic device in the structure had been violently disrupted. They had been forced to cut through the doors at the entrance with their phasers. Lighting fixtures dangled from the ceiling by charred optical cabling, and computer terminals were blackened or partially melted.

Ashok paused to shine his palm beacon onto a scorched door control panel as he scanned it with his tricorder. In response to Ramirez's questioning look, he muttered, "Electromagnetic pulse, Commander. A big one. Would have corrupted every electronic component within kilometers of here."

"Is that the result of a weapon used on the facility, or something that originated here?"

The massive Bolian snapped his tricorder shut with a flick of his wrist as he leveled a carefully neutral expression at his superior. "Don't know yet."

From up ahead, PO2 Dunleavy from the security detachment called out, "I've... got something." There was a strained quality to her voice that spurred the others ahead double-time.

The sight was so remarkable that even Taiee involuntarily gasped. A man, human by the look of him, slouched awkwardly from where the chair that he had presumably been seated in had somehow joined with his torso. It appeared that the man had become momentarily incorporeal and had begun to fall through the chair towards the floor, only to regain his solidity just in time for his abdominal cavity to fuse with the seat.

"Please take your seats," Plazzi said, his voice barely above a whisper. Nobody laughed.

Taiee crouched next to the man and ran the sensor wand from her medical tricorder over him. "I'm reading massive cellular disruption. Fortunately, whatever did this killed him instantly."

Ramirez forced herself to look away from the ghastly sight. "Yes. Fortunately," she echoed, unable to mask the irony in her tone. "So, now we know that there *were* people home in our supposedly abandoned research outpost." She snuck a peek at Taiee's tricorder over the nurse's shoulder and asked, "What would you estimate the time of death was?"

"Somewhere between fifteen and twenty hours ago."

Ramirez nodded. "Right about the time of the shockwave that crippled *Brahmaputra*, then." She gestured to the lead security detail and the exec instructed, "Let's keep going."

They proceeded further into the building, passing laboratories that looked as if they had been struck by miniature tornados, and living quarters and office cubicles that appeared untouched aside from their now defunct electronic systems.

Finally, they reached the main operations center. The team members swept their lights across the various shattered computer banks as their boots crunched on shards of polymers blown free from workstations and monitors.

Tailee's frozen breath billowed in her searchlight's beam as she probed the darkness with it. Something caught her attention, a computer console that didn't look quite right. She approached, her brain having difficulty deciphering what her eyes were telling her. "Found another one. I think."

A Tellarite female had collapsed onto her workstation, but her arm and part of her head had taken on the properties of the workstation itself. An older style console, it was studded with push buttons, toggles and switches, some of which now extruded from the metallic mass of the woman's skull and arm.

Ramirez called Ashok over to where the woman lay. She gestured towards the body. "Could an EM pulse do that, Lieutenant?"

Ashok inspected the macabre scene, then delivered his succinct analysis. "No."

She gave the Bolian an incredulous look as she pried further. "What could, Mister Ashok?"

"Something else we've yet to encounter, sir."

Ramirez bit back a snide reply about Ashok's grasp of the obvious, keenly aware that her own discomfort with this eerie place was agitating her. She admonished herself silently, *Don't take it out on your people, Liana*. Instead, she hailed *Gibraltar* to give the ship a brief update on what they'd discovered so far while the rest of the team continued their examination of the operations center.

A few moments later, she noticed Tark squatting on his haunches near a bank of wrecked computer processors affixed to one wall. He was studying his tricorder intently as she approached. "Something of note, Master Chief?"

Tark wiped the face of his tricorder across one sleeve to remove the crystallized water vapor from his exhalations that had clouded the display. "Yes, sir. There are three sublevels beneath the power plant in the basement."

Ramirez frowned. "And...?"

The grizzled Tellarite looked up at her. "And they're not in the design specs for the station that we requested from the Federation Science Directorate."

Her frown grew more severe as Ramirez postulated, "An unintentional omission?"

Tark stood, stifling a groan as his old soldier's knees crackled in protest. "I don't think so, Commander." He held his tricorder up for her inspection. "Those levels aren't accessible from the power plant, only through what appears to be a hidden stairwell located behind one of those processor towers."

She looked past the tricorder at the bank of processors then muttered some choice phrases in Cardassian under her breath. Then, more loudly, "A secret compartment and a hidden stairwell leading to underground chambers? You have got to be kidding."

"I'm afraid not, sir."

They approached the wall and Ramirez played her palm beacon's beam into the seams between the processor towers. She handed the light to Tark, then squeezed her fingers into the gap between two towers and pulled. "Nothing. It won't budge."

"Scans show there's a small motor mechanism in the wall. It was probably activated by a switch somewhere in this room." Tark drew his phaser pistol; the weapon chirped as he increased the power setting. "Stand back, sir."

She retreated quickly from the towers and looked on as Tark directed a brief yet surgical phaser beam that vaporized two of the processors and part of a third. Behind them, as promised, was a small doorway leading to a staircase.

She swept her light down the stairs and looked back to the away team. "Plazzi, call the ship and let them know what that phaser fire was before we have a rescue team beaming into our midst." She started down the stairs. "Oh, and tell the captain we found stairs." Ramirez grinned nervously and paused for dramatic effect. "Tell him... they go down."

Chapter 8

USS *Gibraltar*.

In geo-synchronous orbit of Pierosh II.

Orbit was a bad thing. Ensign Lightner hated orbit. Having to park the ship around a planet and continue to stand watch at the Flight Control station was like someone's sick idea of purgatory for a pilot. *There isn't enough coffee in the entire galaxy*, he thought glumly. Lightner sat quietly and merely observed the ship's automated systems as they made minute course corrections to hold their orbital position above the survey station.

Captain Sandhurst had been in the ready room for the past hour, fielding subspace inquiries as to the mission's progress from multiple divisions of Starfleet Command and more than one delegate of the Federation Science Council. If the incoming comms signatures had been accurate, it seemed that the Pierosh system was suddenly the hottest spot within three sectors.

Repairs continued throughout the ship as engineering teams attended to the remaining damage caused by the enemy subspace charge. It appeared to Lightner that they were having difficulty reassembling the shield grid, which did not bode well if they were to be subject to further attacks.

With Lar'ragos out of commission and the rest of the senior staff on the surface, Ensign Qawasimi, the assistant chief of security, sat in the captain's chair. Lightner fretted about not having been asked to take the conn by the captain. It was, he decided, just one more prize denied him since his graduation from the academy some three months earlier.

Though not as depressed as he had originally been, Lightner still bemoaned his assignment to *Gibraltar*. He had graduated in the top third of his academy class and had even flown on the academy's elite aerobatics team during his plebe year. As such he'd requested a posting to a combat fighter wing or one of Starfleet's smaller, more maneuverable starships, such as the *Saber*-class. He was enough of a pragmatist to understand that not everyone got their preference of assignment, no matter their graduation standing. Nevertheless, he was convinced that in his case there was more to it.

He had been born and raised on Ronara Prime, a Federation colony along the Federation/Cardassian border that would eventually fall within the Demilitarized Zone. Lightner had grown up hating the provincial feel of the small settlement, certain he was living his life lightyears away from where anything of consequence was happening. In the face of the newly established DMZ and the rising tensions along the border, his family relocated to the Rudyard Colonies the same year Brett was accepted to Starfleet Academy. All except his older brother, Kyle.

Flying in the face of reason, Kyle had run off and joined the Maquis. His brother, although rated at a genius level IQ as a child, hadn't the common sense of a housefly in Brett's opinion. Fortunately, he proved as incompetent a freedom fighter as he had at any of his other endeavors and was quickly apprehended by Starfleet. Kyle had spent the last three years in a Federation penal settlement on Alpha Centauri, growing angrier and ever more embittered. Brett had tried to correspond with him, but Kyle froze both he and his parents out.

Brett believed it was his brother's unsavory ties to the Maquis that had cost him a more noteworthy first assignment. It wasn't officially sanctioned discrimination, of course, but the result was just the same. Someone up the chain of command had decided that Brett might hold Maquis sympathies too, despite all evidence to the contrary.

It wasn't as if his posting to *Gibraltar* had been a total disaster; he had seen plenty of action on their first mission. However, the intervening weeks of drudge work had left him aching for greener pastures.

Seated next to Lightner at Operations, Ensign Browder sat forward slightly and made note of something as he examined the readout of a routine surface scan. Momentarily shaken from his funk, Lightner glanced over at Browder's board. Browder looked behind him to Ensign Qawasimi. "I'm reading a phaser discharge on the surface, Ensign."

Qawasimi stood and moved down into the well to take a look for himself. "I'd concur, Mister Browder." He turned towards the closed ready room door as he reached for his compin, "Cap—" The incoming hail cut him off.

"Plazzi to Gibraltar, we've just cut through a bank of computers with phasers to get at a hidden doorway. Be advised, we've apparently discovered some deliberately hidden levels beneath the facility. We're moving to investigate."

Qawasimi toggled the comms control at Browder's station. "*Gibraltar* copies, Commander. Standing by for further updates."

The security ensign looked somewhat disappointed as he ascended to the command chair and resumed his seat. Lightner turned in his chair to face him as he grinned and inclined his head towards the small replicator terminal at the back of the bridge. "More coffee, Ensign?"

Qawasimi's reply was cut short as the doors to the ready room hissed open. A very tense looking Captain Sandhurst emerged, massaging the back of his neck with one hand. He looked at the ensign in the command chair. "If anyone *else* needs to talk to me, tell them I'm unavailable and will get back to them as soon as possible." With that, the captain headed for the turbolift.

Conscientious of his responsibility as the duty watch officer, Qawasimi quickly recited, "Sir, the away team reports having located some hidden levels to the survey station. They're checking them out now."

Sandhurst nodded. "Very well. Keep me apprised of anything noteworthy, Mister Qawasimi."

"Aye, sir. And... where will you be, sir?"

Sandhurst stepped into the lift car as a faint smile graced his lips. "In Engineering, getting my hands dirty."

Olivia Juneau lay atop the biobed, sleeping peacefully. Though medically cleared hours earlier to resume duty, her psychological state had Tailee worried enough that she'd ordered Juneau to remain for observation. *Gibraltar* was too small a ship to warrant a counselor, and with Tailee planet-side and the EMH in charge, the medical department's psychiatric assets were nil.

So, Juneau had been sedated and left to rest until Tailee's return. This proved utterly intolerable to the junior lieutenant's alter ego, which refused to be incapacitated due to the inherent weaknesses of her host. Determined to take charge of the situation, she flooded Juneau's system with the appropriate cocktail of endorphins and adrenaline to offset the sedative and clawed her way back to consciousness. She would be far from optimal and would remain lethargic and addled, but she would be able to function for long enough to free herself from Sickbay.

Her eyes slammed open, and she found herself once again beneath the damnable restraining field. "Doctor," she croaked as she struggled to regain her voice and equilibrium.

The EMH approached, a perturbed expression on its photonic features. "Lieutenant? You shouldn't be awake." The hologram studied Juneau's biometric readouts on the display at the head of the bed. "That's very odd..."

Juneau fought to keep focus as she dumped more adrenaline into her system to correct for her swimming vision and impossibly heavy eyelids. "Doctor, I'm thinking of a number..."

The Mark I EMH, never known for its winning bedside manner, was having none of it. "I'm sure you are, Lieutenant." It stepped away from the biobed and reached for a hypospray and another sedative ampoule.

Juneau wrestled with her leaden tongue as she forced the words out. "...it's a prime number..."

The EMH charged the hypo as it nodded distractedly. "Mmm-hmm." It approached, poised to inject her.

"...that number is thirty-one." The EMH stopped in its tracks as if frozen. The expression on its face shifted from one of professional irritation to that of helpful anticipation.

"How may I be of assistance?" it inquired.

Juneau sighed and silently thanked the brilliant engineers centuries earlier who had subtly grafted emergency overrides not only into the operating programming of all Starfleet systems, but into the very hardware that supported them. They had remained there through successive generations of advances and upgrades, undetected. They were rarely used, so as to avoid exposure, but when absolutely necessary they proved invaluable.

“Release the restraining field and give me the appropriate stimulant to counteract the sedative.”

“Right away, Lieutenant.”

Pierosh II Meteorological Research Station Aristotle.

Thirty minutes and several wrecked rooms later, Ramirez and company stood before a sealed pressure door situated one level above what their scans indicated was the *actual* lowest level of the building. Ashok and Tark examined the blast door carefully for a few minutes as they pointed to one another’s tricorders and muttered in terminologies that Ramirez would not pretend to understand.

Ashok finally gave his professional assessment. “The door is heavily reinforced, Commander.”

“We can’t cut through it with phasers?”

Tark spoke up, “I wouldn’t recommend it, sir. We’d have to put our phasers on a high enough setting that we’d risk destroying whatever’s on the other side, including any forensic evidence.”

Ramirez turned to Plassi. “Can we have the ship beam us to the other side?”

The scientist referenced his tricorder. “Not with the levels of chroniton radiation in the vicinity, sir. Chronometric particles and transporters don’t play well together.”

“Okay, then. Suggestions?”

Ashok held up his engineering kit. “I have a battery pack, sir. I could attempt to power the locking mechanism and run a bypass.”

The exec nodded curtly. “Do it.”

She stepped aside to give the lieutenant room to work. Ramirez observed that whatever his failings in the area of interpersonal relations, the man attacked an engineering problem with the tenacity of a Caldorian eel. It took less than five minutes for Ashok to run a successful bypass and the door cycled open with a pneumatic sigh.

The room on the other side was illuminated by a wavering bluish light that emanated from a large transparent aluminum observation window that ran nearly the entire length of the room’s far wall. The now familiar sight of blown out control

consoles and the scent of burning electronics were evident here, as well as a number of humanoid bodies strewn about the room.

Tailee started to move towards them, only to find herself restrained by Ramirez's arm on her bicep. The exec nodded towards the security team and murmured, "Let them do their jobs, Doc." Tailee blushed, rightly admonished. Tark and his people quickly swept the room to secure it from potential threats.

The Tellarite's tricorder began to warble, and he appeared to be following it towards something of interest. "I've got life signs," he announced. Ramirez and Tailee moved to assist him as Plazzi wandered towards the viewing windows, tricorder in hand.

Tark found him beneath a mound of debris. An exploding computer processor had collapsed onto the man, who appeared to be a Caucasian human in his mid-to-late sixties. Dressed in a now torn and blackened lab coat, the man stared at the away team members wild-eyed. His mouth moved soundlessly as his one free hand clawed at the air. Tailee began scanning him even as the others worked to remove the debris from atop him.

"I'm seeing erratic neural activity, weakened pulse, and signs of systemic shock." Tailee focused on Ramirez. "We've got to get this man back to the ship, and fast."

"Didn't..." the man gurgled desperately, "didn't mean..."

The exec stood and gestured to Dunleavy and Bostwick from the security detail. "Assist Tailee in getting him to the surface for emergency beam-out." They quickly unfolded a collapsible litter from Dunleavy's pack, and gently set the injured man onto it.

As Tailee led them out of the room, Ashok approached Ramirez and loomed over her uncomfortably until she turned to acknowledge him. "What have you got, Lieutenant?"

The Bolian waved a hand towards the surrounding equipment. "None of these systems have anything to do with meteorological studies, Commander. Much of it is non-Federation in nature. I've found Ferengi, Angosian, and Nyberrite systems components."

Ramirez took a moment to look around the room. "Any idea what they were doing here?"

From his vantage point at the viewing gallery, Plazzi replied to Ramirez in a voice laden with tension, "I've got a pretty good idea, sir." He cleared his throat nervously. "You'll want to take a look at this."

Ramirez approached the observation windows with the others in tow. She barely contained the sharp intake of breath that threatened to escape her lips as she got her first glimpse of the thing in all its horribly beauty.

Some fifteen meters below them, sandwiched between what appeared to be two ruined subspace field coils, was a bright, roiling mass of energy. It was in

constant motion, expanding and contracting while it emitted crackling electrical discharges and sinuous ribbons of bluish plasma.

She pursed her lips in consternation and Ramirez inquired, "That what I think it is?"

Plazzi replied in a surprisingly even tone. "If you mean 'is that a spatial rift and the source of both the radiation anomalies and the shockwave?'" He blew out a shaky sounding breath. "Very likely, sir."

Chapter 9

Ahmet Kutav's return to consciousness was as abrupt as if he had been doused with a bucket of ice water. He found himself suddenly and inexplicably awake, immobilized and suspended in a shaft of white light in black void whose dimensions eluded him. Kutav's first thought was that he fervently hoped this was not the afterlife. His mortal existence had been a lavish parade of sensuality and excess. The thought that death might be an exercise in austerity terrified him.

Echoing footfalls presaged the arrival of a human male. Clad in dark, layered clothing under a flowing cloak of the same color, the man's shock of white hair was incongruous. He was of average height, and appeared to be middle-aged, perhaps approaching seventy.

I hope I've not blown myself all the way into the wrong afterlife, Kutav was unable to prevent the mordant thought. *Too much trilithium in the destruct charges, perhaps?*

After studying Kutav for a long moment, the human was finally moved to speak. He had a deep, distinctive voice, and spoke in exotically accented Federation standard. "So, Orion, might I interest you in a second chance?"

Kutav found his voice right where he had left it, though he was briefly startled at the sound of his own words after believing himself deceased. "I took my own life because I have lost everything of value to me. Can you suggest a reason that I might choose otherwise?"

The man smiled in response, a peculiarly menacing gesture. "Why revenge, of course. You wouldn't want an opportunity to strike back at those who cost you your reputation and livelihood?"

"I did that to myself." Kutav was secretly grateful that he still lived, but it was not difficult for him to see where this conversation was heading. He would be puppet to no man.

The human looked momentarily perplexed, then increasingly irritated. "I have need of your help, Orion. If you were to do my bidding in this matter, I would see you repaid at several times the value of your lost ship."

Kutav sneered. "You believe that's all it would take to buy my loyalty? The promise of mere profit? You must have me mistaken for a Ferengi."

The human feigned sadness. "Pity. Over half your crew still lives as well. I am sure at least some of them will agree to my terms. Profit is not all a contract with me entails, but it is a good beginning. Wouldn't you agree?"

Kutav stalled to bide himself time to consider his dwindling options. He switched tacks and inquired, "Where am I?"

"Aboard my vessel."

The *ahmet* pondered that. "And how did I get here?"

The human seemed to struggle with his own impatience, but finally deigned to answer Kutav's questions though it was obvious he was not used to having to answer to another. "I rescued you and your surviving crew an instant before your ship self-destructed."

Kutav closed his eyes and willingly let go the illusion of control. He would play this man's game for a time. Doubtless, when his usefulness had been exhausted, this man would kill him. The trick was knowing when and where that blow would come, and preemptively striking his assailant just a moment sooner. "What must I do?"

The man's disturbing smile appeared again. "A storm is coming. To prevent our being swept away by it, you and your merry little band of pirates must steal a starship for me."

Taniss Orbital Station Demarcation Border, Vidiian Quarantine Zone, Delta Quadrant. Circa 1983 A.D., Terran Calendar.

Nellit held the holocam with one hand, sure to keep the subjects in frame despite his vocal reservations with this assignment. He glanced at the man next to him and noted his furrowed brow and rigid posture. "You can still change your mind," he offered hopefully.

"We're not having this conversation again," Lar'ragos growled. The El Aurian's hands grasped the railing of the observation platform so tightly that they trembled.

Nellit persisted, determined to vent his anger at not only having to watch this travesty, but record it for posterity as well. "It isn't right, and you know it. Better we had shot them down in the street and left their bodies for Jebrosk to find."

Lar'ragos stood stiffly, eyes focused like laser beams on the tremulous line of prisoners as they were herded towards their destination. "Better for whom, Nellit? Each one of those people down there will save countless thousands through their sacrifice."

Nellit barked out a sarcastic laugh, thankful the audio gain on the holocam had been deactivated.

"I'm pleased you can justify this to yourself so poetically, boss."

1st Subahdar Pava Lar'ragos turned to face him, eyes blazing. "Without this gesture, the 507th and all successive Hekosian units assigned to Dabroth would have to repeat this lesson time and again. How many would die, Nellit? Five thousand? Twenty?" He turned his gaze back to the straggling line, as containment suited Vidiian guards prompted them onto the gangway leading to the waiting transport.

Children clutched at their mothers, and the terrified men tried desperately to carry themselves with some degree of dignity.

Lar'ragos imagined that even at this distance he could see the avaricious look in the Vidiian's eyes at the prospect of so many 'recruits' to their cause. The population of the Vidiian Sodality had been infected with a horrific degenerative disease some fifteen hundred years earlier. Known only as the Phage, the disease's mutagenic nature made it invincible to medical treatments, the syndrome consuming the bodies of its victims by disrupting their genetic code and destroying them on the cellular level. Their decaying, gangrenous bodies were the greatest fear of the local stellar governments, and the Sodality had eventually been cut off and quarantined by their neighbors.

Now, the Sodality harvested the bodies of various humanoids to keep its own infected citizens alive. They had perfected anti-rejection medicines that allowed them to utilize the organs of other species. As luck would have it, the Vidiians' needs were met illicitly by local governments and criminal syndicates who occasionally needed specific individuals or groups of people to disappear. In return, the Sodality provided their suppliers with a host of advanced medicines researched in their ongoing struggle against the Phage.

Nellit continued to record Warlord Jebrosk's family and retainers marching reluctantly up the transparent gangway tube and into the hold of the Vidiian ship.

Lar'ragos said quietly, "Jebrosk and the other warlords regularly sell their captured enemies to the Vidiians. They gave *us* the idea. When the other leaders see this recording, they'll know exactly how serious the Hekosian Empire is about annexing the Principalities. This one recording will keep us from having to conduct hundreds of raids, and will ultimately save lives, Nellit."

Nellit switched the recorder off after the last of the prisoners, a woman and her adolescent daughter, were wrestled through the airlock after attempting an ill-fated last-second escape. He gave the subahdar an icy glare, "I'm going to have to take your word on that, boss." He opened the casing on the holocam, then removed the recording disk and handed it to Lar'ragos. "Last I checked, I was a soldier, not a slaver and certainly not a murderer." Nellit started back towards the Hekosian navy frigate moored on the opposite side of the station. "Tell me, Pava... which one are you?"

Lar'ragos remained silent and merely watched as the Vidiian transport departed the station and slowly navigated the outpost's bustling traffic pattern.

Nellit's damning query rang in his ears long after the younger man had gone.

"Tell me, Pava... which one are you?"

"Which one are you?"

Nellit's voice carried across the centuries to echo in Pava's mind as he slowly drifted back towards consciousness in *Gibraltar*'s Sickbay.

Sickbay, USS *Gibraltar*, in geosynchronous orbit of Pierosh II.

By the time the captain had entered the surgical suite, the civilian rescued from the surface was already beneath the raised clamshell support frame on the diagnostic table. The EMH conducted a thorough examination of the patient as Tailee finished treating his injuries.

Sandhurst stood to the side quietly until Tailee approached to make her initial report. "His injuries weren't terribly severe when we got him aboard, Captain. A few broken ribs, a dislocated shoulder, some internal bleeding due to blunt force trauma, but nothing immediately life threatening. Overall, he should be in stable condition based strictly on the physical injuries he received."

Sandhurst cocked his head thoughtfully. "I hear a 'but' coming..."

Tailee nodded. "Indeed, sir. His autonomic functions are all failing. Neural activity is decreasing, his blood pressure is dropping, and respiration is becoming labored. He seems to be heading towards a complete systemic collapse." She pointed to what appeared to be a cross-section diagram of a human cell on the wall mounted viewer. "His body's biochemistry is off. He's producing hormones, neurotransmitters, and enzymes in the wrong quantities." She stared at the cellular scan for a moment, then sighed. "Damned if I know what's wrong with him."

The captain quirked an eyebrow. "Educated guess?"

She shook her head in response and gestured in the direction of the EMH. "Offhand I'd say something to do with that vortex down there and whatever energies it unleashed. His symptoms aren't consistent with radiation poisoning *per se*, but we'll just have to wait until the doctor completes his examination." She smiled apologetically. "This could take a while, sir."

"I see. Thanks for the update, Doc. Let me know when you have some more answers." Sandhurst headed for the door and passed into the main Sickbay ward near where Lar'ragos lay atop a biobed. He paused to examine his unconscious friend, whose eyes moved rapidly back and forth beneath his eyelids as his fingers twitched slightly.

The medical staff hadn't yet been able to explain why Lar'ragos remained comatose, but so far, he showed no signs of any neurological damage. Their best assessment was that he would wake up when he was good and ready. Sandhurst desperately hoped they were correct.

He turned to see one of the nursing staff fetching newly awakened Ensign Shanthi a glass of water. He wandered over as he took note of the pain etched into the younger man's face. "Welcome back, Ensign." Shanthi, upon seeing him, did an admirable job of trying to sit up straighter in his bed. Sandhurst motioned for him to

relax. "At ease, Mister Shanthi." He pulled a stool over and took a seat. "I'm Donald Sandhurst, captain of the *Gibraltar*."

Shanthi drank the water eagerly then set the empty glass aside. "This is Lieutenant Juneau's ship, isn't it, sir?"

"Correct."

"Thank you for the timely rescue, Captain." Shanthi craned his neck as he looked around Sickbay before he returned his attention to Sandhurst. "My crewmates?"

Sandhurst held his gaze, determined to deliver the bad news stolidly. "Juneau and Chief Osterlund also survived. I'm sorry to say that Petty Officer Shaver did not."

Shanthi's face crumbled and became mask of agony so palpable that it managed to evoke empathy from even Sandhurst's worn heartstrings. It was immediately obvious to the captain that the men had been much more than mere shipmates. It dawned on the captain that as a recent academy graduate, this young man had not yet known the bitter taste of war, the loss of friends and lovers and comrades in the line of duty. For Shanthi, this was likely his first experience with such profound personal tragedy. At a loss for words, Sandhurst merely held Shanthi's hand as the man wept.

Pierosh II. Meteorological Research Station Aristotle.

Liana Ramirez slipped past the cargo crates that now littered the underground lab, sidestepping a bank of analysis equipment manned by one of Lt. Commander Plazzi's science technicians. She found the older man at the large bay windows, a padd in one hand and a steaming cup of coffee from the portable replicator they had brought down in the other. "How goes it, Elisto?" Ramirez knew the man practically recoiled at being addressed by his rank. He had been recalled to duty during the war after a sixteen-year absence from the service, and now thought of himself as a civilian merely playing the part of a Starfleet officer.

Plazzi turned and gave her a wary smile. "Subspace physics isn't really my forte, Commander, but I'm managing." He tapped his finger on the transparent aluminum partition as he marveled at the oddity that lay before them. "What worries me is that, technically speaking, this shouldn't still be here."

Her gaze fixed on the flickering, churning rift as she asked, "How so?"

"The old aphorism that nature abhors a vacuum applies here, sir. This is an active, stable subspace portal. They simply don't occur in nature very often, and when they do, they're extremely short lived."

"Meaning?"

Plazzi pointed to the two shattered subspace field coils that bracketed the rift's open maw. "It appears to have been opened at this end. For what reasons, we still don't have a clue. Regardless, the laws of the physical universe would naturally work to close such a wormhole immediately, especially in the absence of an energy source employed to hold it open." He waved an arm towards the wrecked laboratory surrounding them. "The initial pulse destroyed everything here, Commander."

Ramirez digested that slowly. Her eyes widened after a moment as she concluded, "Something's holding it open from the other end."

He nodded somberly. "That'd be my guess."

Their mutual discomfort with that idea was interrupted by an energetic voice from behind them. "Could you use another hand, Commander?"

Ramirez and Plazzi turned simultaneously to see Juneau in full away team regalia. She stood at attention with a broad smile on her face.

The exec frowned. "Juneau, I thought you were still under sedation in Sickbay?"

Juneau shook her head as her smile grew even wider. "Not any longer, sir. The EMH discharged me an hour ago and confirmed my readiness to return to duty."

Ramirez didn't look completely convinced but relented under the day's onslaught of unusual circumstances. "Very well. It's good to have you back, Olivia. You gave us quite the scare when your runabout disappeared."

Her smile evaporated and Juneau took on a more subdued manner. "I'm glad to be back, Commander. I'm just sorry my first time in the center seat ended the way it did."

Memories of the smoldering, listing bridge of *Phoenix* flashed through her mind and Ramirez muttered, "I know the feeling." She glanced at Plazzi. "Elisto, any objections to some more help?"

He scratched his beard idly and the science officer grinned. "None whatsoever. Let me get you set up here, Lieutenant..."

Ramirez headed out and left the lab as she made her way towards the surface to check in with Master Chief Tark on the ongoing forensic examination of the facility.

The weapons were unfamiliar to him, but they possessed all the necessary accoutrements: handle, trigger, emitter port. Point-and-shoot.

Ahmet Kutav hefted the bulky rifle as he admired the weight of the thing. So many advanced personal weapons systems had become so light that, from a psychological standpoint, it felt like carrying a child's toy into battle. These guns were solid, with a density that suggested pure carnage at the receiving end of the weapon's ire.

Kutav looked to his surviving men. They, too, were in the process of arming themselves for the coming battle. He took some comfort in the fact that if he should die today, in the company of his men and in the execution of such a bold plan, it would be a far better death than being blasted out of existence by his own hand.

The *ahmet* still had no idea who they were working for, or what the man's ultimate goals were. He had not even given them a name, only a title. He instructed that if addressed, they should call him Baron. From what little Kutav had seen of the man's ship, it was unlike any craft he'd ever been aboard. The various rooms and corridors were laid out in an irrational fashion, and he had not seen one airlock, or a single pressure door. The vessel's interior was decorated in a plethora of eclectic antiquities, many of which Kutav was unable to identify despite possessing more than a passing knowledge with the various riches of past ages. It felt more like being inside of an ancient castle than a spacecraft, but the strangeness of his surroundings was not Kutav's greatest concern at the moment.

Within minutes he and the sixteen other survivors from *Sethret* would board and seize a Federation starship. Kutav's arguments that such a small party could not hope to capture such a well-defended vessel had fallen on deaf ears. The Baron had merely stated that he would follow them aboard and could effortlessly gain access to their internal defenses and operating systems. Kutav hoped the man's words were more than idle boasting, for they would soon be put to the test.

Chapter 10

USS Sovereign,

En route from Sector 001 to the Pierosh star system, Warp 9.97.

Temporal Investigations special agent and rapid response team leader Maya Ixis sat uncomfortably in the seat to the captain's immediate right. She disliked being anchored to the bridge, and although she realized the logic behind having her at the captain's disposal, she would have rather been training with her team on the holodeck in preparation for whatever awaited them on Pierosh II.

Captain Rixx, the Bolian starship commander, sat ramrod straight in his chair as he read the latest briefs from *Gibraltar*. "It appears the on-scene personnel are doing a solid job of reconnoitering the situation," he assessed.

Ixis looked sidelong at the man, her expression carefully neutral. "Unfortunately, Captain, adequate isn't even close to sufficient under the circumstances." She modulated her tone to try and sound less confrontational, though Rixx gave no sign of being offended. "I'm sure they're doing the best they can, but *Gibraltar* is an outdated escort ship with few scientific resources. If the situation on Pierosh II worsens, and I think that likely, they're going to be in over their heads very quickly."

Rixx set down his padd and focused his eerily serene gaze on the younger Efrosian woman. "I sincerely hope you are wrong, Agent Ixis. Even at maximum speed it will be another six days before we reach that system. Whatever is unfolding there may well have come to fruition before our arrival." He turned back to the main viewscreen. "They are Starfleet. They will do their duty."

Ixis exercised restraint and held her tongue. She was still certain that an inexperienced crew thrust into this scenario could only spell disaster. Looks as though we'll find out soon enough, she reflected darkly.

Observation Lounge, Deck 2, USS *Gibraltar*, In geosynchronous orbit of Pierosh II.

Sandhurst had again assembled the senior staff in the briefing room. He hoped to pool his department heads' skills and knowledge to get a clearer picture of what had happened at Pierosh II, and who or what might be responsible. Ramirez, Plazzi and Ashok had been recalled from the surface to attend, while the newly awakened Juneau had volunteered to stay behind and oversee the remaining surface teams.

The captain stared at the image on the briefing room's wall screen, a head shot of the scientist currently residing in Sickbay, one Dr. Stephen Benghazi. The image had been taken some five years earlier, and showed the countenance of a man who could perhaps be best described as driven. His receding gray hair was tied in a short ponytail, and his deeply set pale green eyes seemed to burn with an unnamed obsession.

As he craned his neck to look down the table at Plazzi, Sandhurst asked, "So what do we know about him, Elisto?"

Plazzi glanced up from the padd containing Benghazi's biography. "To sum it up briefly, sir, he's believed to have been born circa 2309 on the Crevanus colony. He was recovered as an orphaned survivor of the Tholian attack on that planet a year later, and no other family members could be located. Benghazi was adopted by a family on Alpha Centauri and was raised there. He apparently demonstrated an early aptitude for science and mathematics." Elisto scrolled through the text as he mined only the most important bullet points from the story of the man's life and accomplishments. "Graduated from Atramis University on Alpha Centauri and pursued his graduate and doctoral work at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology on Earth, earning dual doctorates in quantum mechanics and applied dimensional theory in 2341."

The science officer quirked an eyebrow as he read. "Well, now this is interesting... it says here that he was later employed by the Daystrom Institute as a researcher into parallel dimensional theory. Eventually he transferred to the Vulcan Science Academy, where he taught for three years, until being recruited by the Starfleet Corps of Engineers to look into the viability of resurrecting the 23rd century Transwarp Propulsion Program. Apparently, the SCE later shut down that line of research after the underlying theory once again proved impractical."

Plazzi briefly scanned the remaining text and set the padd down on the table. "He spent the next few decades bouncing from one project to another, serving largely in an administrative capacity while submitting over a dozen separate requests to the Federation Science Council for the authorization and resources to conduct research into 'subspace inter-dimensional tunneling.'"

Sandhurst grunted sourly. "Looks as if he did an end run around the Science Council to put together his little experiment here." He shook his head as he wondered aloud, "Am I the only one who thinks it's a bit strange for someone whose background is in astrophysics and quantum mechanics to be heading up a meteorological survey?"

"It's not terribly unusual, sir," Plazzi replied. "It would appear that Dr. Benghazi was hired on, ostensibly, for his administrative experience in supervising scientific projects. His leadership credentials are as impressive as his academic ones." The science officer directed a mischievous smile at Sandhurst. "It's no stranger than an engineer by trade captaining a starship."

The captain smirked and inclined his head as he conceded the point. “So, it appears we have a group of rogue Federation scientists hiding out here on Pierosh II, conducting unsanctioned research into breaching the walls between dimensions.” He looked to the assembled officers. “Everyone onboard with that?”

The others appeared to accept the premise, and Sandhurst leaned back in his chair. “I realize that this probably goes without saying, but I’m going to mention it anyway. That heat you’re feeling is the glare of the spotlight on us, and it’s going to be there for the duration of our time at this planet. Starfleet Command, the Science Council, and even Temporal Investigations are all clamoring for updates, and you can bet they’ll be scrutinizing every one of our reports with the proverbial microscope.”

Ramirez frowned, and the others didn’t appear any happier than she at this news.

The captain continued, “My point is that we need to make sure everything we send up the chain of command is as accurate as we can make it. Conjecture is fine on this end, but where your reports are concerned stick to what you can prove. Admirals, agency directors and ambassadors may well be making decisions that will affect a great many people based on our findings. So, check your figures, and make damned sure you can back up your hypotheses before filing your respective reports with Commander Ramirez and me.” He scanned the dour faces of his subordinates and then favored them with an ironic smile, “No pressure, though.”

His attempt at humor fell flat, so he looked to Taiee. “Doc, what’s Benghazi’s condition?”

Taiee was to-the-point. “He’s dying, sir.”

The captain’s eyes narrowed in frustration. “I take it there’s nothing that can be done for him?”

“No, sir. The EMH finally pinpointed the problem. It appears his DNA has been irrevocably warped somehow, likely a result of the energies accompanying the pulse that devastated the research station.” Taiee appeared disappointed, but her professional detachment held firm. “We attempted a genetic tissue graft from a few undamaged cell nuclei we found in his bone marrow, but it didn’t take. The damage appears to be too extensive. For now, all we can do is make him more comfortable until he dies.”

“Can we interrogate him?” This from Ramirez, who had remained silent until now.

Taiee cocked her head thoughtfully. “We’ve placed him in an induced coma for the time being. I suppose we could wake him, at this point with a terminal diagnosis it really wouldn’t make any difference. His neurographic scan didn’t indicate any serious neural degradation so far, so it’s possible he might be coherent enough to answer questions.”

Sandhurst nodded favorably. "Okay, Ramirez and Taiee, I want you to oversee waking him and getting what information we c—" The captain was drowned out in mid-sentence by the wail of an alarm.

"Intruder alert," the computer announced. "Deck 1, main bridge."

Main Bridge, *USS Gibraltar*, in geo-synchronous orbit of Pierosh II.

Petty Officer 1st Class Brazeal manned the aft auxiliary control station, which had been configured as a science console to watch for anomalous energy readings from the surface of the planet. What at first sounded vaguely like a malfunctioning air circulation pump grew into a bizarre cacophony; a pulsing, grinding screech that filled the bridge with discordant noise. Brazeal winced and covered his ears, then watched incredulously as he witnessed a black, two-dimensional rectangle appear to rise from the deck.

A burly, emerald-complexioned Orion stepped through this window onto nothingness. Without warning or preamble, he raised a compact and lethal looking rifle and stitched a line of smoking holes through the back of the command chair. As the unfortunate occupant of that chair, Ensign Qawasimi's chest exploded outward to spray the bridge well with gore as the young man toppled from the center seat and thudded lifelessly to the deck.

Ensign Browder at Operations had been trying to locate the source of the sound and was unaware anything was amiss until he was showered with bits of the duty watch officer. Instinctively he grabbed the phaser positioned beneath his console and pivoted in his chair to find a gang of heavily armed Orions surging onto the bridge. He raised the phaser and got off a glancing stun shot at one of the attackers before another of the Orions shredded both Browder and his Ops board with a sustained burst of plasma-jacketed slugs from his assault rifle.

The bridge devolved into a frenzied storm of action. Some officers and crew dove for cover as others tried valiantly to resist the sudden onslaught. Brett Lightner hit the deck as rounds hissed past his head and perforated the main viewscreen. He rolled under the console and fumbled for the phaser housed there as his mind reeled with the surreal speed of the attack. He attempted to increase the weapon's power setting with trembling hands, someone grabbed hold of his lower leg and dragged him out from under the station. Lightner flailed with the phaser, unable to even depress the trigger before he was struck full in the face with the muzzle of an Orion's rifle that crushed his nose and shattered the orbital socket of his right eye.

Security Specialist Weatherly who manned the Tactical station had the presence of mind to initiate an emergency lockout of main computer functions on the bridge. He realized that he didn't have time to reach for his weapon, and instead

launched himself towards the nearest Orion. Weatherly delivered a solid elbow strike to the pirate's head that sent the attacker staggering against the bridge's safety railing.

As Weatherly stooped to collect the Orion's dropped rifle, he was unprepared for the sensation of Kutav's wicked dueling blade as it sank into his back. Weatherly reflexively dropped the gun as his arms flailed beyond their natural ranges of motion and tried desperately to reach the killing implement lodged deep in his flesh. Kutav grabbed him roughly about the head with a muscular arm and pulled the knife from Weatherly's back with his free hand. The ahmet yanked the young man's head to one side and drew the blade across Weatherly's throat, which ended their struggle in a pulsing cascade of the human's lifeblood.

Amidst the chaos, Brazeal tapped his compin and announced an intruder alert which initiated a computer driven ship-wide alarm. He then sprinted for the nearest turbolift and actually made it into the lift car and announced his destination. Just as the doors began to close, one of the Orions tossed a plasma grenade into the lift that landed with a soft clunk on the carpet and rolled to a stop against Brazeal's feet. He was immolated in his own self-contained crematorium *en route* to Deck 4.

The fight was brief, yet bloody and culminated in five dead bridge crew and three more wounded. The Orions suffered only two of their number briefly dazed from the crew's frantic defensive measures. Those Starfleet personnel captured in the attack were moved to the front of the bridge, forced to lay prone on the deck with their heads toward the now inoperative viewscreen. Two Orions stood over them and swept back and forth with their rifles, prepared to bring lethal force to bear on any unauthorized movement.

The way having been cleared, the Baron stepped out of the dark portal as the doorway vanished behind him. He moved immediately to the engineering console on the upper level as he reached into the folds of his cloak to produce the yellow, tear-drop shaped crystal.

Kutav approached and gestured to the darkened consoles throughout the bridge. "We have been locked out, Baron. What are your instructions?"

The Baron appeared calm and collected as he waved the crystal over the engineering board which inexplicably came to life. The display screens began to flicker through a litany of shipboard schematics so quickly that Kutav had to look away. The Baron rapidly set about disabling *Gibraltar*'s internal security systems. While he worked, he spared Kutav an irritated glance and growled, "Prepare yourself and ten of your men to be transported into main engineering. Take that section but make certain to keep collateral damage at an absolute minimum."

Kutav gave the Baron a skeptical look, then held up the sinister looking firearm he had provided them. "Your weapons have no stun setting. How do you suggest we do that?"

The Baron shrugged, already deeply engrossed in *Gibraltar's* schematics. "Fight them hand-to-hand if needs be, but if you damage the engineering systems I'll have your head, and those of your men."

Kutav resisted the urge to shoot his mysterious benefactor then and there. He surmised that the Baron was clever enough to have taken precautions to prevent such an obvious act of betrayal. He turned and barked out orders to his men, who scrambled to collect the Starfleet phasers scattered about the compartment.

After he gathered nine of his men around him, Kutav checked the setting on his phaser to ensure that it was on heavy stun. The Baron navigated his way through the ship's systems until he located the command processor modules responsible for transporter control. He initiated a site-to-site transporter lock and beamed Kutav's party into the ship's engine room.

The Baron turned his attention next to subduing the remainder of the ship's crew before they had a chance to interfere with his plans.

Sandhurst and the others leapt to their feet as the intruder alert sounded. The captain urgently prompted, "Computer, display visual recorder, main bridge!"

The viewscreen shifted from the picture of Dr. Benghazi to an image of the ship's badly mauled bridge. The bodies of fellow crew littered the floor while heavily armed Orion pirates milled about the command center. Sandhurst was stunned, unable to grasp for the first few seconds how this had happened. The sight of dead crew finally spurred him to action. "Computer, raise shields."

As the computer acknowledged the captain's order, Ramirez reacted from years of security training. She instructed, "Computer, release anesthizine gas on Deck 1, main bridge. Seventy parts per million concentration."

The computer's feminine voice responded, "Unable to comply. Access to internal security subroutines has been restricted."

Undeterred, she tried another avenue. "Computer, erect level ten containment fields around all persons on the main bridge."

Again, the computer proved incapable of fulfilling the command. Ramirez swore formidably in Klingon as Sandhurst shot her a worried look, his expression tight with anger "Commander, take a security team and get up there. Jefferies tube alpha-three will take you right up into the ready room. You can stage from there."

Without taking the time to acknowledge the order, Ramirez sprinted out of the room as she tapped her combadge and directed a security team to join her on Deck 2.

Sandhurst moved to the viewer and issued orders as he reconfigured the wall display into a ship's systems control panel. "Taiee, get to Sickbay and prepare for incoming casualties. Plazzi, get down to the auxiliary control room and reroute

command functions to that location.” The two officers rushed out as Ashok moved to the captain’s side. “Lieutenant, it looks as if they’re trying to hack into our control systems. You and I need to erect an adaptive firewall to prevent that, at least until Ramirez and her team can take back the bridge.”

“Aye, sir.” The large man set to work and tapped away at the screen as he moved to assist Sandhurst in blocking the enemy’s infiltration into their computers.

The computer’s voice issued forth again, and again it was the bearer of bad tidings. “Intruder alert,” it declared in its irritatingly calm tone, “Deck 15, main engineering.”

Chapter 11

Observation Lounge, Deck 2 - USS *Gibraltar*, in geosynchronous orbit of Pierosh II.

Cascading lines of datacode descended across the display, graphic representations of the struggle being waged for control of Gibraltar's main computer. Sandhurst fought mightily and used every trick he knew to erect successive barriers of defense in the face of this technological onslaught.

In the wake of repeated Borg attacks on the Federation, Starfleet's computer encryptions had grown more formidable by several orders of magnitude in less than a decade. All those advances proved unable to stop the invasive program that plowed through layer after layer of cyber-barricades as if they didn't exist. Sandhurst was forced to choose between systems, gambling on what would best help Ramirez and her team regain control of the bridge. He called to Ashok as the first hints of desperation crept into his voice. "Lieutenant, I'm about thirty seconds from losing subspace communications. I need you send out a message that will alert both Starfleet Command and our away team to our situation."

"Aye, sir."

His fingers worked furiously as Sandhurst struggled to compartmentalize and isolate those systems already compromised by the invasive programming. If he could just hold out a little longer... He broke stride just long enough to tap his combadge. "Sandhurst to Ramirez. This isn't going well. Whatever you're going to do, do it quickly."

He took the absence of a reply as an ominous sign. The captain addressed the chief engineer once again.

"Ashok, when you're done sending the message, ready our log buoy for launch."

The Bolian's only response was an unreadable grunt.

Pierosh II, Meteorological Research Station Aristotle.

Olivia Juneau stood and observed the portal as her mind churned with helpless frustration. A brief communiqué from Ashok had announced that Gibraltar was under attack by an unknown foe, and that Juneau should prepare the surface team for an assault should the ship and crew be overcome.

She had coordinated her efforts with Master Chief Tark, and the two had managed to assemble a layered defense of the facility. The chronometric radiation generated by the portal would prevent the enemy from beaming into their midst and

would force any aggressors to fight their way into the basement complex from the surface.

Tark watched Juneau warily as he finalized his arrangements for an ambush of any would-be enemy near the main entrance to the facility. From what little interaction he'd had with the junior lieutenant prior to this mission, Tark knew her to be immature, indecisive, and a poor leader with sub-standard interpersonal skills. None of those were accurate descriptions of the woman who now stood before him. In the face of a dire situation, she had proven calm, collected, and had displayed a grasp of small unit combat tactics that far surpassed anything she might have learned in Starfleet Academy. Perhaps her time away from the ship had served her in particularly good stead, but Tark was still suspicious.

At the moment he had nothing but simple misgivings, and there was no plausible way to confront a superior for being too professional. In the face of a possible attack from orbit, the master chief had other more pressing issues with which to deal. But he would be watching...

Ready Room, Deck 1 - *USS Gibraltar*.

Liana Ramirez crouched on the floor of the ready room. She knelt over a large duffel bag filled with photon grenades. With her were Petty Officer 2nd Class Sainhra Dunleavy and four others from the security division. There was no time to plan a stealthy entry onto the bridge, as she was sure the enemy were equipped with sensor devices that would soon alert them to the security team's presence. Ramirez quickly outlined her assault plan to the others in a subdued whisper as she drew imaginary diagrams in the air with her finger to illustrate how they would breach the bridge.

Each team member took a photon grenade in one hand, primed it for a stun discharge, and hefted their compact Type-III 'pug' style phaser rifles. Ramirez activated the door, and as it swooshed open, she and the others lobbed their grenades onto the bridge. They detonated in quick succession, bathing the command center in overlapping fields of concussive stun energy.

Ramirez entered first to take aim at a staggering Orion who had braced himself against the command chair to keep from toppling over. The exec was impressed, the charge on the grenades should have been sufficient to render a Vulcan sehlat unconscious, yet this man was still on his feet. Her heavy stun beam caught him mid-torso, and she drew it up his body, which launched him up and over the safety railing and splayed him across an auxiliary console on the upper deck. Dazed and reeling, the other Orions were in no condition to offer much resistance, and the security team made short work of them with precise blasts of phaser energy.

As she turned to confirm her section of the bridge was clear and secure, Ramirez unexpectedly came face to face with the man they had recovered from the surface, Dr. Stephen Benghazi. He stood silently at the engineering console, apparently unaffected by the stun grenades. The man turned an agitated expression on her as he waved some manner of yellow crystal above the workstation. She raised her rifle at him. "Doctor, don't move."

The crystal flashed brightly in response, and the status-ready light on Ramirez's rifle winked out. She depressed the trigger which elicited only a hollow click from the weapon. As she hefted the rifle, she thought to herself that the situation felt strangely familiar. Ramirez swung the weapon butt-first at the cloak-draped figure in front of her.

The older man blocked her strike with fluid ease as he swept down with his left arm to redirect the momentum of Ramirez's makeshift club. He raised the crystal in his other hand, and a pencil-thin beam of red light lanced from the facets of the device. The beam sliced cleanly through Ramirez's left arm before piercing the neck of Security Specialist Rulgt who was standing behind her in the lower bridge well. Momentarily stunned, Ramirez heard Rulgt collapse to the floor, gurgling frantically.

Dunleavy vaulted the safety railing and drove her feet into the man's midsection. He was knocked against the console, but as she regained her footing and moved to strike him, he brought his hands up to parry her blows and Dunleavy ended up grappling furiously with him.

Her left arm now numb and hanging uselessly at her side, Ramirez used Dunleavy's distraction to her advantage. She side-stepped to her right and brought the rifle up one-handed to club her attacker across the temple with it as the man struggled with the security specialist. He grunted as much in surprise as pain, and replied by delivering a palm-heel strike that caught the petty officer squarely in the face and snapped Dunleavy's head back. As she stumbled backwards into the railing, he brought the same hand in close to his chest, and then lashed out with it to land a vicious backhand to the side of Ramirez's head that sent the commander crashing to the deck.

The other security personnel moved to encircle the deceptively aged looking man, extremely conscious of the fact that while he was obviously armed, their phasers had been effectively neutralized. Apparently eager to avoid further unpleasantness, he turned and raised the crystal, which opened a dark doorway in the air at the back of the bridge.

The man had nearly reached the portal when the muzzle of the Orion rifle roared. The plasma jacketed bullet slammed into the man's left shoulder blade and spun him around in an almost graceful pirouette. The yellow crystal tumbled to the deck as it slipped from his slackening grip. He sank to his knees, his lips moving soundlessly for the briefest moment before he pitched forward face first onto the floor. The portal collapsed silently as the crystal dimmed.

His lower face awash in blood and his right eye swollen completely shut, Brett Lightner sagged against the shattered console behind him and eased the cumbersome assault rifle to the floor. He thought idly that it should have proved a more difficult shot as he slid slowly towards the deck. As he fought to remain conscious Lightner decided that his ambiguity towards his current posting might just be coming to an end.

Main Engineering, Deck 15 - *USS Gibraltar*.

“Fall back! Fall back!”

Phaser beams sliced through the air around him as ahmet Kutav backed out of the engine room as he laid down suppressive fire while trying desperately to herd the five remaining stragglers from his assault squad to someplace safer. The attack on Engineering had been an abysmal failure, with many of his team cut down in the first moments by pre-positioned security personnel who had already been alerted to the presence of intruders onboard.

As he moved into the corridor, the air around him sizzled with phaser pulses crisscrossing the intersection. A discharge that was most certainly not set to stun singed his hair and blistered his face as it flashed past. He recoiled as the nearest of his men was vaporized where he stood. Kutav flung himself flat against the wall and tossed a plasma grenade in the direction of the heaviest fire. The explosion buffeted him as he sought escape through a maintenance access hatch and dragged one of his men through the ridiculously tight aperture with him.

As they scrambled through the confusing warren of interconnecting crawlways, Kutav reflected that these men and women were obviously not the preening, egotistical Starfleeters of his youth. These were the hardened veterans of the most destructive war the quadrant had ever seen. More than ever he now regretted the fool’s pact he’d made with the Baron. He feared he would be hunted down like an animal and killed here in the dark bowels of a Federation starship. It was truly not the preferred fate of a merchant prince of Rigel; not a death worthy of an Orion pirate.

The attack on Gibraltar’s systems had ended. They had been only minutes away from losing life-support, and the magnetic fields encasing the ship’s anti-matter stores had begun to fluctuate troublingly. Communications were out, internal defensive systems were offline, and both shields and weapons were inoperative.

A runner from the security detail had arrived to inform Sandhurst and Ashok that the bridge had been stormed and secured, and security teams were chasing down

the remaining Orions who had been repulsed in Engineering. The prisoners were on their way to the brig. Casualties were significant, and the wounded were being moved to Sickbay.

Captain Sandhurst backed away from the reconfigured viewer and leaned against the table as his adrenaline surge abated and his legs threatened to give way. He offered a nod to the Bolian engineer. "Good work, Lieutenant."

Ashok gave him an impenetrable look. After a long moment, the large man was moved to speak. "How did you manage to keep ahead of that viral cascade, sir?"

Sandhurst stood and tugged at his uniform jacket while he worked to compose himself. "I didn't, Lieutenant. All I managed were some tricks with smoke and mirrors to alter the pathways along which the virus was attacking. We nearly lost anti-matter containment as a result; despite the fact it wasn't originally one of the targeted systems."

Ashok remained unconvinced. "You saved the ship." It sounded more like an accusation than a compliment.

Sandhurst made for the exit and shook his head. "No, Mister Ashok. Ramirez and her team saved the ship. We just bought them some time." He paused at the threshold. "Get down to auxiliary control. I'll need you and Commander Plazzi to restore the computer from the protected backups in the core."

Strangely reticent, Ashok murmured, "Aye, sir," and fell into step behind his captain.

The creature watched and waited, safely ensconced in the gravity well of the nearly lifeless planet. It had regained much of the strength sapped from it by the subspace convulsions, and though it was inexorably anchored to the world below it had begun to stretch out with its senses again to study the universe that surrounded it.

It had been observing the orbiting starship, but now the presence of The One prevented it from considering the vessel available prey. It turned its gaze inward towards the planet, sensing foreign life there that could perhaps meet its immediate needs. It gathered itself together and descended.

Taiee estimated the ambient noise level in Sickbay was hovering at about seventy decibels. The screams and moans of the wounded competed with shouted instructions from the medical staff who endeavored to save them. Nurses and medical technicians raced between biobeds, suturing wounds, transfusing fluids, and dispensing a host of analgesics and antibiotics to the injured.

The computer attack on the ship had rendered the two medical holograms inoperative, and Taiee found herself forced to cope without their invaluable aid. She was no stranger to triage and combat medicine, but making life and death decisions about people with whom she served never got any easier. She stepped away from the bed containing Engineering Specialist Moira Mattis, a young woman to whom Taiee had become both close friend and confidant in recent weeks. But Moira was beyond her help, the victim of savage burns from a plasma grenade detonation just outside the engine room. Taiee would grieve for her friend later and curse her own inability to treat Moira's wounds, but now was the time for cold, clinical decisiveness.

Sandhurst waded into the chaos as he followed two crew carrying Ensign Qawasimi's body into Sickbay on a litter. He steeled himself against the sight of his people, broken and bleeding and beyond his help. He navigated his way through the jostling crowd of medical staff but stopped short at the sight of Dr. Benghazi resting peacefully atop an examination bed within one of Sickbay's isolation wards. Sandhurst grabbed a nearby engineering crewman by the arm and spun him around as he inquired briskly, "I was told Dr. Benghazi participated in the attack on the bridge?"

The young man, nearly overwrought with emotion at the loss of a comrade, strove to pull himself together long enough to answer the captain. "Sir, not that man." He pointed to a figure currently lying on a bed flanked by two armed guards. "The person you want is there."

Sandhurst made a beeline for the biobed, his mind at first refusing to believe the image being relayed from his eyes. The gray-haired figure on the bed was a nearly identical twin to Benghazi. He lacked only the doctor's receding hairline and a few of the character lines around the man's eyes.

A med-tech studied the readings on a medical tricorder as he passed the sensor wand over the mysterious doppelganger's body.

"A Changeling?" were the first words out of Sandhurst's mouth.

The tech frowned as he returned the sensor device to its housing within the tricorder. "No, sir. We've already drawn and analyzed his blood. He's not human, but he's no shapeshifter."

Sandhurst noticed the hastily applied pressure dressing on the man's through-and-through bullet wound, now soaked dark crimson. "What species?"

"I couldn't tell you, Captain. His biology doesn't match anything in our database." The med-tech pointed to a viewer extending down from the ceiling which displayed an internal scan of the man's torso. "He's got some pretty exotic organ structures, and his blood chemistry is especially unique." The man looked perplexed. "He's got a binary cardiovascular system, and the computer can't make heads or tails of his DNA sequencing."

The captain studied the man briefly as his mind raced to try and place this new piece of the puzzle. He eyed the man's biometric readouts on the bed's headboard display and took note of the fluctuating readings. "What's his condition?"

"Not good." The tech swept a dermal regenerator over the man's wound, but stopped after the device trilled a warning klaxon. He replaced the instrument on the equipment tray beside the bed and gave Sandhurst a pained expression. "I'm sorry, sir. The damage is too extensive for this gear." He looked past the captain to where Taiee was fighting to revive a crewmember who had slipped into cardiac arrest. "Hopefully the lieutenant can do more to help him."

The words were barely out of the young man's mouth when Sandhurst moved away and strode over to stand beside Taiee. Her medical smock streaked with the mingled hues of blood from multiple species, Taiee refused to spare the captain even the quickest glance as she directed yet another pulse from the cardio-stimulator into her patient's chest. "What do you need, sir?"

"The prisoner is dying, Lieutenant. I need you to stabilize him."

Her reply was voiced more tolerantly than even she had expected. "I'm busy at the moment, sir, but I'll certainly take a look at him as soon as we get more of our people triaged."

Sandhurst's voice lowered and took on a steely quality that Taiee hadn't heard before. "This man might hold the answers to what's been happening here. He might know why we were attacked, and if more of the same are forthcoming."

Taiee increased the joules output on the cardio-stimulator and gave the woman on the bed a jolt sufficient to make her whole-body shudder. "So, you want me to cease my efforts to revive this person so I can treat one of the men responsible for her injuries?"

His reply seemed to freeze the air in their vicinity. "Yes."

In response, Taiee tossed the stimulator noisily onto the equipment tray and shouldered past Sandhurst to head for the Baron's bedside. "Fine. I'm sure you'll do me the honor of calling time of death for Crewman Eravine, Captain."

Sandhurst watched her go, then forced himself to look into the slackened face of the woman on the examination table. He surprised himself when his voice failed to crack with the words, "Of course, Doc..."

Chapter 12

Ahmet Kutav punched the control interface in aggravation but accomplished little more than bruising his fist. He and his last remaining crewman, Mutwen, had scrambled to stay ahead of the security teams hunting them throughout the Jefferies tubes on Deck 12. Kutav's attempt to access the ship's systems via an LCARS panel in the tube junction had proven futile; he had never possessed whichever gene regulated technical savvy. Now they were simply stalling for time, attempting to delay their inevitable capture by a vengeful ship's crew.

He had been betrayed. First by whatever malignant force had spurred him to attack the Federation starship with *Sethret*, and then by the Baron. The man had obviously overestimated his ability to thwart *Gibraltar*'s defenses. Kutav had wrongly identified the man as being powerful and dangerous, and having been duped by a fool was not improving the *ahmet*'s mood any.

Kutav felt the air shift, the breath of a cool breeze whispering past him. He whirled around and brought up his rifle, only to find himself facing a familiar black portal. It was exactly the type he had used to board the ship in the assault on the bridge. Kutav grabbed Mutwen by the shoulder and rushed towards the now wavering apparition. The two passed through it and into a large, dimly lit compartment.

In the middle of the sizable room stood an octagonal control dais which served as a central focus to a space that appeared more museum than command center. Large, swirling arches of intertwining metal spiraled up from floor to ceiling, encircling the control table like some kind of psychotic rendition of Stonehenge. Exotic looking alien artifacts stood atop pedestals scattered throughout the compartment, bathed in pools of light from above.

A man stood at the improbable looking control station. He was a human male of small stature, clad in what to Kutav's eyes appeared to be some manner of formal human attire from ages past. He had medium length brown hair, parted in the middle, and wore glass-lens spectacles that gave him a strange, anachronistic appearance. The man did not seem the slightest bit surprised at their arrival.

A polite smile took shape on the man's thin lips, and he inclined his head in greeting. "Ahmet Kutav, welcome back. I'm pleased to see you've survived the mission unscathed."

Kutav was flummoxed. "Who are you?" It was meant more as challenge than query, but the Orion was still reeling from recent events, and his own voice sounded damnably tremulous to him.

"I am Parlan," the man answered simply. "I am servant to the Baron, and steward of his vessel in his absence."

Now certain of the man's affiliations, Kutav raised his rifle menacingly. Mutwen followed his lead and also took aim at the man as he moved to flank the thin

human. Kutav raged at Parlan, venting his frustration and loss, “What was that? Were my men and I sent in there *simply to die?*”

Parlan turned to face Kutav fully, unfazed by the *ahmet*’s mounting anger. “Hardly. Your mission proved a resounding success. You are to be congratulated.”

That proved too much for Kutav to take. He rushed the man as he wielded the rifle like a cudgel. A forcefield of some kind repelled Kutav who reeled backwards an instant before he landed his blow. The big Orion staggered clumsily and crashed into a display pedestal as Mutwen opened fire with his assault weapon. The field rippled as ricochets snapped and whizzed throughout the compartment, but Parlan remained otherwise unaffected.

His anger and aggression having come to nothing, Kutav waved off Mutwen as the man began to load a fresh magazine into the smoking rifle. “Enough.” As he pulled himself back to his feet, the *ahmet* looked again to the implacable Parlan. “What now, human? Will you kill us too and finish the job?”

“Nothing of the sort,” Parlan smirked. “Nor should you be unduly grieved by the capture of your crew.” He paused to toggle some switches on the archaic control console. “Thanks to your efforts, the starship will soon be ours to command. Your people will be liberated once we’ve moved to seize it.”

Kutav looked away as he digested this. “Where is the Baron?”

“He too was taken prisoner aboard the starship.”

Kutav’s head snapped around to examine Parlan carefully. “And why do you not seem overly concerned by this turn of events?”

“He is in less danger than you might imagine.” Parlan pulled a small lever on the control dais which opened a doorway leading to a long corridor. “Now, if you’ll come with me, I will provide you with some refreshment and show you to your sleeping arrangements.”

Still unconvinced, Kutav hesitated before following Parlan through the doorway. “If you’re now capable of taking over the starship, what was the point of our attack?”

The lithe man turned back and directed a patient smile at the Orion captain. “You provided a splendid diversion, *ahmet*.”

Ready Room – USS *Gibraltar*, in geo-synchronous orbit of Pierosh II.

Sandhurst sat behind his desk in the small compartment where he conferred with Ramirez, Pazzini, and Ashok. The two department heads sat in the chairs opposite the captain, while the XO occupied the couch along the far wall.

Ramirez’s injured arm was suspended in a sling, but apart from that she seemed none the worse for wear from the brutal fight on the bridge. The final tally

from the Orion assault on *Gibraltar* was eight dead, fifteen others injured, three of them critically. On the other side of the ready room door, engineering teams scrambled to patch the damaged bridge back together.

As he cast a glance across at Ramirez, Sandhurst asked, “Anything from the Orions so far?”

The exec frowned, clearly displeased with the meager results from her interrogations. “Not much, I’m afraid. All we’ve been able to get from them is the fact that they call the Benghazi double ‘the Baron’ and that they staged the assault from his ship.” She shifted uncomfortably, then moved to tighten the strap on her sling. “To be honest, they know at worst they’re looking at a few years in a cushy Federation penal settlement, so we don’t have a lot of leverage to encourage cooperation.”

“And what about Dr. Benghazi?”

Ramirez shook her head. “Unfortunately, Benghazi’s condition has continued to deteriorate. We might have been able to revive him for questioning prior to the attack, but no longer.”

Plazzi sat with his ubiquitous padd in hand. Sandhurst turned to him next. “And what do we have on this ‘Baron?’”

The science officer referenced the padd and recited, “Tailee reports his condition has stabilized, and he’ll likely regain consciousness within the next few hours. We’re still unable to identify his species, but we have determined that he’s not from our time/space continuum.”

Sandhurst sat forward in his chair, his curiosity piqued. “How do we know that, Elisto?”

“The Baron’s quantum resonance doesn’t match that of our universe, Captain.” Plazzi brought his eyes up from the padd to meet the captain’s. “All matter generated in a particular dimension resonates at a specific frequency unique to that universe. He obviously originates from a different reality than the one we know.”

Ramirez looked contemplative as something occurred to her. “If I may, sir?” Sandhurst nodded, and Ramirez continued. “Elisto, do we have readings on the quantum resonance of the Q particles emitted from the portal?”

Plazzi glanced over his shoulder at the exec. “We do.”

“How closely do they match the Baron’s resonance?”

The science officer tapped at his padd, running a quick comparison. He quirked an eyebrow and gave Ramirez an appreciative look. “They match exactly, Commander.”

“So, now we know that our new friend is from wherever the other end of that wormhole leads to.” Sandhurst nodded approvingly. “Okay, we’re making some progress.”

Sandhurst addressed Ashok and queried, “Any luck locating the Baron’s ship?”

The Bolian was his usual stoic self. "No, sir. We've scanned the system repeatedly and have yet to find any indicators of a spacecraft."

Sandhurst addressed both men, "Anything yet on his hand device?"

Ashok spoke first, "Again, no success yet, sir. Scans indicate a complex crystalline structure, but no obvious data storage or computational components. It appears to be a highly advanced piece of technology."

Plazzi added, "Crew had observed him using it both as a computer interface as well as a weapon, but it now seems to be completely inert."

"Alright." Sandhurst sat forward to brace his elbows atop the desk. "I think it's time for me to meet this Baron." To Ramirez he instructed, "Have Tailee alert me when he regains consciousness. Continue your interrogations of the Orion prisoners, Commander. I'd like to know what their relationship is with the Baron."

"Aye, sir."

"Thank you all. You're dismissed."

The others filed out, but Plazzi lagged behind, clearly wanting to address something in private.

Sandhurst looked up. "You need to speak with me, Elisto?"

The older man looked uneasy. "Yes, sir." He took a breath. "Captain, I realize now probably isn't the best time to address this, but it's come to my attention that within a month or two the Federation Security Council will likely repeal the stop-loss order and end the call-up of the Reserves. I just wanted to give you some lead time to find a replacement, as I'll be resigning at that time."

The captain looked surprised. "I'm sorry to hear that. You're a valuable member of this crew, and your years of experience have been enormously helpful."

"Thank you, sir." Plazzi shifted nervously. "I've got a wife, three children, and four grandkids. Before they reactivated my commission during the war, I hadn't been in a uniform in nearly two decades. I feel I've done my duty, and to be perfectly honest, sir, at this stage in my life this job's too damn dangerous." He looked pained and added, "I just can't shake the feeling that if I stay, sooner or later my number's going to come up."

Sandhurst smiled as he stood. "No explanation is necessary. You've more than met your obligations, Elisto. As far as I'm concerned, the Federation owes you and the other Reservists a debt of gratitude." He extended a hand to the scientist. "You give me the word when it's your time, and I'll have you at the nearest starbase so fast you'll think we've broken the Warp 10 barrier."

Plazzi shook his hand gratefully as he returned the smile. "Thank you, Captain."

Royal 51st Forward Combat Hospital Planet Makshar, Trabe Confederacy Delta Quadrant Circa 1994 A.D., Terran Calendar

So much for the privileges of command, Subahdar-Major Lar'ragos thought mordantly as he counted the ceiling tiles for the umpteenth time. Pava's hospital bed was only one among dozens, arranged within flimsy prefab buildings designed more for logistical necessity than the comfort of the patients.

They had been ambushed. It hadn't even been that well organized an attack, really, but it had been effective enough to shoot down one of his insertion team's two heavily armored skimmers. They crashed in the stinking, hellish bogs outside of the capitol city. In the dead of night, the injured survivors had slogged through marshes of chest-high water, cloying mud, razor-grass, and colonies of sting-beetles, all the while locked in a running skirmish with Trabe guard units.

The Trabe themselves were only middling soldiers, vacuous nobility playing at army life. Their Kazon vassals, however, were another matter entirely. The barbarian tribesman had been enslaved by the Trabe generations ago and were used as both an involuntary labor force and as front-line shock troops. The Kazon hunting parties had pursued the Hekosian team relentlessly, and only their amateurish Trabe leadership had allowed Lar'ragos' people to eventually outmaneuver their enemy.

Now Lar'ragos waited. It wouldn't be long until the commandant's internal security apparatchiks arrived to take him into custody. He had disobeyed orders after all. Without prior approval Pava had scrubbed the original insertion plan and changed targets in mid-mission. As a result, he'd led his team right over a previously unknown Trabe firebase.

The airlock door at the far end of the medical ward cycled open, admitting Na-Vizier Nellit. Lar'ragos' old protégé looked unaccountably dashing in his formal dress uniform, his red baldric complementing his dark blue tunic which was adorned with medals, ribbons, and the accouterments of royalty. Nellit scanned the rows of beds, finally setting his gaze on Lar'ragos.

He pulled up a stool to Pava's bedside, then removed his campaign hat and tucked it neatly under one arm as he sat. Nellit cleared his throat and glanced around to assure their relative privacy. "Major, you're looking well, considering the extent of your injuries."

Lar'ragos smiled, drinking in the irony of the moment. "Yes, sir. Thank you, sir."

Nellit leaned in closer, and his expression grew hard. Voice barely above a whisper, the nobleman hissed, "Ten dead, seven more wounded? What the hell were you thinking, Pava?"

Lar'ragos tried to shrug, but his bandages wouldn't allow it. "I made a command decision, sir. I'm certain you're familiar with the necessity of changing—"

“Do not exercise that attitude with me, Major! You are speaking with a crown prince of the realm; one who has the power bury you so deeply no one would ever think to find you.” Even without his innate senses, Lar’ragos could tell Nellit was deadly serious; it was in his eyes.

Pava’s jaw muscles twitched. “You sent me to blow up a school.”

Nellit’s head dropped in exasperation. “Not just any school, and you know it. It was the Trabe’s top military academy.”

Bile rose in Lar’ragos’ throat, “Semantics. Our righteous sovereign, your uncle, ordered us to kill innocent children.”

Nellit raised his head and gave Lar’ragos a disbelieving look. “And when has that ever stopped you before?” He gestured to their surroundings. “We’re on the cusp of victory here, Pava! The Trabe Confederacy is the last obstacle to the Empire controlling everything within sixty lightyears of the homeworld.” He rubbed his face with one hand, his exasperation cracking his reserved noble façade. “Everything we’ve fought for, sacrificed for in the past fifteen years... it’s all come to a head. If you’d successfully planted explosive devices of Kazon design, it might have caused a rift between them and the Trabe.”

Pava turned his head away; his El Aurian bred principles warred with his sense of duty.

“Gods, man, you were the one who taught *me* to harden my heart in preparation for what our duty required of us. I wouldn’t be the man I am today without your iron will to guide and mold me.” Nellit sighed, pushing back from the bed in frustration. “You’ve picked one hell of a time to find your moral compass.” The airlock cycled again, and two field medics entered carrying an empty litter between them. The prince glanced up at them, then turned back to Lar’ragos. “I can’t protect you anymore, Pava. Even my influence has its limits. Commandant Shuvan’s drafting an arrest order for you as we speak. A perfunctory tribunal should take perhaps a day at most, and then you’ll be shot.”

Lar’ragos turned his head to meet Nellit’s eyes. “I’d often wondered how this would end. I suppose it’s long past time for me to join my family.” As ridiculous as it seemed, he found himself fighting back tears, “You don’t know, Nellit. You’ll only have to live a lifetime with the burdens of what we’ve done. I might have suffered those memories for millennia.”

Nellit gestured the medics over, who then transferred Lar’ragos onto the litter. As they did so, the prince smiled darkly. “You’re not going to get off that easily, old friend. I owe you my life a dozen times over. Lest you forget, I *always* pay my debts.”

As the medics carried Lar’ragos to an awaiting transport, Nellit offered him a final salute. “I shall reluctantly inform the commandant of your unfortunate escape. It’s been an honor serving with you.”

Pava raised one hand with great effort, calling out... but the airfield was gone – *he blinked* – the glare of Sickbay’s overhead lights startled him.

A nurse called Taiee over to Lar'ragos' bedside. She gave him a subdued smile. "So, there you are, Pava. We wondered when you were coming back. How was the trip?"

Pierosh II, Meteorological Research Station Aristotle.

Juneau sprinted towards the entrance to the building with two armed crew nipping at her heels. Their footfalls thundered through the empty labs and living quarters as they scrambled to respond to their comrade's call. It wasn't the fact that Tark had requested Juneau's immediate presence outside that spurred their pace, but the fact that the old curmudgeon had actually sounded *rattled*.

She drew her phaser as she approached the doors the away team had breached days earlier. Juneau slowed and motioned for her escorts to do the same. As she paused at the threshold to reconnoiter, Juneau was met with the unexpected sight of Tark and one of his security people standing idly on the outside steps. They sheltered under the parsteel awning from the rain that pattered noisily against its metal surface. A quick tricorder sweep confirmed nothing appeared amiss, and with her curiosity outweighing her irritation, the junior lieutenant stepped out to join them. "Something wrong, Master Chief?"

Only once she had moved out from the dimly lit entryway did she notice that the hair, faces, and field jackets of both men were wet, soaked a deep burgundy. She stepped closer. "What is that?"

Tark gestured numbly to the vacant panorama. "Rain."

"I don't understand—" Juneau trailed off as she eyed the open tricorder in the Tellarite's hand.

The master chief's voice was tight, a hoarse echo of his usual timbre. "Blood, Lieutenant. It's raining blood."

Juneau focused on the surrounding vista. She had to squint in the fading twilight to discern that the sea of rocks was in fact awash in a field of red. "That's... not possible."

Tark raised his tricorder; the scanning display clearly read the precipitation as an amalgam of humanoid blood types. Juneau's alter ego quickly assessed that the species represented in the mixed blood types were identical to the racial cross-section of *Gibraltar's* crew.

She was momentarily speechless. Neither her training, nor her augmented intellect could help her process what was most certainly an illusion. "This has to be some kind of projection. Holographic, or perhaps direct telepathic manipulation?" Juneau wished she sounded more certain. Regardless, they would have to act. "Alright, gentlemen, let's get inside. Help me seal up this door."

All three of them flinched simultaneously as Juneau's combadge chirped. She tapped it as she shepherded the two men back inside. "Juneau here, go."

"Dunleavy here, sir. You'd better get down here. Something just emerged from the portal."

Chapter 13

Sickbay, USS *Gibraltar*, in geo-synchronous orbit of Pierosh II.

Upon first arriving in Sickbay, Sandhurst had met briefly with the newly awakened Lar'ragos, who seemed to be recovering quickly from his inexplicable three-day coma. The lieutenant was mortified that he'd been unconscious during the Orion boarding incident, but Sandhurst had reassured him that the security teams had responded superbly, due in no small part to their intensive holo-sim training regimen.

The captain approached the guarded isolation ward and nodded to the security specialist standing watch outside the door. "I'll speak with him alone."

The Baron appeared to be sleeping beneath the restraining field that fixed him to the bio-bed. He opened his eyes, however, in response to the door cycling. Sandhurst approached and pulled a chair over to take a seat next to the immobilized man. He had decided to forgo any theatrical attempts at intimidation. If the Baron had half as much intelligence as Sandhurst credited him, he would easily see through the captain's threats. Such tactics would only serve to undermine his credibility.

"I'm Donald Sandhurst, captain of the Federation starship *Gibraltar*."

The Baron watched him impassively and remained silent.

"We know you only as 'the Baron,' by way of your Orion accomplices. Might I inquire as to your proper name and where your barony is located?"

After a long moment, the man responded, "My actual title is closer to that of Lord than Baron, but for the time being, the latter will suffice." He offered a knowing smile. "And my domain is a great distance from here, Captain."

Sandhurst nodded. "I'll begin by telling you that at present you're facing eleven different counts of serious felony crimes against this vessel and its crew. Your cooperation in our ongoing investigation might serve to reduce some of those charges. I can't make any promises, though, as prosecution of such crimes is decided by our civilian government."

The Baron sneered, "You would charge me for trying to undo the crimes of your people?"

Sandhurst studied the man for a long moment as he ran his tongue across the back of his teeth. Calm and controlled, the Baron exuded a casual arrogance that the captain found unsettling. No, that wasn't quite it. *He's in control, or he thinks he is*, Sandhurst assessed. The man was lashed to a bio-bed in a locked room, and yet apparently felt that he was fully in command of his situation and surroundings. He was either completely mad, or ridiculously dangerous. *Perhaps he's both*, Sandhurst mused.

"And what crimes would those be?"

The Baron shot Sandhurst a disbelieving look and said, "Your crew has been to the surface, you've seen it for yourselves. Those fools down there went diving in

waters so deep and dark they couldn't begin to understand." His expression shifted to one of disdain. "Do not think me the idiot, Captain. Your own people did this, and your kinsmen will surely suffer the consequences."

Sandhurst frowned as he wondered if the Baron did in fact know of Benghazi's activities, or if the man was merely fishing for information. "Perhaps you should tell me what, specifically, we're talking about?"

"Those careless simpletons thought to command energies they could neither contain nor control. They blindly opened a conduit into another reality, and in so doing they've unleashed the dragon!" The Baron delivered the rebuke with conviction as his eyes flamed.

In response, Sandhurst quirked a dubious eyebrow and replied, "I'm going to assume you're speaking metaphorically."

The Baron seethed while he thrashed against the restraining field. "Of course I am, you dolt!" Then, as if exercising pure force of will, the Baron appeared to compel himself to relax. "Forgive me, Captain. I have been given a terrible task to perform, and the weight of it upon me is considerable."

The captain scratched his chin idly and folded his arms across his chest. "Baron, you're speaking in riddles. I'd much prefer you explain the circumstances as plainly as possible."

The prisoner closed his eyes briefly and took a deep breath. Once he had centered himself, he began, "The scientists who opened that conduit have inadvertently tunneled into a prison, Captain. It was a very unique construct, a pocket dimension created explicitly to contain a being of unbelievable destructive power." The Baron craned his neck and his eyes fought to lock and hold Sandhurst's. "That creature has partially emerged into your universe, though it remains tethered to its containment vessel by a proverbial thread that is decaying even now. If you fail to act, an entity that annihilated seventeen star systems before it was imprisoned will be let loose upon your universe."

Sandhurst felt a tightening in his stomach. He didn't want to believe the Baron's words, but on some primal level, he did. He consciously controlled his movements to prevent himself from fidgeting as he sought clarification. "What is your relationship to the creature?"

"I was sent here to capture it and return it to its prison."

"Sent by whom?"

The Baron rolled his eyes, his frustration palpable. "A league of advanced races cooperated to create the containment dimension. I am an agent of one of those species."

Sandhurst stood slowly as he pushed the chair back. "If you are some kind of peace officer or bounty hunter whose goals are recovery of this 'fugitive,' how do you explain your unwarranted attack on my crew?"

“Unwarranted? Not from my vantage point, Captain. Until I’d accessed your computer database, I believed your people had done this deliberately. For all I knew, you planned to try and capture the entity and use it against your Federation’s enemies.” The Baron shifted uncomfortably under the restraining field. “The Orions accused your ship of having fired on them with a subspace explosive.”

His expression soured and Sandhurst fumed, “No. The subspace weapon belonged to the Orions themselves. They initiated an unprovoked attack on *my* ship. The experiments you speak of were unauthorized. Such activities are expressly forbidden by our government.” He decided to give the Baron the benefit of the doubt, and Sandhurst asked, “We have personnel on the surface. How much danger are they in?”

“Impossible to say.” An ironic smile flitted across the older man’s features. “In my present circumstances, I’m obviously unable to track where and what it is.”

“How do you mean... ‘what it is?’”

“It’s an omnimorphic entity, Captain. It can be whatever it desires. Matter, energy... nothing is beyond its capabilities.”

“I see,” Sandhurst replied coolly. On the inside he was in turmoil. He weighed the unconfirmed dangers possibly facing his crew against his distrust of the Baron. “One final question.” Sandhurst moved to a control interface and downloaded an image into the room’s holo-emitter. A one-quarter-sized holographic image of Dr. Benghazi appeared in the air above the bio-bed, rotating slowly. “Do you recognize this man?”

The Baron grunted noncommittally, then noted, “He looks very much like me. Who is this?”

“Dr. Stephen Benghazi, the scientist in charge of the project that opened the wormhole on the surface.”

From beneath the restraining field, the Baron chuckled wryly. “Fascinating. Are you familiar with the theory of alternate parallel realities, Captain Sandhurst?”

“Somewhat,” Sandhurst allowed as he observed the man closely while wishing he had Lar’ragos’ unconventional abilities.

“Identical individuals can exist in parallel realities. How ironic that my counterpart in this universe shares my vocation.”

Sandhurst intoned soberly, “Indeed.” He deactivated the image. The man had at least given the appearance of being candid, so Sandhurst decided to roll the dice with another query. “Where is your ship, Baron?”

The enigmatic traveler responded with a question of his own. “How long must I remain confined in this manner?”

“Until our medical department informs me that your injuries have healed sufficiently. Then you’ll be moved to our brig.”

The Baron smiled humorlessly. “In which case, I’m afraid I must withhold any further cooperation. I am not your enemy; in fact, I may be your only hope. As

long as you continue to treat me like some petty criminal, you're endangering yourselves as well as the rest of your galaxy."

Sandhurst moved to the exit and signaled the security officer on the other side to open it. "I appreciate what assistance you've shown me so far, Baron. We will, of course, have further questions." With that, Sandhurst left. He moved into the adjoining exam room, where Ramirez and Taiee had watched the exchange on a monitor. Sandhurst looked to his exec. "Thoughts, Commander?"

Ramirez pursed her lips thoughtfully before replying. "Is it just me, or does this guy sound like a villain from a particularly bad holo-novel?" She smirked at Sandhurst. "Pity he doesn't have a mustache to twirl while he spins his lies."

Sandhurst cocked his head. "I'm not so sure he is lying. Not about everything, anyway." He leaned against a bio-bed to rub the bridge of his nose tiredly. "If this 'dragon' exists as he claims, it could wreak unbelievable havoc. That's not exactly the kind of trouble the Federation or Cardassia needs right now." Turning to Taiee, he inquired, "What about his claim that Benghazi's his counterpart in our universe?"

The nurse practitioner was still behaving frostily towards the captain, but she made a concerted effort to bolster her professional demeanor. "Complete crap, sir. Our friend the Baron, despite his appearance, isn't even remotely human." She directed their attention to a display screen at a nearby workstation. "And to make matters worse, the EMH has found genetic irregularities in Benghazi's DNA unrelated to the energy discharge on the surface."

A DNA double-helix appeared onscreen, sections of which were highlighted in flashing primary colors. "These segments normally control physical appearance characteristics in humanoids. These highlighted sections are areas where specific alterations have been made to his genetic code." Taiee turned to face the captain. "It's very good work, better than Federation medical science is currently capable of. However, it created what amounts to areas of weakness in his genome. This may be why he proved so susceptible to the EM pulse and chronometric radiation on the surface."

Sandhurst squinted as he tried to make sense of this. "And this means..."

Ramirez was quicker on the draw. "Meaning, sir, that someone deliberately altered Benghazi's DNA so that he would physically resemble the Baron."

Taiee smiled at Ramirez. "Well, look at the brain on Liana."

The XO gave the Chief Medical Officer a mock glare that turned into a smirk.

Sandhurst looked skeptical. "That doesn't make any sense, Doc. Benghazi's sixty-seven years old. He's lived his entire life in the Federation. Benghazi and the Baron are the same age. Perhaps someone altered both of them to resemble one another?"

Taiee shook her head emphatically. "The Baron's DNA is obviously non-terrestrial, but I've detected no similar genetic anomalies. And we're only assuming

that their ages are approximate. I've no way to judge the Baron's true age until I get a better understanding of his physiology."

The captain still looked unconvinced. "So, you're saying that sixty-eight years ago, someone altered the genetics of a human embryo to make it look like the Baron? And then that embryo grew up to be Stephen Benghazi? A man who just *happens* to become a researcher into interdimensional physics?" He felt a headache coming on. "Isn't that far too convoluted to be believable?"

"No."

The three officers turned simultaneously to see the source of the refutation. Pava Lar'ragos leaned unsteadily against the doorframe, clad in his patient gown. He inclined his head towards the isolation ward. "Our new friend in there... he's a time traveler."

Pierosh II. Meteorological Research Station Aristotle, Sub-Level 4.

Dunleavy stood behind the transparent aluminum viewing partition as she kept an eye on their visitor below. The glowing orange orb measured some two meters in diameter. It had emerged from the mouth of the portal moments earlier and was now hovering a few meters from the open maw.

She glanced back at Science Specialist Vandermere and asked, "What do you think, life form or probe?"

Without looking up from her tricorder, Vandermere assessed, "My guess would be: probe. It's transmitting some form of polaron beam back through the aperture."

"Sending telemetry back to its base?" Dunleavy posited.

"That's as good a theory as any."

As Juneau and her entourage rushed into the lab, the sphere emitted three fan-shaped fields of amber light that swept the perimeter of the lower chamber on multiple axis.

Juneau joined Dunleavy at the viewport while the blood drenched Tark drew startled looks from the others as he set about double-checking the laboratory's security measures.

The old non-comm called to Juneau, "The door leading to the portal chamber is secured, Lieutenant."

Eyes still fixed on the bright sphere, Juneau replied, "Thank you, Master Chief." Then to Vandermere, "Is it scanning?"

"Yes, sir. Broad-spectrum sensor sweeps of its environment. Intensity of the polaron beam has increased ten-fold."

Without warning, the sphere shot up into the air and came to a stop directly in front of the viewing partition. The assembled crowd stepped back; their movement accompanied by a chorus of gasps.

The sphere drifted forward to pass through the partition effortlessly. Tark took aim with his phaser rifle as he growled, "Everybody back! Head for the surface!"

Dunleavy turned to run but was instead enveloped in a golden beam of light from the sphere and vanished.

Tark pulled his trigger and sent pulse after pulse of phaser energy into the sphere to no effect. He was joined by the other security officer, whose constant beam from his hand phaser had no better luck.

The remaining Starfleet personnel scrambled to exit the room as they tripped over one another and created general pandemonium. Juneau executed a tactical step-slide backwards, slowly backing away as she kept her phaser trained on the object. "Chief, cease fire! We haven't even tried communicating with the thing!"

Over the steady thump of his discharging rifle, Tark shouted, "Oh, I think it's getting the message!" Something shoved the barrel of his rifle skyward at the same time Tark was swept off his feet to land crumpled in an angry pile on the floor. He gaped open-mouthed at the sight of Juneau standing above him, his rifle in her hand. She raised her eyebrows and bore the expression of a displeased parent. "Perhaps you misunderstood me, Master Chief. I ordered you to cease fire." She dropped the rifle and Tark caught it fumblingly. "In most circles that phrase is commonly accepted as meaning 'stop shooting right the hell now.'"

Juneau looked up just in time to see the sphere backtrack along its original path as it retreated through the viewport and down into the lower chamber. She raced to the window only to witness it pass through the roiling blue event horizon of the portal. A bedraggled looking Tark joined her to emit a grunt of displeasure as he watched the sphere vanish.

As she looked over at the old warhorse, Juneau commented, "At least now we know it goes both ways, eh?"

Meteorological Research Station Aristotle, Level 1.

Security Specialist Eric Stins tried to keep his hand from shaking as he drew his phaser's beam down the seam of the entrance doors to weld them together. Whatever nightmarish thing lay on the other side howled and pounded on the doors with a strength that was most certainly preternatural.

The door's seam glowed an angry red as Stins and Petty Officer O'Shae backed away. Stins looked at his comrade. "First it starts raining blood outside, and now we've got some kind of giant beast trying to force its way in." He shook his

head. "Commander Plazzi told me this planet is a lifeless rock, except for moss." Wide eyed, he looked at O'Shae beseechingly. "Does that sound like *moss* to you?"

Rather than answer what was a decidedly rhetorical question, O'Shae tapped his combadge.

"Away team to *Gibraltar*, we have an emergency..."

Chapter 14

Death was rather different than Saihra Dunleavy would have imagined. Never having held fast to any particular spirituality, she had really not given the idea of an afterlife much consideration. In her present circumstances, she supposed that might have been a mistake.

She was relatively sure that she had no eyes, and yet she was able to perceive her surroundings in all directions simultaneously. She had no mouth, no lungs, no larynx that she could detect, yet strangely she felt no compulsion to speak. All around her was a dimension of violent color and motion.

From the chaotic palate something took shape. The object was either approaching or growing in size, but without any reference points Dunleavy had no source to judge perspective. It took a moment for her to identify the thing. A human embryo. The magnified life-state increased in size and complexity with great speed. She watched it develop, the maturation of months taking place in mere seconds. As the embryo became a baby and continued to grow into a small child, Saihra recognized it as herself.

And then, with increasing swiftness, she witnessed her full life cycle, followed by successive generations of what she assumed to be offspring. The images came with escalating speed, as if some unknown force was mapping the potential of human evolution, the various forms that earth's distant descendants might assume. Spindly multi-armed humanoids flashed past, followed by cybernetic neo-hominids with their organs encased in decorative metallic shells, then beings of pure energy... she witnessed it all in the blink of an eye that she no longer possessed.

A spark of hope flared in what would have otherwise been Dunleavy's heart. Perhaps this was not death after all. She surmised that maybe, just maybe, she... and by extension the rest of humanity... were being studied.

Sickbay, USS *Gibraltar*, in geo-synchronous orbit of Pierosh II.

Sandhurst directed Lar'ragos carefully to a nearby chair, the captain's expression tinged both with concern and curiosity. He looked to his friend with a wry smile and Sandhurst said softly, "I think that's a statement that bears elaboration."

Lar'ragos sank gratefully into the chair. His hands trembled so much with the effort of moving that he had to clasp them tightly together to make them stop. "It's... nothing specific, I'm afraid. I monitored your conversation with the Baron. When he speaks, there's a sense of..." Lar'ragos groped for the right words, "...he's on the cusp of achieving something very important to him."

The exec cleared her throat. “You said he’s a time traveler?”

Lar’ragos sighed. “Yes. He’s old. Older than me.” He raised his eyes to meet Ramirez’s. “Many names, many faces, but his experiences are out of order. I see him in places and times that he couldn’t possibly occupy, unless he possessed the ability to move beyond normal space/time constraints.” Lar’ragos turned his gaze on Sandhurst. “He’s no agent come to save us. Whatever his role in all this, it’s for purely selfish ends.”

Ramirez knew from experience how prescient Lar’ragos’ intuition could be, but Taiee appeared skeptical. The CMO gave the El Aurian a dubious look and gently urged, “Lieutenant, you’ve just recovered from a serious neural fugue, one that I’m still unable to explain. Your senses, however they work, may not be firing on all thrusters at the moment.”

Lar’ragos, however, appeared not to hear her. Instead, he was focused like a laser on the captain. “You know more about parallel realities than you let on.”

Sandhurst frowned. “How so?”

“Pell,” Lar’ragos replied, looking tired. “Tell them about Pell.”

The color drained from Sandhurst’s face. “Ojana? What about her?”

“You *know* what I’m talking about, Donald!” Lar’ragos snapped irritably. “I’m too damn exhausted for games.”

Sandhurst looked away uncertainly, then his shoulders set, and his resolve firmed. He turned to the others and said, “Eight years ago, while serving aboard the *Cuffe* under Captain Diaz, we encountered a dimensional rift in the Tong Beak Nebula.” He rubbed the back of his neck as he often did when under stress. “We discovered a Bajoran national from an alternate reality, one who mirrored a Starfleet officer I’d known.” The captain sat heavily on a chair. “The entire mess was classified by Command.”

Ramirez watched Sandhurst with a guarded expression. “So, are we talking about another intrusion from the same dimension?”

“No.” Sandhurst stood. “I compared the quantum resonances of both incidents, they don’t match.” He looked to Taiee. “Doc, I need to speak with the commander and Lar’ragos in private.”

Taiee nodded obediently and left. Sandhurst toggled the door closed behind her. As soon as the portal was shut, he rounded on Lar’ragos and seethed, “You *don’t* get to pull your parlor tricks on me, goddamn it, Pava!” Sandhurst clenched his fists, clearly holding himself in check, but just barely. “I’m the *captain*. There are going to be things only I know about, and I won’t have you playing twenty questions to fish for classified information, regardless of what it is you think you know.”

Lar’ragos’ face sagged, and he looked genuinely repentant. “I’m sorry, Captain.” He swayed in his chair, then grabbed onto a nearby table to steady himself. “As the doc said, I’m not exactly at my best right now.”

Sandhurst turned to Ramirez. “I wasn’t holding anything back, Commander. I promise.” He worried about having alienated his first officer even more through perceived omissions of vital information, compounding his earlier sin of having shanghaied her into this post in the first place. “If there had been some correlation between the two-dimensional ruptures, I’d have mentioned the *Cuffe* incident.”

She smiled wistfully and said, “No explanation necessary, Captain. It’s not your judgment I’m questioning.” She shot a sour look at the lieutenant to underscore her point.

“Bridge to Captain Sandhurst.”

As he still struggled to reign in his emotions, Sandhurst paused a beat to leach the tension from his voice before replying. “Go.”

“Sir, we’re getting multiple distress calls from the surface. The away team is reporting some kind of creature is attempting to gain access to the facility at the main entrance, and Lieutenant Juneau says that one crew member has either been killed or abducted by a probe sent through the portal.”

“Acknowledged.” Sandhurst tapped his combadge to open a channel to the transporter room. “Can we beam the away team back?” he inquired, dreading what would almost certainly be the response.

“No, sir,” the transporter chief said regretfully. *“Some kind of energy field is masking the away team’s signatures. I can pinpoint their locations, but I’m unable to get a solid lock.”*

“Would pattern enhancers help?” Sandhurst offered.

“They might, sir.”

“Commander, take a rescue team down by shuttle, and bring the transport pattern enhancers with you.”

Ramirez nodded curtly and activated the door as she tapped her own combadge. “Ramirez to Commander Plazzi and Ensign Diamato, report to the shuttle bay for a surface mission immediately.” She isolated Diamato’s frequency and added, “Ensign, I know you guys have taken a beating, but I want you to assemble whatever security team we can manage.”

As the exec stepped out into the main ward of Sickbay, she pointed to Lightner who was sitting idly atop one of the many biobeds as he awaited his discharge. “Quit lollygagging, mister. Rumor has it this planet has some of the worst weather ever recorded on a Class-M planet. And that means I need our best pilot.” She spared him a quick smile as she headed out the main doors leading to the corridor. “Move with purpose, Ensign.”

Sandhurst directed Lar'ragos to replicate a uniform and make himself presentable. His anger at Pava's impertinence had subsided, and the captain decided he'd still rather have Lar'ragos' abilities working for him in the coming encounter.

As the two men entered the secured ward, the Baron remained restrained to the biobed. He looked at the Starfleet officers questioningly. "Back so soon, Captain?"

"The creature you spoke of... the 'dragon' as you call it. It's attacking my people on the surface." Sandhurst moved closer to the bed to project as much severity as he could manage.

"Then I pity your people, Captain." The Baron appeared passably sincere.

Lar'ragos was still shaky but determined to help. He stood by and observed as he drank in every word, expression, and nuance of their prisoner.

"How do I stop it?"

The Baron looked troubled. "You can't. Not without my help."

"I don't trust you." Sandhurst had no time for niceties.

The Baron smiled, and despite his being arrested, contained, and confined, Sandhurst felt a nagging chill at the mysterious man's expression. "Trust isn't the issue. Necessity is." He craned his neck to inspect Lar'ragos curiously. "Your people don't have much time. The creature could consume them, that installation, and this ship in an instant if it chose. Fortunately, it was designed as a terror weapon. It will assault those men and women with horrors beyond their darkest imaginings, savoring every moment of their fear and agony."

Sandhurst scowled. "It feeds on fear?"

The Baron chuckled. "It doesn't feed on anything. It requires no nourishment, no rest, nothing aside from entertaining itself by torturing and killing every living sentient creature it can find."

Lar'ragos' eyes widened, and what little color he retained seemed to drain from him. He stepped forward and placed his hand against Sandhurst's back to steady himself as he whispered in the captain's ear. "It's his, Donald."

Sandhurst turned, clearly perplexed.

The El Aurian raised his voice. "He created the damn thing. It's the way he talks about it, like some kind of twisted parental pride."

The Baron's face became a mask of deadly earnest, his voice heavy with menace. "This charade has gone on long enough. It is time for you to decide, Captain. Help me capture this creature of your own volition, or I'll take your ship from you and cast you and your crew aside like so much refuse."

He shook his head at the Baron's audacity, and Sandhurst replied, "And how do you expect to do that?"

"You see, dear Captain, during our assault on your ship, I had one of my operatives sneak into your computer core and corrupt your protected backup files." The Baron's tone conveyed an assurance that froze Sandhurst's marrow. "Bit of an insurance policy, you see. When my attack failed, and you uploaded the backups to

repair the damage my computer virus had wrought on your systems, you inadvertently gave me complete control of your ship.”

Sandhurst slapped his combadge so fiercely he nearly tore it from his uniform. “Sandhurst to bridge, shut down the prim—”

The Baron roared over him, “Computer, release the restraining field on my bed!”

It took both men, charged as they were, a moment to comprehend the computer’s response. “*Unable to comply due to insufficient authorization.*”

The Baron became apoplectic, screaming and thrashing against the restraining field. “Computer, release me this instant! Acknowledge my order!”

“*Bridge to Captain Sandhurst, please repeat your message. You were cut off.*”

Sandhurst appeared confused. “Bridge, this is the captain. Standby to initiate a complete shutdown of the main computer and all ancillary functions on my order.” Almost as an afterthought, he added, “And get me a security team down here.”

“Aye, sir.”

Lar’ragos moved to the opposite side of the bed, prepared to help restrain the Baron should he suddenly break free. The adrenaline coursing through his veins helped to offset some of his fatigue and disorientation.

“Sandhurst to Lieutenant Ashok.”

“*Ashok here, sir.*”

Sandhurst briefly outlined the Baron’s threats for the chief engineer, followed by a question. “Lieutenant, did you restore the computer as I’d ordered?”

There was a pregnant pause. “*Not entirely, sir.*”

His jaw clenched as he idly watched the Baron’s antics, and Sandhurst replied icily, “How so, Mister Ashok?”

The Baron raged, “Parlan, you are needed!”

“*Owing to the nature of the computer attack on the ship, I had reservations about rebooting our systems from the protected archives, Captain. Instead, I requested an upload of those files via compressed subspace transmission from DS9.*” Ashok’s voice seemed brittle, as if he half-expected to be relieved of his post at this revelation. “*It took a bit longer for full systems restoration, but I thought it would be safer.*”

Sandhurst was stunned. He murmured absently, “You saved the ship.”

“*I’m sorry, sir? I didn’t copy your last.*”

Both Sandhurst and Lar’ragos slowly became aware of a new sound, something discernable over the Baron’s outburst and the captain’s conversation. A grinding, screeching, thumping sound emanated from the main Sickbay ward. Sandhurst stepped to the door and opened it to find a black cylinder approximately three meters tall and a meter and a half in diameter materializing in the middle of Sickbay.

The security officer posted to the Baron's door drew his sidearm and called out an intruder alert that set off a ship-wide red alert klaxon.

Sandhurst moved quickly to the Sickbay arms locker, a box protruding innocently from one wall amidst a host of medical displays. He took a phaser pistol for himself, and then moved to the doorway to the secure ward, throwing the other phaser to Lar'ragos "Pava, we've got company. I'm locking you in!"

He located Tailee amid the busy crowd and ordered, "Doc, get everyone out of here!" Medical staff scrambled to evacuate patients into the corridor, which inadvertently clogged the ship's arterials and delayed the arrival of the ship's responding security staff.

A portal, even blacker than the outside of the pillar, appeared in the side of the structure. Out stepped a gargantuan humanoid, a hairless male clad in a tan, form-fitting jumpsuit that seemed designed to broadcast his inhumanly developed musculature. As he brought his phaser up, Sandhurst found himself musing that this individual made Ashok look small.

"Stop right where you are!" Sandhurst ordered, in what he hoped was a sufficiently authoritative voice. To his surprise, the mammoth actually stopped in his tracks and turned to face him. This prompted the captain to add, "Identify yourself and your intent."

An incongruously unremarkable voice emerged from the giant's mouth. "I am Parlan. I am here for the Baron. Assist me, and you will live. Interfere, and I will kill you."

Chapter 15

Out of his peripheral vision, Sandhurst saw someone else rushing to the arms locker. A moment later, he perceived Ensign Kuenre Shanthi of the late USS *Brahmaputra* with phaser in hand as he took up position beside him. Now, three armed men stood opposed to the Baron's would-be rescuer, with Lar'ragos locked inside the secured ward with the prisoner.

"Mister Parlan, we have you at a disadvantage. I don't want to see you or anyone else get hurt here; enough people have died already." Sandhurst fought the urge to ramp the phaser's power setting beyond heavy stun. "Stand down, and we can work to sort out this whole tangled mess."

Parlan appeared unmoved by the captain's words. He began walking towards the door to the secured ward. "You have been warned."

The captain, Shanthi, and the security man opened fire simultaneously. Their beams, however, terminated at the threshold of Parlan's defensive forcefield. The behemoth plowed on and reached out a hand to swat the security specialist across the ward, where he slammed into a computer workstation with a meaty thud. Sandhurst witnessed this and had the presence of mind to duck as Parlan swung on him. The man's massive hand carved through the air centimeters above the captain's head as Sandhurst rolled beneath the nearest biobed.

Shanthi increased his phaser setting to maximum and fired again. The scream of his phaser competed with the shriek of rending metal as Parlan peeled the door to the secured ward apart as if it had been made of paper. From the other side, Lar'ragos added his beam to the maelstrom of energy that now surrounded the enormous man.

Parlan strode unhurriedly into the ward and casually slapped the phaser from Lar'ragos' grip, breaking the El Aurian's hand in the process. He then pushed Lar'ragos against the far wall where the lieutenant bounced off the bulkhead and slid to the floor, unconscious. Using only the bladed edge of his hand, Parlan scythed through the base of the biobed and severed the EPS leads powering the restraining field. As the bed toppled over and the field collapsed, the giant scooped the Baron up in his arms and cradled him protectively.

After he regained his feet, Sandhurst joined the fight and added his phaser's maximum power discharge to the effort. The forcefield bubble around Parlan and the Baron started to shimmer and oscillate as it began to show the strain of dissipating such concentrated destructive energy.

In response, Parlan aimed a single hand palm-out towards his attackers. A purplish bolt of energy lashed out from that hand to strike the deck between Sandhurst and Shanthi. The resulting explosion threw both men off their feet and peppered them with searing metallic shrapnel from the savaged deck plating.

Parlan moved with greater alacrity now and made for the pillar. The Baron growled, "Put me down. I will walk out of captivity on my own two feet." The enormous man complied instantly as his pale blue eyes darted in search of additional threats. As they passed the writhing, semi-conscious form of Sandhurst, the Baron smiled. "Bring him along, I simply must return the favor of my incarceration."

The colossus knelt to gather up the broken form of the captain and followed the Baron through the dark membrane and into his mysterious craft. The portal closed soundlessly behind them.

In the wake of the division's recent losses, a security non-com now led a makeshift response team cobbled together from various crew with prior combat experience. They had waded through the crowd of medical personnel and patients choking the corridor outside to finally execute a hurried tactical entry into the Sickbay. They rushed into the compartment just as the black pillar vanished, once again accompanied by its eerie pulsing screech.

Shuttlecraft *Kon-Tiki*. En-route to Meteorological Research Station Aristotle from USS *Gibraltar*.

Even with the shuttle's inertial dampeners set to maximum, it was proving to be a rough ride down to the surface of Pierosh II. A storm front had inexplicably materialized over the plateau on which the survey station was located. Anomalous storm activity was nothing unusual on this planet, however, and Lightner had adjusted his course to try to minimize the amount of wind shear and turbulence the shuttle would encounter.

Despite Lightner's efforts, the size of the storm had swelled, and it proved necessary to fly through it to reach their destination. The *Kon-Tiki* shuddered violently as the craft punched through a compact cloud formation and threw Ramirez against the restraint straps keeping her in the copilot's seat. Her stomach was doing its level best to crawl up inside her esophagus, and by way of distraction she glanced over at the youthful pilot. The injuries Lightner had suffered at the hands of the Orions were fading, and only some light bruising around his right eye attested to his presence in the pitched battle for the bridge.

She mused that the ensign wasn't a bad looking kid, and he had certainly handled himself well since his posting to *Gibraltar*. He still possessed that endearing fresh-from-the-Academy earnestness that all newly minted ensigns seemed to exude for their first year of service or so. Often, they were simply thrilled just to be aboard a starship, no matter how routine or unimportant the tasks they were assigned to perform. Ramirez had noticed that it was only when he was piloting in stressful circumstances that the 'real' Brett Lightner appeared. The hesitation and uncertainty

of a first-tour junior officer vanished, and in their place were the focus and composure of a superior pilot.

At twenty-one, he was a graduate of the academy's accelerated wartime curricula with only three years of academics under his belt instead of four. Ramirez felt the young man had been cheated out of much more than just a year's education. During the war, courses such as history, philosophy, and ethics had been discarded in exchange for those skill sets more apt to help a person survive in a combat environment.

In her opinion it was exactly those courses that differentiated a Starfleet officer from a Klingon warrior or a Romulan centurion. Any thug could hold and fire a weapon. Starfleet taught their people how to think, how to analyze a situation from multiple angles, and gave them the empathy to view a scenario from someone's perspective other than their own. Most importantly, the academy taught its graduates the moral context within which they were allowed to operate.

As the executive officer, Ramirez was responsible for the continued training and education of the ship's compliment of junior officers. She would help guide and groom them for greater responsibility as she gave them the tools they needed for eventual promotion. She had already lost two of them, Browder and Qawasimi, both promising young men who hadn't lived to see even a tenth of the wonders she had witnessed in her career. Ramirez vowed that she would strive to do better by the others, Lightner included.

Another jolt washed away Ramirez's reverie as the shuttle lurched through an air pocket. She craned her head around to glance back into the passenger compartment. Ramirez smirked at the sight of Plazzi's death grip on the armrests of his chair. Ensign Diamato, the sole surviving commissioned officer from *Gibraltar*'s security division aside from Lar'ragos, appeared immune to their bumpy ride. Diamato studied a padd containing schematics of the surface installation. Two enlisted security personnel sat facing one another against either wall, seated on the bulkhead mounted benches in the cargo area.

Ramirez called out to Plazzi, "Everything okay back there, Elisto?"

Plazzi gave her a forced smile and a half-hearted thumbs-up that made her laugh despite her airsickness.

She turned back to address Lightner, "Please tell me this little ship is up to the task, Ensign."

Lightner grinned, his concentration consumed with navigating the treacherous storm cell. "Oh yeah, Commander. No worries. These Type-8's can take a pounding."

I certainly hope so, she thought grimly, who knows what the Baron's 'dragon' is capable of inflicting on us.

Something loomed suddenly in the cockpit windscreens, a dark, massive shape abruptly visible through the surrounding miasma. Ramirez and Lightner both caught

the briefest glimpse of something with an enormous wingspan, and of vicious talons that raked across the shuttle's forward shields.

To his credit, the ensign maintained their angle of descent. His face betrayed confusion, but his hands were steady on the controls. "I... was that... that couldn't be..."

Ramirez reached out to the console at her station and charged the shuttle's phasers. "I'm not sure what that was, Mister Lightner." She suppressed the shiver that sought to arc down her spine and replied coolly, "Just keep flying, Ensign. I'll worry about our hyper-thyroidal avian friend out there." Then it hit her, she had been thinking about dragons. *Oh, goody, she mused, perhaps it reads thoughts, too.*

As she turned back to see Plazzi's wide-eyed, ashen face, the first officer raised her hand sheepishly. "Sorry, my fault. That was me."

Pierosh II, Meteorological Research Station Aristotle.

Juneau and her team scrambled to seal the doors leading to the secret laboratory. The entire Starfleet contingent had retreated to the reinforced lab to escape whatever nightmarish thing had breached the building's defenses.

Tricorders had proved to be of only questionable use. The creature alternately registered on scans as being a field of energy, or a swarm of giant Plavian arachnids, or any number of equally unpleasant alternatives. Thus far, however, the attacks had amounted to mere harassment. For the time being, the thing seemed content to frighten them and drive them farther underground. Juneau had no intention of allowing it to take more lethal actions against them.

The lieutenant had moved to a secluded corner of the lab as her crew busied themselves welding additional barriers in front of the doorway and setting up a secure perimeter. She opened her tricorder and tried again to make some sense of the jumbled readings their attacker was giving off. Juneau observed Tark walk up, padd in hand. As he stepped beside her, she felt a pressure in her side that she knew instantly to be a phaser. Tark whispered, "Now that you've led us down here to a dead end, I'm very interested to know just who you really are."

As she lowered her tricorder, Juneau weighed her options. She could try to disarm him, but that would likely result in her being stunned or killed. Last time she had overwhelmed the master chief, she'd had the advantage of surprise. Now Tark had the upper hand. She decided that the circumstances warranted a novel approach, the truth.

Juneau kept her voice low as she replied, "I won't insult your intelligence by trying to convince you what you've seen and heard isn't true, Master Chief. There is, in fact, more than one person in here." She touched a finger to her temple. "But I

assure you, I'm no shapeshifter or enemy agent. I'm Starfleet too, and I'm far more qualified to help you here than Olivia would be."

Tark still looked grimly skeptical. "How are you tied up in all this?"

"I wasn't. Let's just say that ninety-nine percent of the time I'm simply an observer in Olivia's head. Only when I come across something which could be considered a serious threat to Federation security, or our national interests, do I take the reins." She gave Tark a hard look. "And our present circumstances definitely amount to a dire threat, wouldn't you say?"

"And the lieutenant? Where is she right now?"

Juneau watched as the crew welded a metal table to the growing pile of debris in front of the pressure door; embers of molten metal rained down onto the floor. "Asleep, actually. When I take over, she goes into a kind of mental hibernation."

Tark muttered, "I don't understand. Why would Starfleet do such a thing?"

Juneau shook her head. "The Obsidian Order, the Tal Shiar, the Klingon *So'Taj*... you don't think we have our own version of a 'dirty tricks' branch, too? You're not so naive as to believe that we allow all those other powers to play by their own rules while we adhere to the strict letter of the law?"

The master chief sighed, "I suppose not."

"I'm the dark underside of the Federation's moral high road." She smiled harshly. "So, what's it to be? Do you want my help here, or shall I bring Olivia back? I'm sure she'd be a terrific asset to you. You could use her for cover when that thing starts beating down the door and she curls into the fetal position."

As he lowered the phaser, Tark hissed, "Fine, for now. This isn't over, though."

Just then an unearthly yowl issued from behind the pressure door, accompanied by the sounds of manic scratching on metal. Juneau stepped out and prepared to take command of the situation. She glanced at Tark as she replied, "Not by a long shot, Master Chief."

Donald Sandhurst floated in agony, suspended in a shaft of white light. His legs were badly mangled, and his wounds had received little in the way of treatment from his captors. He groggily recalled a small human man using a device to staunch the bleeding, but the wounds remained open to fester, and he had been given nothing to dull the blazing pain.

He passed in and out of consciousness for a period, but he couldn't say how long as he'd lost the ability to judge the passage of time.

The Baron's face swam into focus, accompanied by a wave of misery as the older man gripped Sandhurst's torn thigh tightly with one hand to bring him around. The captain coughed, sputtered, and finally rasped, "I'd like to lodge a complaint with the concierge."

As he smiled wolfishly the Baron purred, “I’m sure.” He took a moment to appraise Sandhurst. “You’ve certainly looked better, Captain. I’d very much like to offer more medical treatment, but that will be dependent upon your level of cooperation.”

Sandhurst coughed again. “My command codes won’t do you any good. The moment I was abducted the crew would have locked those codes out of the system.”

“No, no, I’m done mucking about with your damned computers.” He crossed his arms impatiently. “I need your ship, Captain.”

“Wh—” Sandhurst winced and drew in a sharp breath. “Why? You have this vessel, and we suspect the ability to travel through time and space. I can’t imagine what you’d need a mere starship for.”

The Baron glowered. “All my ship’s power is being utilized to keep the portal on the surface open. My reserves are dwindling, especially after expending additional resources to rescue myself from your captivity.”

“Why are you keeping it—” Sandhurst groaned suddenly and writhed in the clutches of the suspensor field. He took a steady breath and continued. “Why hold it open?”

“Closing the wormhole will sever the creature’s connection to the prison dimension. Once free, the difficulty in capturing it increases exponentially.”

He fought off another wave of pain and Sandhurst asked, “You created it?”

“In a manner of speaking.” The Baron took the captain’s silence as a request for elaboration, and he began walking a slow circuit around Sandhurst. “There are beings in the multiverse that move about the cosmos as gods. I have had chance to encounter them on occasion, but I’ve found them to be selfish, arrogant, and capricious entities. They flit about, meddling in the affairs of lesser species for their own amusement, wielding their awesome powers like fickle children.”

Sandhurst cried out, then bit down on his lower lip until the wave of suffering passed. Something that felt broken shifted in his chest and burned like a hot knife twisting. “Yes, we have them here, too. We call them Q.”

The Baron continued without acknowledging Sandhurst’s statement, clearly indifferent to the man’s agony. “Centuries ago, while traveling the periphery of the Keng-Ceri Cloud, I discovered the remains of one of these beings, cocooned within a protostar. It must have been injured in some great cataclysm, though I shudder to think of what weapon or event could fell a god. Its energy matrix was intact, but its intellect had been rent asunder. It was essentially an animated corpse, a hollow shell of its former glory.”

Sandhurst struggled to remain conscious as he fought to grasp and retain everything the Baron was revealing to him. There was no telling what would be of use to him later.

“So, I painstakingly rebuilt its neural state, giving it the semblance of consciousness, but leaving it very amenable to direction. *My direction.*”

As he strained to get his head around what he was hearing, Sandhurst asked, “That thing out there... it’s a Q?”

“It used to be a Q, as you call it,” the Baron corrected. “Now it’s the perfect weapon of terror.” He had now circumnavigated the suspensor field, and the Baron found himself facing Sandhurst again. His features beamed with haughty pride. “I used it to cut a swath of destruction across my dimension the likes of which had never been seen. Seventeen populated star systems obliterated.” His eyes took on a faraway cast. “Entire civilizations lay prostrate before me, and for a time, I commanded an empire of untold billions.”

“And then?” Sandhurst croaked.

“Then a supposedly ‘enlightened’ coalition of species conspired to overthrow me,” the Baron spat bitterly. “It was a horrific war, countless millions slaughtered in order to end my benevolent rule. The creature was captured, but even the combined intellects of these races could not design a method capable of destroying it.” The Baron paused to pull a crystal from the folds of his cloak. He touched its facets and beckoned a small pedestal to rise from an opening in the floor. Upon the pedestal were arrayed a gleaming assortment of metallic devices, blades, spikes, flails, and other accoutrements of torture. “The creature was locked away in a dimensional schism that I could not access from my quantum reality.”

“Ah,” remarked Sandhurst, his eyes glued to the instruments of pain. “That’s why you created Benghazi.”

The Baron nodded as he picked up a wicked-looking scalpel-like implement and held it up to the light to admire its fine edge. “Yes, Benghazi, and a host of others. I littered them throughout several dimensions with a similar quantum variance to yours. Dozens of men, all in my image, all programmed to be obsessed with the idea of breaching the dimensional boundaries between universes along a very specific seam.”

“And our Dr. Benghazi was the first one to successfully tunnel into your creature’s prison.” Sandhurst coughed wetly and blood flecked his lips from a lung punctured by a fractured rib. “Lucky us.”

“Just so.” The Baron grinned cruelly. “Tell me, Captain, you’re not a hemophiliac by any chance?”

“And if I say yes?”

“Then I’ll administer a clotting agent prior to our *conversation*, Donald.” The Baron stepped closer and used the scalpel blade to slice away the captain’s uniform top. “Can I call you Donald?”

“Sure,” Sandhurst stammered as he tried desperately to think of something to dissuade his captor from what was to come. “I’d remind you that you were not mistreated as my prisoner, Baron. You were given medical aid, food... you were merely restrained.” A few precise cuts of the blade and Sandhurst’s remaining clothing fell away.

The suspensor field lowered Sandhurst to where his feet almost touched the floor. The Baron rose from the ground on similar energies and leaned in to whisper intimately to his victim as he made the first of many incisions. "Consider this payment with interest."

Chapter 16

The colorful maelstrom surrounding her coalesced into a single shape that left her now in the midst of a black void. Saihra Dunleavy clung to the hope that this was some kind of psychotropic First Contact experience, and her emotions were buoyed by the aura of munificence being projected by the creature taking form before her.

It appeared crystalline in nature, an amorphous construct that seemed all angles and hard edges, which expanded and contracted continuously as its shape changed. The spectrum of colors that had once enclosed her now washed across the facets of the entity.

“We are Sentinel.” She heard the words in her head, or she would have, had she still possessed one. “We apologize for the necessity of your being detained, but it was imperative for us to determine your biology, your nature, and your intent. From your thoughts and memories, we have concluded that you were not complicit in our prisoner’s escape. Your people demonstrate a high-level codified ethical structure, and it has been decided that we may enlist your cooperation in returning our charge to its place of confinement.”

{* I... um... thank you.*} Wonderful, *she thought dourly*, I’m sure my first words to these beings will be immortalized by the Federation Diplomatic Corps.

“One of our number will accompany you back through the conduit and will coordinate the efforts necessary to drive the creature back into captivity.”

{* I’m being returned?*} She asked hopefully.

“Yes, both to your body as well as your native realm. We have also discerned that your people have made contact with the Betrayer. He is as intelligent as he is dangerous, and it is vitally important that we not allow him to escape captivity aboard your vessel. With permission, we will take custody of the Betrayer for the safety of all, as the danger he poses to your dimension is considerable.”

{* I’m sure we can work something out. I can’t speak directly for my people, though. Your representative will have to speak with my captain.*}

“We acknowledge and will abide by your hierarchical command structure.”

Dunleavy felt herself being drawn backwards as her unique multi-perspective vision began to wane...

Ensign Lightner’s touchdown on the meteorological station’s landing platform was not the most graceful of his career, but it got the job done. Both the buffeting winds as well as the monsters that had begun slashing at the craft from the veil of clouds had conspired to make the last few kilometers to the landing site especially harrowing.

Ramirez pulled off her arm sling and winced as she hefted her phaser rifle and moved to the rear exit ramp of the shuttle. “Okay, people, we’re going to stay close together and provide mutual cover from whatever’s out there.”

She, Ensign Diamato, and the two security personnel were armed with rifles, while Plazzi was equipped with a hand phaser and science kit. Lightner would bring up the rear and haul along the transport pattern enhancers.

As Ramirez conferred with the security team, Plazzi moved into the cockpit. He took a moment to access sensor readings at the now abandoned pilot’s console. After a moment he poked his head back into the main cabin as he called out to the XO, “Commander, might I have a moment?”

She was clearly perturbed at being distracted so near to their mission getting underway, but Ramirez spared the science officer a brief audience. “What is it, Elisto?”

Plazzi jerked a thumb towards the cockpit. “Sensors are going crazy with the activity outside, sir. I strongly suggest we use the shuttle’s emergency transporter to put us inside the facility, deep as it can get us.”

She frowned reflexively. “I thought the transporters were unable to get a positive beam-in lock due to the interference.”

“Yes, sir. That was from orbit. Now that we’re dirt-side, the shuttle’s transporter sensors should have enough power to punch through this soup and put us at least a couple levels down into the structure.”

Ramirez was skeptical. “They should or they do, Mister Plazzi?”

He smiled. “I’m about a month away from a well-deserved second retirement, Commander. Rest assured I’m not going to start gambling with my life now.”

She considered it for a moment and finally acceded. “Alright, let’s do it.” She cast a glance back at the rear hatch and confided, “I really wasn’t all that anxious to go running out there anyway.”

Ramirez’s combadge chirped, and she tapped it as Plazzi took a seat at the pilot’s station to begin setting up the site-to-site transport. “Ramirez here. Go ahead.”

“Commander, this is Lieutenant Taiee. I’m afraid I have to report that the Baron has escaped from Sickbay an—”

“What?” Ramirez cut her off as her face colored with frustration. “How did that happen?”

“It gets worse, sir. They’ve taken the captain.”

Explosions sent concussive waves of force tearing through the lab that rained debris down upon Juneau and her team. Bursts of phaser fire, both in beam and pulse form scoured the area around the entrance to the lab to burn, blast, and vaporize the

ravening beasts that fought and clawed their way atop one another to push through the doorway.

Juneau moved at a crouch to Tark's firing position behind a burned-out computer workstation. She paused to squeeze a burst of phaser pulses into a particularly vicious looking Klingon jackal mastiff that had managed to force its way over the pile of smoldering animal corpses choking the doorway. "Master Chief," she yelled above the din of combat, "we're going to need to fall back!"

Tark swept the doorway with his phaser set on a high wide beam setting that incinerated the bodies of the various nightmarish creatures and creating a cloud of putrid but concealing smoke. "Fall back? To where?"

She looked over her shoulder at the viewing gallery behind them.

"Oh, no. *Hell* no!" Tark's pugnacious face took on a savage mien. "You've seen the radiation readings from in there. There's no way we could survive down there for more than a few minutes."

Juneau shook her head. "We'd only be in there for a moment."

Tark's eyes widened. "You're crazy! You *are* trying to get us killed!"

"I'd rather take my chances with that wormhole than remain here and get torn apart."

One of the science technicians broke formation to retrieve a new power cell for his phaser, only to have an enormous Seltan carnosaur rush from out of the pall of smoke and pounce on him. The reptile's wicked teeth ended the man's cries quickly, and as it raised its head to swallow a mouthful of his flesh it was cut down by a fusillade of phaser energy.

Tark studied the man's twitching form for a brief moment before he turned back to Juneau. "Point taken, Lieutenant."

"Good. I think that we should..." A peculiar brightness from behind them caught her attention. She turned to see five orange orbs, each identical to the one that had vaporized Dunleavy, hovering just outside the viewing partition. Juneau nudged Tark with her elbow. "Chief, the neighbors are back."

He swore colorfully in Tellarite. "Now we're trapped in a vise."

All five orbs passed through the transparent aluminum. Before Tark could bring his phaser around, they began to lash out at the predatory animals fighting to get at the Starfleet contingent. They blasted their way through the hellish chokepoint of the doorway and into the corridor beyond as swaths of golden light vaporized everything in their path.

Tark looked on, clearly amazed. "That was—"

"Enormously helpful," Juneau finished for him.

They rushed forward to catch a glimpse of the orbs as they ascended the stairway, the death screams of sundry creatures heralding their passing. "They're clearing a way to the surface, people, let's move!" Juneau shouted to the assembled crew.

People began rushing for the surface, but Juneau remained behind. Tark turned to see her drop to the floor and maneuver the dead science technician into a fireman's carry. She struggled to her feet, shifted her burden, and began plodding towards the door. "Quit gawking and move, Master Chief. That's an order."

From behind them a voice asked, "That include me, too, Lieutenant?"

Saihra Dunleavy smiled at them self-consciously, one hand held high. "Everyone here who's made a First Contact, raise your hand."

They clambered up the stairwell until they finally reached the main level. The other personnel had fanned out to form a perimeter, but there was no longer any sign of the orbs. As Tark stepped into the room, he was surprised to see Lt. Commander Ramirez and her rescue team talking animatedly with the others. Lightner and the team's security personnel were setting up the pattern enhancers in a triangular formation.

Ramirez turned to see Tark, her relief tinged with a concern that the Tellarite couldn't place. "Good to see you, Master Chief. We thought you were in trouble."

"We were, sir." Tark assisted Juneau in lowering their fallen comrade to the floor. "According to Dunleavy here, we appear to have some new friends on the other side of the rift."

"Good, she can tell us all about it when we get topside." Ramirez raised her voice to get the attention of the others as she announced, "Get assembled for beam-out."

Tark glanced at Dunleavy. "Didn't you say one of those spheres would be coming aboard as a liaison?"

Dunleavy smiled wistfully. "Don't worry, Master Chief. When they're ready, they'll find us."

As Ramirez finalized transport protocol with the ship, Tark looked around the room and then sniffed loudly through his porcine nose. "Now I remember that smell. It's been a while."

Juneau observed him curiously. "What smell is that, Master Chief?"

"Victory."

He awoke shortly before their next scheduled session. Sandhurst couldn't say how he knew it, but he did, nonetheless. Despite the grievous damage his body had suffered at the hands of the Baron, he was occasionally able to sleep from sheer exhaustion, regardless of how much pain he was in.

Sandhurst was given regular medical attention, though just enough to keep him from slipping into unconsciousness too quickly during their time together. He surmised that the Baron must have done this frequently to have become so talented a sadist. *Torture as art*, he mused darkly.

How long had he hung here, bloodied, battered, and caked in his own filth? Days certainly, perhaps weeks. Sandhurst couldn't tell. When the seconds between punches or cuts or the closing of an electrical circuit seemed to last an eternity, estimating the passage of time became impossible.

A full two weeks of his rigorous nine-month stint at the Starfleet's Command Officer's Training course had been dedicated to capture and interrogation by hostile forces. Fearsome questioning sessions at the hands of skilled instructors had given the students a taste of what the real thing might be like. For his graduation exercise from that class, Sandhurst had been pummeled ruthlessly by an enormous holographic Tzenkethi who demanded to know the Federation's defense plans for the region along their mutual border. Sandhurst had resisted admirably and had congratulated himself afterwards for his fortitude.

Such was not the case now. As his physical and emotional strength were sapped by repeated meetings with the Baron, Sandhurst had eventually broken. Sleep deprivation, starvation, and constant pain had conspired to shatter his defenses. He had cried, he had pleaded and begged and howled. The Baron had used various cutting implements at first and insinuated that these were a 'warm up.' He had subsequently moved on to more creative means: fire, water, suffocation, electrocution, and finally direct neural induction.

Sandhurst had not known such levels of agony were possible. Each session invariably ended with him drifting in and out of consciousness, having shrieked and wept himself to utter exhaustion. The only times when he felt anything like his real self was just before the sessions began. His short-lived bravado was always stripped away, of course, but those brief moments of defiance were all he had to look forward to now.

The Baron emerged from out of the darkness, his boots clacking noisily on the floor. Sandhurst's head lolled, and he strained to raise it and look at his tormentor. "Howdy," he rasped.

"And a good day to you, Captain," the Baron replied jovially.

"I've been thinking," Sandhurst slurred past cracked and swollen lips. "I think you've got the wrong man."

The Baron busied himself setting up the day's mystery device; it was some kind of apparatus that Sandhurst hadn't seen before. "Oh, really?" The older man chuckled. "And how is that?"

"You want Jean-Luc Picard." Sandhurst coughed and his chest rattled ominously with the effort. "Or Captain DeSoto. Glover maybe. Those guys get abducted all the time." He laughed hoarsely, then gritted his teeth at the pain the

effort elicited. “They’re in the big leagues. It—” he was wracked by a spasm that contorted his entire body briefly. “It’s part of the deal. Big ship, big name, big danger.” He moaned softly as his musculature relaxed and released his weight once again to the suspensor field. “Me? I’m nobody.”

The Baron smirked as he stepped up to place a small, reddish-tinted circular device on Sandhurst’s temple. “I disagree, Donald. Right now, out of all those presumably important captains, you’re the only one who can assist me.”

Sandhurst’s head bobbed. “Yeah, definitely Glover. He’d eat this stuff up.” Sandhurst giggled irrationally. “You’d like him, he’s got a real dark streak.”

“Sounds like a man after my own hearts,” the Baron murmured distractedly as he fiddled with his ever-present crystal device. Finished, he turned his gaze back on Sandhurst. “Well then, Donald. Shall we get started?”

“Already? And here I thought we were having a moment.”

The Baron’s wicked smile returned. “Moment’s over.” He touched the crystal and suddenly Donald was five years old again, sitting in the kitchen of his parents’ house in Johannesburg. It was more perfect than any holo-program he’d ever experienced. Every sight, smell and sound exactly as he remembered.

Sandhurst could still hear the Baron, whose voice echoed in his head. *“This is similar to the neural induction you experienced, only it taps directly into your memories. It allows me to manipulate your long-term memory engrams, to shape your recollections however I please. I also have the ability to revert your emotional responses to the appropriate age. It’s all rather ingenious, really, perverting your fondest childhood memories to torture you with your own past.”*

Donald’s mother stepped back from the kitchen replicator station, startled by a loud noise in the next room. That’s when the Nausicaans burst in. Donald screamed as one of them grabbed his mother roughly...

Chapter 17

It fled in a panic. It had been so engrossed with tormenting the corporeals on the planet's surface that it nearly hadn't registered the arrival of its former captors. It had foolishly believed that wherever it was, no matter that it remained linked to its prison, that it was somehow out of reach of those who had confined it for countless centuries.

It rocketed out of the gravity well with the Sentinels in pursuit. As it ran it turned its senses back on its hunters. It hoped to divine what their plans might be, and it was unprepared to find fear among its jailor's emotions. If they feared it, it must have the power to hurt them. It had never considered that possibility.

The creature slowed and gathered its strength as it marshaled its anger. As they approached, it turned suddenly to attack...

Ramirez, Juneau, Tark and three others stayed behind as the last of the surface team to beam out. As they waited for the transporter cycle to initiate, Juneau surreptitiously moved a hand to activate a control on the interface bracelet attached to her wrist beneath her uniform sleeve. A cascading field of transporter energy descended over Ramirez and the other three to sweep them away, but Juneau and Tark remained.

Tark grimaced. "What now?" He moved to activate his combadge, but instead slumped insensate to the floor, victim to Juneau's concealed stun field. She knelt beside him and unfolded a small device that had been housed in the bracelet that she then placed on the unconscious Tellarite's forehead. The engramatic purge took only seconds to completely erase the master chief's short-term memory for the past two days.

Her communicator chirped, "Ramirez to Juneau, report." The lieutenant did not reply.

She removed her interface bracelet and set it to self-destruct while simultaneously emitting a thoron field that would serve as part of the real Olivia's unwitting cover story. As the bracelet vaporized, Juneau laid down next to Tark as she prepared to sublimate her consciousness and wake Olivia after a brief delay. The real Juneau would have no recollections of the past two days during which the operative had been in control of her body. Thus, both she and Tark would exhibit the same symptoms, apparent victims of some mysterious thoron-based energy discharge on the surface.

As she slipped into oblivion, the *Gibraltar*'s transporter sensors finally managed to cut through the localized thoron interference and the ship's two remaining personnel were whisked home.

Ramirez stepped onto the bridge to find an invisible pall of melancholy hanging over the crew. People manned their stations dutifully, but the anguish and trials of their mission to this damnable planet had taken their toll. Nearly everyone aboard had a friend who'd been injured or killed in the past three days.

Before leaving the transporter room, she had watched tight-lipped as Tark and Juneau, both unconscious, had finally materialized on the transporter pad. It was as if the planet below just couldn't see fit to let them go without extracting another pound of flesh, this time in the form of the two inexplicably comatose crew.

A battered Pava Lar'ragos sat in the center seat, his left hand encased in an osteo-regenerator cuff. His shoulders sagged with exhaustion and defeat, and as he looked up to greet the exec, she could read both the physical and emotional pain in his eyes.

"Status," she ordered crisply.

Lar'ragos slid out of the command chair and stood shakily. "Sir, long range scans haven't turned up any signs of the captain or the Baron. Repairs have been completed on all shipboard systems. Transporter Room One reports that both Lieutenant Juneau and Master Chief Tark have been recovered, though both are unconscious and unresponsive. They're on their way to Sickbay, Commander."

Ramirez shook her head in dismay. "I was there." She gestured to the ready room, poised to ask Lar'ragos to join her, but the warble of the Ops panel cut her off.

The petty officer at the Operations board announced, "Incoming subspace transmission, Commander." The young man scrutinized his readouts and then added, "No identifier on the message, sir."

As she turned to face the viewer, Ramirez queried, "Type?"

"It's a request for visual communication, sir. Source is unknown and I'm unable to trace it." He engaged a series of subroutines, then finally concluded, "Wherever it's coming from, it's close. Definitely from within this star system, sir."

Ramirez set her shoulders. "Set our communications viral filters to maximum and put it on screen."

It seemed everyone on the bridge jumped simultaneously as the bright crescent of Pierosh II on the viewer was replaced with the naked, bloodied, and screaming form of Captain Sandhurst. Lar'ragos stood transfixed as he struggled to integrate the image on the viewscreen with the man he knew so well. His blood turned to ice in his veins, and he fought back waves of intrusive memories of the atrocities he himself had inflicted on others in his youth. One small part of Lar'ragos wondered selfishly if his friend's ordeal was yet another penance for him to pay.

The only one who seemed largely unaffected was Ramirez, though her jaw set, and her eyes grew hooded. On the screen, Sandhurst sobbed, begged for mercy,

and implored his torturer to tell him what it would take to make the pain stop. Suddenly, the image was gone, replaced with the countenance of the Baron, a dark backdrop behind him. “Now that I have your attention, I would like to discuss terms for the release of your captain.”

Ramirez’s reply was brutally succinct. “We don’t negotiate with terrorists and kidnappers.”

The Baron smiled fearsomely. “Really? Shall I arrange for the transfer of your captain’s body, then?”

Unable to stop himself, Lar’ragos spoke out of turn and earned a rebuking glare from Ramirez. “Wait! What is it you want in return for his safety?”

The Baron appeared to savor Lar’ragos’ discomfort. “My time is growing short, and I must move to capture the entity within the next five hours. Loath as I am to admit it, I require your help in order to snare the beast.”

She held up a hand and Ramirez interjected, “Just a moment, Baron. Anyone can fake an image of a man being tortured, and I have difficulty believing that you’ve broken Captain Sandhurst in the mere three hours you’ve had him captive.”

The Baron laughed coarsely, and his words dripped with disdain. “You forget, *Lieutenant Commander*,” he said using the English-accented “lef”, “I am in possession of a time machine. I can not only navigate the currents and eddies of all history; I can also control its flow aboard my own ship. The temporal chamber in which Donald is housed allows me to slow the passage of time to suit my whims.” There was a delighted gleam in the man’s eyes that convinced Ramirez that his assertion was absolutely true. “Though mere hours have passed for you, Donald and I have had weeks together.”

That proved too much for Lar’ragos to bear, and the man became unhinged. “You monstrous son of a bitch,” he raged. His hands clenched into claws with which it seemed he might tear the fabric of the universe apart to get at the Baron. “When I find you, I will kill you slowly with my own hands!”

Ramirez wheeled on the El Aurian. “Lieutenant, you’re relieved. Get off the bridge now.” She didn’t raise her voice. She didn’t have to.

He regained some small measure of control and Lar’ragos strode mutely into the turbolift. Ramirez turned back to the screen and acted as though the interruption hadn’t occurred. “Let’s say for the sake of argument that I’m prepared to entertain this idea. What would you need from us?”

The Baron acted as if Ramirez’s grudging cooperation had been a forgone conclusion. “On my command, you will direct a power transfer beam of thirty megawatts per minute to these coordinates,” the image was overlaid by numerical equations which quickly vanished. “Once completed, you will immediately initiate a static warp shell at a frequency of thirty-seven point one Cochrane and hold it for a period of two minutes.”

“And these tasks would accomplish what, Baron?”

The man assumed an even more feral grin. “You do not need to know the reasons behind these actions. It is only necessary that you comply.”

Ramirez stood firm. “And if we do as you require, and you manage to trap this creature, what then? What’s to stop you from unleashing this thing on any number of unsuspecting worlds nearby?”

“I have no designs on anything or anyone in your reality, *Lieutenant Commander*. My quarrel is with the denizens of my home dimension.” He smirked, as if entertaining some amusing thought. “And if I do not gain control over the dragon, the portal will close, and it will be loosed upon you and yours. Believe me when I say that no weapon or defense that you possess can affect the creature in the slightest. If by some chance you’re fortunate to survive its initial rampage, you will have the dubious honor of witnessing the destruction of countless worlds across this quadrant of your galaxy.”

Ramirez countered, “And we have only your good word to rely on, Baron? Why not return Sandhurst to us as a gesture of goodwill? I would be much more inclined to cooperate without the Sword of Damocles hanging over our heads.”

“You will cooperate regardless. You simply have no other alternative.” With that, the transmission terminated.

Ramirez stood there, arms folded across her chest, deep in thought. The others on the bridge shifted uneasily in their seats, unsure of what was to come. Most among the crew had learned through the grapevine of Ramirez’s objections to her current assignment. Would she leave Sandhurst to his fate, as Starfleet guidelines would seem to dictate? Or would she take the bolder road of those officers who threw the rulebook aside at such times to strike out and make their own plans? The XO could easily remedy her current circumstances, right here, right now, and do so within the bounds of official conduct.

Finally, Ramirez toggled her combadge. “Commander Pazzi and Lieutenant Ashok, report to the briefing room. We’re going to be making some modifications to the ship.”

Sandhurst awoke and bobbed to the surface of consciousness like a Terran pearl diver who had been submerged too long. He gasped and sputtered, then urinated on himself as he fought to focus his vision long enough to look the Baron in the eyes.

It took him a long moment to realize that the figure situated in his swimming vision was not the Baron, but a burly Orion clad in the trappings of a merchant prince and ship’s captain. He struggled with a dim memory from his time at the academy... an *ahmet* was their culture’s title for such a leader.

He took in a deep, rattling breath and willed his uncooperative mouth and larynx to form the semblance of words. “Good mor-ning *ahmet*. To what do... I

owe..." he was wracked by a bout of coughing that subsided after a moment. "...the pleasure?" he finished.

The Orion merely studied him for a time as he drank in the man's broken body and tried to take some measure of the spirit still lodged within the casing of maltreated flesh. "It would appear, Captain, that we have both run afoul of a particularly malevolent force."

"B—Baron," Sandhurst wheezed.

"Yes." The Orion clasped his hands in front of him. "He has made you his prisoner, and he has transformed me into a destitute underling."

"Trade you," Sandhurst offered.

"I think I'll pass, thank you." The Orion stood quietly for another few minutes, clearly giving something a great deal of thought. Eventually, he broke his silence. "If I were to help you to escape this place, could you guarantee me safe passage out of Federation space?"

"Yes."

"Do not answer too quickly," the *ahmet* cautioned. "I led my ship in an attack on your vessel, then boarded it with the Baron's help and killed several members of your crew. I do not apologize for my actions or seek to excuse them. I also do not want a simple change of scenery to lead you to alter your decision about this. If we can escape, have I your word that you won't turn and see me incarcerated like some common thief?"

"I'd k—" Sandhurst struggled to maneuver his thick tongue. "I'd kiss... your ass to leave... this place," he said simply.

Kutav bobbed his head back twice, the Orion variant of a nod. He turned wordlessly and left.

Sandhurst could not trust his own senses to tell him if the Orion had even been there. Perhaps this was his mind playing cruel tricks on him, or yet another of the Baron's sick torments. As he considered these options, he slipped once again beneath the waves and sank into the cool, painless abyss of unconsciousness.

Executive Officer's Quarters, *USS Gibraltar*, In geo-synchronous orbit of Pierosh II.

After meeting with Plazzi and Ashok to set the necessary systems modifications in motion, Ramirez had rewarded herself with twenty minutes dedicated solely to her before their common predicament came to a head. Just time enough for a quick sonic shower and something to eat, to buoy her ebbing strength.

Her spacious quarters were still Spartan and largely undecorated. She didn't intend for this to become a long-term hitch; just a year's time aboard the *Gibraltar* and she could get on with her career.

After she pulled on a fresh uniform, Ramirez grabbed a plate of Andorian taaftan bread, a bowl of Vulcan plomeek soup, and a cobb salad from the delivery slot of the replicator. She had moved her computer terminal to sit atop her dining table, and sorted through her correspondence as she ate. Ramirez sought anything to free her mind from the portentous thoughts that plagued her.

The messages were a mix of subspace communiqués from friends and colleagues, and the typical variety of administrative busy work mandated by Command. She paused as she spotted a missive that had been sent both to Captain Sandhurst and herself, although she had received it on an intentional twenty-four-hour delay. Apparently, the captain's inaction on this message had exhausted his window of opportunity, and the message had been activated on Ramirez's terminal. She toggled an audio version of the notification.

"To Lt. Commander Liana Ramirez, executive officer, *USS Gibraltar*. Effective this date you are hereby promoted to the rank of Commander, with all the duties and privileges thereto. Your dedication and professionalism have been in the finest tradition of Starfleet. Congratulations."

Signed,

Vice Admiral Lewton Westerly
Starfleet Bureau of Personnel
Starbase 27, Morab Sector.

Ramirez stared numbly at the screen, a half-eaten piece of taaftan bread dipped in soup suspended in her hand. The terminal dispatched a signal to her replicator station, and the device hummed to life. It produced a full rank pip to replace her brevetted one.

Unbelievable, she thought. This promotion had been in the works since Ramirez had been scheduled to transfer from her post as XO on the starship *Tempest*, presumably to Admiral Covey's staff. Once she'd been shuffled off to *Gibraltar*, she had assumed the promotion would be delayed a year until she finished her commitment to Sandhurst's command.

Here, now, amidst all the chaos and heartbreak of this mission, even her long-awaited promotion tasted like ashes. Considering their current circumstances, she wouldn't dare change her rank insignia until the captain had been recovered. It would be an affront to the crew, who would doubtless take it as an attempt to capitalize on Sandhurst's hostage status.

Ramirez's door chimed, but she was still so sidetracked by the unexpected announcement that it took a second chime for her to respond. "Who is it?"

"Lieutenant Lar'ragos, sir."

She sighed. "Do I really want to talk to you at this moment, Pava?"

He hesitated a beat. "I... would hope so, sir. I'd like to apologize for my earlier actions, if you're prepared to hear me out."

She closed her eyes briefly. "Enter." The doors parted and a regretful looking Lar'ragos walked into the cabin.

"This had better be good after the stunt you pulled, Lieutenant. And I'd remind you there's an airlock on this deck, so don't tempt me."

He nodded as he moved to the couch. Lar'ragos nearly sat but turned instead to seek permission.

Ramirez motioned curtly for him to be seated.

Lar'ragos made himself comfortable. "I am sorry, Commander. Seeing the captain like that was..."

"Beyond horrible, I know."

"Yes." He frowned and lowered his head to look at his clasped hands. "I know I didn't help matters any, and I hope you can find it in yourself to trust me to help you resolve this situation."

Ramirez sat forward, suddenly overcome by an urge to be uncommonly candid. Part of her realized that was probably the result of one of Lar'ragos' special gifts, but she found that she didn't care. "Pava, you of all people should have realized where I was going with that line of questioning. If I'd had immediately capitulated to the Baron, he'd have smelled duplicity and would have either killed the captain straight away or attacked the ship again out of sheer desperation."

Admonished, Lar'ragos sat silent as he digested that.

"I want the captain back as badly as anyone," she continued, "but we're dealing with a megalomaniacal crazy with his finger on the trigger of a super-weapon. I will not, under any circumstances, help this man capture the creature. The Baron claims that the thing has destroyed entire star systems, and if he's telling the truth I'll bet it was done on his orders." Her eyes registered Lar'ragos' dour expression. "I won't trade Donald Sandhurst for the lives of billions, nor would he want me to. Not in this universe, or any other."

"We could get help," Lar'ragos offered. "The *Sutherland* is *en route* to Setlik III to help rebuild the colony. She could be here in less than fifty hours." He smiled and tried to turn on the charm. "I've served with Captain Shelby, Commander. If I tell her we need backup, no force in the universe would stop her from coming to our aid."

Ramirez refused to budge. "Pava, we lost a lot of good people at Lakesh because Command couldn't see what it was we were actually up against until it was too late. If this creature is as powerful as the Baron insists, it could destroy a fleet of starships effortlessly. I won't put another ship in its crosshairs unnecessarily."

Lar'ragos tensed. "So, what now? We simply do this by ourselves?"

“No. Command has ordered the *Sovereign* here to assist, and she’s reportedly carrying a team of experts in this sort of cross-dimensional incursion. We’re going to wait for them.”

“How long?”

Ramirez settled back in her chair and looked pained. “Four days until they arrive.”

That would be too late, and they both knew it. Lar’ragos let it go unsaid.

“I can help you here, Commander. We have to save him.”

She smiled without enthusiasm. “That’s certainly my goal.” She gave the Security chief an appraising look as she queried, “What can you bring to the table?”

His haunted eyes bore into hers. “The Baron’s a monster, isn’t he? Well, I’ve been one, too.” With absolute sincerity he murmured, “Perhaps it takes one to catch one. Let me get inside his head.”

Chapter 18

*There is no pain, you are receding.
A distant ship's smoke on the horizon.
You are only coming through in waves.
Your lips move but I can't hear what you're sayin'.
When I was a child I caught a fleeting glimpse,
Out of the corner of my eye.
I turned to look but it was gone.
I cannot put my finger on it now.
The child is grown, the dream is gone. I have become comfortably numb.*

Comfortably Numb, Pink Floyd. Songwriters: David Jon Gilmour / Roger Waters

Main Bridge, *USS Gibraltar*, in geosynchronous orbit of Pierosh II.

They were committed. More accurately, they were stranded.

To produce a power transfer beam of sufficient strength to meet the Baron's requirements had necessitated that Ashok and his engineering team make substantial modifications to the ship's main deflector. Thus, at present the *Gibraltar* was limited to impulse speeds and was effectively anchored to the Pierosh star system until those alterations could be undone.

Although Commander Ramirez was hesitant to hamstring the ship so completely, it was a necessary ruse to convince the presumably watchful eye of the Baron that they were cooperating with his demands.

She sat in the center seat, fully in command and ever so mindful that the last time she had occupied such a position the starship in question had been shot out from under her. She promised herself that the fate of the *Phoenix* would not be repeated this day. Ramirez turned a slow circle in the captain's chair as she inspected her people and their readiness.

Lar'ragos, bruised but unbowed, stood at the Tactical console directly behind her. Plazzi manned the Science station with quiet efficiency as he probed every conceivable nook and cranny within sensor range for a telltale sign of the Baron's whereabouts. Ashok, who normally shunned the bridge, was seated at the Engineering console to monitor the final adjustments to the newly reinforced power waveguides that would convey the massive energies from the reactor core to the deflector dish.

Lightner sat at the Flight Control station while he ran a seemingly endless string of evasion simulations. Sadly, Juneau, who had proved so unexpectedly formidable on the planet's surface was still recovering in Sickbay, and her bridge station was filled by a senior NCO from the Operations department. Ramirez was encouraged that the young woman seemed so changed by her brief command

experience aboard the runabout. Perhaps one positive thing had resulted from the Pierosh Incident after all.

Plazzi emitted a discontented grunt that caught Ramirez's attention. She observed him for a moment and watched as he ran a series of multi-spectrum sensor scans that appeared to be directed at the system's star. She resisted the urge to pry, trusting that he'd bring the issue to her when he had sufficient information.

A few moments later, he did just that. Plazzi stepped over to the command chair and leaned in to whisper discretely, "Sir, there's something going on out there." She gave him a patiently expectant look, and he elaborated. "I'm reading all sorts of unusual gravimetric and spatial anomalies throughout the system, with the highest concentration in the immediate vicinity of the sun."

"Do you think it's the creature, or something the Baron's doing?"

Plazzi looked unsure. "This is just supposition on my part, but whatever's happening out there is taking place in subspace, and it's widespread. I'd be very surprised if the Baron's vessel, however powerful, could generate enough energy to create all the chaos I'm seeing."

Ramirez contemplated that. "If it's the creature, what's it up to?"

"If I had to guess, sir, I'd say it's violence of some kind."

The exec inclined her head. "Dunleavy's orbs, maybe?"

"Perhaps. She was told that one of them would be contacting us, and that's yet to happen. Maybe they're slugging it out in the ether."

She looked uncomfortable with that prospect as she queried, "So who's winning?"

Plazzi offered an apologetic smile. "Couldn't say, Commander. It's a bit like trying to judge an undersea battle by the ripples it produces on the surface." His demeanor grew more serious, and he added, "But if this continues to increase in magnitude, it could very well destabilize the star itself."

Ramirez sat a little straighter in her chair. "Destabilize as in...?"

"Resulting in violent stellar behavior, to be certain. Exactly how bad is the question, sir. We could experience some especially nasty solar flare activity, or if the disruption is catastrophic enough, the star could go nova."

She swore under her breath, then added, "And we just took the nav deflector offline."

"It might not make any difference," Plazzi said, sounding a pragmatic note. "With this much subspace chop, it's doubtful we could generate and maintain a stable enough warp field to outrun a stellar nova in the first place."

Ramirez gave the Science officer a severe look. "You're really a glass-is-half-empty type of guy, aren't you Elisto?"

Plazzi wagged an eyebrow and turned back towards the Science station. "Guilty as charged, sir."

As Ramirez mulled over the scientist's assessment, she inquired, "Will this prevent us from establishing the static warp shell the Baron's demanded?"

Plazzi resumed his seat at the Science station. "No, sir. The planet's gravity well is shielding us from much of the anomalous activity. A static warp field meeting the Baron's parameters at this location shouldn't prove too difficult."

Ramirez sat back in the chair, suddenly feeling the weight of command sinking onto her shoulders. Dupe a highly dangerous interdimensional criminal while simultaneously trying to free the captain from his clutches. Simple, really. She mused darkly that this was one of those eventualities the academy training scenarios never seemed to cover. As creative as the instructors' imaginations had been, none of them could have fashioned a simulation this bizarre.

Cargo Bay 3, Deck 5, *USS Gibraltar*, in geo-synchronous orbit of Pierosh II.

Ensign Kuenre Shanthi had been willing to undertake any task, no matter how menial, in order to get out of another day in Sickbay. The injuries he had suffered at the hands Parlan had been serious but were easily mended by Taiee's expertise. He had already spent more days than he'd care to remember atop a biobed, and so when the word had gone out that the crew were looking for volunteers to assist with the modifications to the ship's navigational deflector, Shanthi had jumped at the chance.

Still numb from the death of his lover, Kuenre was nonetheless mindful of his name and the reputation of his family in Starfleet. This was no time to lie helpless in the medical ward plagued by feelings of loss and regret. Only work would free his mind from his troubles, however briefly.

He had been put to work supervising the move of five induction stabilizers from the deflector control room into storage, to make room for the additional power waveguides. As he directed the anti-grav pallets into the cargo bay, he noted their placement on a padd and made certain to double-check their serial numbers as well as those on the cargo containers they were placed next to.

Shanthi stared at a cargo identifier tag on a stack of three cargo crates as he tried for a moment to make sense of the jumbled script. It looked like a standard cargo identification label, but the text was a mishmash of random letters and numbers.

Always the science officer, he made a habit of carrying a tricorder with him at all times. He flipped the device open and scanned the unusual crate stack and the ones surrounding it. The scans showed identical contents within the target stack and the stack nearest it. However, just as Shanthi was staring at the readout, his team deposited the containers holding the induction stabilizers nearby. The readings from the unusual crate stack in question instantly changed, and now showed their contents to be induction stabilizers rather than the previously noted equipment.

The ensign stared incredulously at the tricorder and wondered if it was malfunctioning. Then it occurred to him. Something was amiss in Cargo Bay 3. The young man tapped his communicator. "Shanthi to security, I need some assistance..."

The heavens howled with the brutal exchange of energy that rent the very fabric of space and time asunder. The creature battled the Sentinels ferociously as it fought like the cornered animal it was. The Sentinels, conversely, tried to lure the monster back towards the rift on the surface. They baited it, taunted it, and pricked its substance with weapons that could shatter entire continents.

In the midst of this maelstrom, a lone Sentinel broke ranks and moved off to tunnel its way up through successive layers of subspace towards the humanoids' starship.

Sandhurst reacted to the injection almost instantly. The cobwebs that clouded his head reduced fractionally, but his pain level abated significantly. He willed his eyes open to see *ahmet* Kutav standing before him, a stylized syringe of some sort engulfed in his large hand.

The Orion's words came to him as if from across a great chasm. "You are fortunate that much of my squandered youth was spent formulating and peddling illicit narcotics. Our friend the Baron has quite the laboratory onboard his ship."

Sandhurst began to feel something akin to human once again. It was the first time in a long while.

"What you're experiencing right now is a psycho-pharmaceutical illusion, Captain. I've mixed a powerful narcotic painkiller with a potent amphetamine. The physical damage you've suffered remains, and I'd warn you not to overextend yourself."

"What... mean by... overextend?" Sandhurst managed to gurgle.

The *ahmet* growled, "Continue breathing and focus your energy on trying not to die of your injuries. Clear enough?"

Sandhurst grunted his understanding.

Kutav pulled a small padd-like device from a pocket in his vest. "I believe the Baron's crystal, for all its sophistication, utilizes some very simple radio frequencies for much of its control of shipboard systems." He squinted at the display and plugged away at the device with fingers that were decidedly too large. "Let's see if we can find the frequency that controls your suspensor field."

Gibraltar jolted from another subspace shear that jostled Ramirez in the command chair. In the last thirty minutes the spatial disruptions had increased considerably and the strain on their shields was beginning to tell. The exec glanced up at Dunleavy as the younger woman stumbled onto the bridge from the turbolift. The security non-com grasped at the safety railing to regain her balance.

“Dunleavy, where are my spheres?” Ramirez fretted. “I was promised happy, shiny, presumably helpful alien spheres.” The XO gestured theatrically at the surrounding bridge. “I am witnessing what I would describe as a decided lack of spheres here.”

Dunleavy blanched. “I’m sorry, sir. I was told they would be in contact with us; that they required our help, but I wasn’t given any specific timetable.”

Ramirez’s frown deepened as the vessel was buffeted again. She spun around in the chair and looked to Lar’ragos. “Okay, Lieutenant, I need options. We have a deteriorating situation in system, a ticking countdown to our expected moment of cooperation, and no idea whatsoever where our enemy is hiding.”

Lar’ragos looked grim, and appeared just about to reply when something on his status board caught his attention. His eyes lit up as he focused a serious look on the first officer. “We might have something, sir. An unidentified object disguised as a stack of cargo crates in one of our cargo bays.” He tensed expectantly.

“Go,” she replied.

The Security/Tactical officer sprinted for the lift with Dunleavy in tow as the crewman at the Ops board announced an incoming message. “The *Sovereign* is hailing us, Commander.”

As much as she dreaded the choices she would have to make in the coming minutes, Ramirez harbored a deeper fear of having her options restricted by someone up the chain of command with little understanding of their situation and no personal investment in the outcome. She prayed the officer on the other end of the conversation would grant her some leeway. Reluctantly, Ramirez ordered, “On screen.”

The jumping, jumbled image was beset with interference from the local subspace chaos.

“Additional power to comms,” Ramirez ordered, and the transmission stabilized.

An Efrosian female stood in center frame of the viewer, the spacious bridge of a *Sovereign*-class starship arrayed behind her. “Commander Ramirez, I am Special Agent Ixis of Temporal Investigations. We’ve received the latest updates on your circumstances.”

Ramirez swayed in the seat as a shear slammed into their aft quarter. She managed to hold Ixis’ gaze but remained silent.

Undaunted by Ramirez's lack of response, Ixis continued. "I want to make myself absolutely clear here, Commander. Under no circumstances are you to give the Baron any assistance. Not even marginal help in the context of a ruse to secure Sandhurst's return."

Ramirez replied coldly but calmly. "You're three days away at best speed, Ms. Ixis." She had deliberately omitted the woman's title. "I would remind you that I am the ranking officer on scene, and as such I retain control of this situation."

Ixis' expression could have frozen plasma. "Really, Commander? I've seen no indication of a workable plan from you or any of your officers. I believe you're trying to wing this, making it up as you go along. That's unacceptable." The Efrosian's voice was saturated with derision. "You can't play fast and loose against odds like these, not with the lives of billions potentially hanging in the balance."

Ramirez noted, "Our lives are riding on this as well." She allowed the merest hint of a sarcastic smirk to grace her lips as she said dourly, "I've no intention of helping the Baron to achieve his plans, whatever they may be. However, if I can keep him dangling long enough to affect a rescue of our captain, then that's what I'll do."

Ixis countered, "We don't share your priorities, Commander. The capture of this Baron and his vessel are of paramount importance. That takes precedence over all other considerations, including the recovery of Sandhurst."

Ramirez's retort was succinct. "Go to hell."

Ixis grimaced. "We don't have a hell in Efrosian mythology, Commander, but if we did you wouldn't stand a chance there." From off screen a bluish hand descended and came to rest atop the special agent's shoulder.

"That will be sufficient, Agent Ixis." Captain Rixx's resonant voice and firm hand conspired to make the woman stiffen noticeably.

"Captain, do not interfere," she hissed. "TI has taken the lead on this assignment, and I'll thank you to—"

Rixx was unfazed by the woman's venom. You will stand down or I will have you removed from my bridge. Sit and be silent or you'll find yourself restricted to quarters." The Bolian's hand tightened fractionally on her shoulder to underscore his statement. Ixis' mouth snapped shut as two security officers stepped forward from their posts near the turbolifts. She retreated mutely to her chair at the mission specialist's station.

The captain leveled his stoic gaze on Ramirez. "Commander, I regret that we won't arrive in time to offer any substantive help. Regardless, however you see fit to proceed, rest assured that I'll support whatever decisions you make. Your duty here is clear; how you achieve it in the coming hours is your business." He offered a perfunctory nod of his head. "Upon our arrival we stand ready to either congratulate you... or avenge you. *Sovereign*, out."

Ramirez stood, momentarily transfixed with the now empty view screen. She was unsure what to make of the power play she'd just witnessed but was relieved

that for the time being the blundering tentacles of Federation bureaucracy would leave her in peace. Another tremor in the deck plates snapped her back to the here and now. "Status?" she inquired as she looked at Plazzi.

The scientist's assessment was bleak. "Subspace fluctuations continue to increase, sir, and we're at four minutes, eighteen seconds until the Baron's deadline."

She nodded grimly, then glanced over her shoulder at the chief engineer she asked, "Mister Ashok, how's my siphon coming?"

Cargo Bay 3, Deck 5, *USS Gibraltar*, in geo-synchronous orbit of Pierosh II.

Lar'ragos watched impatiently as the engineers moved the last of the portable shield generators into place around the faux cargo stack. Every scan of the object had returned the same falsified reading, and this led the El Aurian to surmise that this was either a retaliatory explosive device of some kind, or more hopefully, the Baron's timeship itself. A maintenance drone hovered overhead to support a generator suspended directly above the target to provide three-dimensional coverage.

He conferred with Ensigns Diamato and Shanthi to sketch out his plan for a multi-tiered defensive grid designed to deplete the strength of the Baron's gargantuan assistant's personal forcefield, while minimizing the danger to *Gibraltar*'s remaining security staff.

Reinforcing the portable shield grid was the starship's own internal containment fields. These would be erected in a cascade progression designed to slow the progress of any intruders who managed to fight their way clear of Cargo Bay 3. Ringed outside the generators were a series of automated phaser emplacements typically used for perimeter security during the war. These would focus massive firepower on any enemy combatants that exited the presumed craft.

He tapped his combadge and briefly outlined his plan of attack for Ramirez on the bridge.

"Acknowledged, Lieutenant. Be advised, our deadline is up in forty-five seconds, so you can expect some activity soon."

"Understood, sir." Lar'ragos severed the commlink and gestured to his team. "Alright folks, everybody out. We'll monitor the device from out in the corridor." As they exited, Lar'ragos activated the shield grid and powered up the phaser emplacements.

They moved into the hallway, which was filled with various monitoring and power generation equipment, as well as littered with makeshift tactical barriers designed to allow security personnel to fire from cover in close-quarters combat. Lar'ragos activated the viewer set into the corridor bulkhead and waited.

The Baron stood at the central control dais of his timeship as he flipped switches, turned knobs, and monitored *Gibraltar*'s power build up. He was flanked by Parlan, his diminutive human assistant. Looking to the smaller man, he effused, "I am on the cusp of a great victory. Soon, I can return triumphantly to our universe and resume my rightful station."

Parlan nodded obediently. "As you say, sire."

"I am inputting the coordinates of the focal point of the starship's transfer beam. Prepare the baffles to stem the energy influx and route it into the oculus." He then gave the other man a vindictive sneer. "And send your cousin out onto the starship to ensure their compliance. There is no margin for error here."

Parlan toggled a control on the dais. "Immediately, sire."

The Baron's manservant observed on a tiny display screen as the hulking form of his larger namesake stepped out of the craft.

The timeship lurched as the dematerialization sequence began that sent the craft away from its hiding place within the starship towards its meeting place with destiny.

Cargo Bay 3 was filled with an eerie pulsing screech that echoed off the walls as the object disguised as a stack of crates slowly vanished. In its place stood the giant humanoid that had wrought so much havoc in Sickbay half a day earlier.

Lar'ragos closed his eyes briefly as he mourned the lost opportunity to rescue his friend. After a second's hesitation, he found his focus and pressed the firing button on the padd that controlled the phaser emplacements.

The giant found himself at the center of six intersecting beams of phaser energy and surrounded by layered forcefields established to bar his progress.

The fight was on.

"Initiate power transfer beam." She had almost choked on the words.

A quietly voiced affirmative response was the only sound on the bridge as the view screen shifted to show a white-hot beam of energy that reached from *Gibraltar*'s deflector dish to an otherwise unremarkable point in space above Pierosh II.

Ramirez directed a hopeful half smile at Plazzi and raised her hand to display her crossed fingers. The older man acknowledged the gesture with an identical one. "Standby..." she ordered.

The overhead speakers crackled with interference as Lar'ragos' voice washed over the bridge.

"We've got company down here, sir. I'll keep you updated."

The Baron struggled to keep his sense of barely contained glee from overwhelming him as he announced, "Transfer beam on time and precisely where I'd instructed." He moved around the control table like a man possessed as he checked readings, threw levers, and multi-tasked at inhuman speeds. "Parlan, lock out the circuit breakers, I don't want the ship to panic and cut the power feed prematurely."

The bespectacled man blinked; the confusion evident on his face as he studied the controls.

"I'm... not certain I remember how to do that, sire."

The Baron glowered at him. "What's the matter with you? All this excitement have you locked into a diagnostic cycle again?" The ship's master moved around the dais to shove Parlan none too gently aside as he carried out the procedure himself. "Remind me to crack you open and have a look when all this is over," he growled.

Ramirez watched the seconds tick down in the corner of the viewer as the power beam reached maximum output. She turned in her seat and inclined her head towards the Bolian lieutenant manning the Engineering station. "Now, Mister Ashok."

Ashok replied in his basso rumble and announced, "Inverting power field and activating energy siphon, Commander."

As she swiveled around to face the view screen, Ramirez murmured, "Let's see how you like the taste of that, Baron."

The timeship shuddered violently and threw the Baron and Parlan against the control station. As he squinted to read an oscillating display screen, the older man howled, "No! They've reversed the power stream!" His face collapsed into a mask of utter fury as his hands flew across the controls and he strove desperately to keep the starship from draining his vessel's power reserves. "I have been betrayed," he seethed. "I will kill Sandhurst slowly while his crew watches, and then I'll tear that ship apart piece by misbegotten piece!"

Parlan watched the Baron's efforts while he grasped the console for support as the vessel bucked and jerked like a frenzied animal. "Yes, sire."

From the shadowy entrance to the corridor outside, *ahmet* Kutav emerged. He supported the naked and badly abused form of Donald Sandhurst who shuffled painfully beside the larger Orion.

Amidst the chaos of his predicament, the Baron looked up at their arrival, and immediately flew into a rage. “What is this? I gave no instructions for him to be freed from the time chamber!”

Kutav put some effort into appearing perplexed as he braced both himself and Sandhurst against the ship’s unpredictable movement. “Forgive me, Baron. I’d assumed that you would want him present to witness your triumph, as well as the destruction of his vessel.”

The Baron drew his crystal from within the folds of his dark cloak. “Nothing happens aboard my vessel that I have not ordered to be so! I knew allowing alien refuse like you onto my ship was a mistake.”

Kutav smiled savagely. “More than you know, Baron.”

As he raised the crystal in his hand and prepared to cut down the insolent Orion, the Baron was unprepared for the knife that Parlan slid between his ribs and then twisted enthusiastically. Aghast at this unexpected betrayal, the older man turned to look at his android servant as his legs gave out. He slid slowly towards the floor and the Baron croaked in disbelief, “How can this be?”

The chameleoid shapeshifter Mutwen had been in the employ of Kutav’s family for generations. The *ahmet* found the man’s changeling abilities useful on occasion, and Mutwen had been responsible for the demise of more than one of Kutav’s sworn enemies over the decades. Very few among the *Sethret*’s crew had known that he was anything other than the average Orion privateer that he appeared.

Kutav assisted Sandhurst to the control pedestal. He scowled at the mortally wounded man as he did so. “You make a habit of underestimating your opponents, Baron. Your arrogance blinds you, and I have made a life thriving in the blind spots of men and governments.” The merchant prince looked quizzically at Sandhurst as the frail human gestured to a control display with a shaking hand. “What is it, Captain?”

“Help... help me access... a schematic,” Sandhurst panted as he hoped against hope that he could decipher the peculiarities of the sophisticated craft in time.

Chapter 19

Main Bridge, USS *Gibraltar*, In orbit of Pierosh II.

“Status?” The query was meant for both Ashok and Plazzi, and as usual the Science officer was first to respond.

“Our beam is intersecting some kind of structure, sir. Size and composition are identical to the object that appeared in Sickbay.”

Ashok chimed in reticently, “I’m reading a positive energy tap from the object, Commander. Seventeen megawatts per minute and climbing.”

She turned to the petty officer manning Tactical. “How are the shields ho—”

A gravitic shear struck *Gibraltar* with sufficient force to overwhelm the inertial dampeners. Those crew not fastened to their seats were sent sprawling across the bridge with a chorus of yelps.

The NCO at Tactical pulled herself slowly back to her feet as she rubbed her jaw with one hand. She grimaced in pain and noted, “Shields now at thirty-two percent, sir.”

Thankful for the command chair’s safety harness, Ramirez glanced back at Ashok. “Route the power from the energy siphon and all auxiliary power to shields and the structural integrity grid, Lieutenant.”

“Aye, sir.”

The Tactical specialist’s voice raised an octave in alarm, “Unknown energy source has just appeared four-hundred kilometers off the port quarter...” The woman struggled to keep up as data rushed across her display, “...it’s on a direct intercept course... impact in...” She gasped,

“It’s penetrated our shields!”

Ramirez braced herself for a collision but after a few seconds it became obvious that none was forthcoming. She activated the public address to announce, “All hands, this is the XO. Be prepared for an intruder alert...” she paused, frowned, and added, “That is, make ready for intruders other than the one currently on Deck 5.”

She caught a glimpse of Plazzi smirking at her from the Science station but pretended not to notice. An instant later, the bridge was bathed in an ethereal orange light as a bright sphere of energy passed up through the floor from the deck below and hovered just in front of the main viewer.

The exec released her safety restraints and rose from the command chair as she called out to the Science officer, “Elisto?”

“It reads as identical to the ones our away team encountered on the planet’s surface,” Plazzi said while he shielded his eyes from the orb’s brilliant glare.

Suddenly self-conscious, Ramirez raised her voice to open with, “I’m Commander Liana Ramirez of the Federation starship *Gibraltar*, representing the United Federation of Planets.”

{**We are Sentinel, guardians of the prisoner’s captivity.**} The words reverberated in the heads of everyone on the bridge. Ramirez caught some of the other crew flinching reflexively from the perceived volume, despite the fact that the message had completely circumvented their auditory nerves. {**We know of you and your people through the one called Sajhra Dunleavy. It is imperative that you cease your efforts to neutralize the Betrayer’s vehicle. It is his craft that maintains the portal leading to the creature’s prison realm.**}

“Disengage the siphon beam,” she ordered without hesitation. Ramirez then asked hopefully, “What would you have us do?”

{**We have harried the creature, increasing its confusion. Now we must drive it towards the rift on the surface. To do this, you must generate a static warp shell as the Betrayer instructed. The creature has been programmed to be attracted to a subspace harmonic pattern at that wavelength. You must draw the creature back down into the gravity well of the planet. There we may be able to use our combined energies to force it back through the portal.**}

Ramirez frowned at that idea. “How close to the surface?”

{**The closer its physical proximity to the portal, the weaker it will grow. It will need to come within twenty kilometers of the surface. Outside of that range, the creature will be able to resist our efforts.**}

She cast a glance back at Ashok as Ramirez solicited, “Is that feasible?”

The lieutenant stood, the scowl on his face more pronounced than usual. “I’d recommend against it, Commander. Twenty-third century starship designs aren’t anywhere near as forgiving of atmospheric flight as more recent models. Our structural integrity grid wasn’t intended to cope with planetary gravity and atmospheric friction.”

Ramirez’s piercing eyes bore into the engineer. “I said feasible, Lieutenant, not preferable.”

Ashok inclined his head to concede the point. “It is feasible, sir, with a high probability of catastrophic failure.”

She smirked ironically. “I’m surrounded by the Optimists’ Society.” Ramirez stepped back and resumed her seat in the command chair. She took a deep breath and steeled herself for the task ahead. “Lieutenant Ashok, initiate the static warp shell.” She met the eager gaze of their daring helmsman and put their lives in the young man’s hands with the words, “Mister Lightner... take us down.”

“Fools!” the Baron rasped. “You’ve doomed us all. Once your ship has drained my reserves, the portal will collapse, freeing the beast.”

Kutav looked askance at the older man as he attempted to assist Sandhurst, “Aren’t you dead yet?” He then glared at Mutwen, “Finish him.”

Mutwen obeyed wordlessly. He stooped over the Baron and deftly ended the man’s life with swift, sure strokes of his blade. To his credit, the Baron met his end with more dignity than Kutav would have liked. The old man locked eyes with the chameloid as the shapeshifter cut his throat.

His attention now back on Sandhurst, the *ahmet* inquired, “What is it you’re trying to do?”

“Contact my... ship... for starters.” The captain experienced a rasping coughing fit that soon passed. “Then put this... craft back aboard *Gibraltar*.”

Kutav weighed his options and found the captain’s proposed course most sensible. Certainly, neither he nor Mutwen possessed the knowhow to pilot the timeship anywhere. Acting as the ailing Sandhurst’s hands, the Orion set to work.

Deck 5, USS *Gibraltar*.

Their phasers pulsed and whined in a symphony of energetic violence as they laid down a dizzying field of fire that the tactical android Parlan shouldered through with steely determination. The intruder had already fought his way free from the cargo bay. His shields had apparently been significantly reinforced since his foray into *Gibraltar*’s Sickbay.

Lar’ragos had exercised a fighting retreat down the long curving corridor which had left the hallway behind them pitted and smoldering from near-misses and blasts refracted from Parlan’s personal forcefield. The portable shield generators and duranium blast barriers now lay broken and scattered in the wake of the colossus’ advance.

The giant had weathered their assault and had replied in turn. He had launched blast after blast of energy from his outstretched hands that had collapsed one defensive containment field after another. Fortunately, no one among the *ad hoc* security team had as yet been injured, but unless they could find a way to destroy or contain the massive humanoid, casualties were a certainty.

Ensign Diamato thumbed the initiator button on a photon grenade and lobbed it down the corridor where it detonated noisily at Parlan’s feet. This sent the android reeling as the deck plating beneath him exploded impressively. The junior officer ducked as debris and shrapnel skittered down the hallway towards them. He glanced at Lar’ragos and asked, “What do you think his game plan is, Lieutenant?”

Lar'ragos shouldered his rifle to send a volley of phaser energy at Parlan as the neigh unstoppable giant clambered back to his feet. "He's heading for turboshaft two. If he gets in there it'll be nearly impossible to stop him."

Diamato ducked again as Parlan's answering bolt struck a nearby doorway. The blast blew the sliders off their tracks and sent them spinning into the cabin beyond. Lar'ragos gestured vigorously for the security team to fall back even further, past the turbolift alcove. He hoped to regroup the scattered members and focus their combined fire on the android.

As his enemy retreated, Parlan opened his mouth wide. It would have been a humorous looking gesture, if not for the shrill ultra-sonic scream he emitted. It was so overpowering that it brought the security team's hands reflexively to their ears. Phaser pistols and rifles clattered uselessly to the deck.

Lar'ragos staggered and fell against the corridor wall as he pressed his hands to his ears, screaming soundlessly against the mega-decibel assault.

The massive automaton disappeared into the alcove and the turbolift doors closed behind him to blessedly cut off the piercing scream that had incapacitated the ship's defenders. Lar'ragos fumbled for his combadge as he slid down the wall to the floor. His words were inaudible to his own traumatized ears, "Bridge, we've lost containment! He's in turboshaft two, destination unknown!"

With Kutav's help, Sandhurst moved around the control table to pull levers, push buttons, and toggle switches on the ridiculously antiquated looking apparatus. Mutwen, who had apparently been impersonating the Baron's companion long enough to have learned a few things about the vessel's functions, moved with them and pointed out various controls and their purposes.

Without warning, an orange glow erupted from the other side of the dais, accompanied by a sound reminiscent of a strong wind blowing through foliage. The *ahmet*'s eyes narrowed in frustration. "Profit and loss, what *now*?" He motioned brusquely for Mutwen to investigate.

The chameleoid shuffled around the dais. He frowned with the smaller Parlan's face as he remarked, "The Baron's body is on fire."

Kutav grumbled with annoyance, and he apologized as he set Sandhurst against the base of one of the spiraling support beams that ringed the dais. "One moment, Captain." He rounded the control station, a perplexed expression on his features as he observed gouts of radiant energy roaring from the Baron's collar, sleeves, and pant legs.

Mutwen cast an inquisitive stare at the Orion prince. "Perhaps his species self-immolates at death?"

“Perhaps.” The *ahmet*’s finely-honed sense of self-preservation began to send warning signals, and he felt the hair on the back of his neck start to rise. “I prefer to take no chances, however. When whatever this is finishes, dispose of what remains of the body.”

Mutwen nodded mutely and drew his knife from within the late android’s nineteenth century Terran business suit. As he waited for the strange phenomenon to conclude, he reflected on how surprisingly simple it had proved to follow the smaller Parlan back to his recharging station. Mutwen’s good fortune had continued when the shapeshifter discovered that the android’s formidable defenses went offline with the rest of him when coupled to the Baron’s craft for replenishment.

As suddenly as it had begun, the fiery emanation ceased. Mutwen stepped forward and raised the knife, but hesitated fractionally as he realized he was looking at a completely different person. He had expected a charred husk of a body, he found instead a young man in the Baron’s place. His indecision stemmed from the strong chameleoid taboo against harming others of his kind, a cultural trait they apparently shared with their morphogenic cousins in the Gamma Quadrant.

The rejuvenated Baron, however, suffered no such uncertainty. He raised the crystal he still clutched in his hand and sent a pulse of reddish energy surging into Mutwen that uncoiled his attacker’s molecular structure with torturous sluggishness. The chameleoid screeched in agony and lurched backwards as his body was literally turned inside out and disassembled at the atomic level.

Having watched his loyal friend and servant annihilated, Kutav rushed forward and bellowed furiously as he kicked the crystal out of the Baron’s hand. The device clattered across the floor into the dark recesses of the control chamber.

The Baron reacted with surprising speed. He grasped Kutav’s extended foot and wrenched it to pull the larger man off balance. The *ahmet* collapsed on top of the Baron, and the two men struggled feverishly as Sandhurst looked on, unable to do anything but watch.

Ramirez gripped the armrests of the command chair as the starship groaned and juddered around her. They plunged into the habitable envelope around Pierosh II, the starship’s shields glowing brightly as they absorbed the incredible heat generated by atmospheric entry.

The alien sphere had vanished as they’d begun their descent, presumably returning to the fight against the Baron’s creature. She desperately hoped the strange alien representatives knew what they were doing. *Gibraltar* had no means of detecting the entity, no way to confirm that it was following them down into the barren world’s gravity well. *Hell of a thing to take on faith*, she thought forebodingly.

Flashing red warning alerts began to appear on Ashok's board with greater frequency as the stresses on *Gibraltar*'s spaceframe increased. The Bolian called out, his voice distorted from the vibrations that jostled him in his chair. "Structural integrity field running at one-hundred and twelve percent of nominal output. Shearing stress reaching design tolerances."

"And the warp shell?" she asked.

"Holding," Ashok replied tersely.

"Transitioning into the mesosphere, Commander... eighty kilometers from the surface," Plassi updated.

"Ensign, how's she handling?"

Lightner's hands were steady on his console as he made minute course adjustments to their descent. "She's answering sluggishly, sir, but that's to be expected."

Ramirez forced herself to relax her hands, "Nothing you can't handle?"

The ensign smiled, the gesture going unseen by the XO. "I'm on it, sir."

She turned her attention behind her to the Security/Tactical station. "Status of the intruder?" Ramirez inquired of the duty NCO.

"We've stopped the turbolift car the intruder entered and redirected it to the security team's location, but it was empty. He apparently blasted his way through the car's ceiling. We're still unable to pinpoint his location, sir."

As she gritted her teeth in frustration, Ramirez asked, "And our attempts to get a transporter lock?"

The petty officer shook her head as she braced herself against her trembling console. "All attempts to lock onto the intruder have failed. His personal defense field prevents an accurate lock, and our tries at area-effect transports were ineffective. The beam just couldn't get a hold of him."

Ramirez nodded curtly, the movement lost in the ship's buffeting. She directed her gaze back to the viewer and struggled with her own impatience as they plunged into the stratosphere.

Lar'ragos, Shanthi, and Dunleavy checked their weapons as they ascended in the turbolift car. The security team had been forced to disperse throughout the ship in order to cover the vessel's most vulnerable areas. As Lar'ragos and the others headed for the bridge, he lamented this turn of events. If the entire force in concert had been overcome by Parlan, what chance did a three- or four-person team have against the behemoth?

All three of them were still effectively deaf as their ears continued to ring in the aftermath of Parlan's auditory attack. What little communication went on between them was conveyed in simple tactical gestures. As Lar'ragos attempted to

communicate his plan for them to secure the bridge, the lift car jolted violently and threw its occupants to the floor in a tangle of limbs.

When Lar'ragos' head stopped spinning, he looked to his companions. The young Science officer and the Security specialist were both alive but unconscious, their pulses strong. He glanced up to see the entire roof of the car crumpled inward, the surviving illumination in the lift car flickered dimly as guttering sparks rained down from the shattered lighting matrix overhead.

He tapped his communicator to make a brief report to the bridge which he was unable to tell had been received or not. Lar'ragos groped in the twilight for his phaser rifle and finally found it wedged beneath Shanthi's insensate form. He pulled it free and set the weapon to maximum, then vaporized a hole through the collapsed ceiling. Lar'ragos slung the rifle over his back and wriggled awkwardly through the opening.

As he stood atop the shattered lift car and gazed upward, Lar'ragos discovered the source of their accident. Approximately fifteen meters above him in the turboshaft, Parlan climbed the emergency egress ladder. The turbolift car had collided with the giant and his personal shield. His features contorted in a feral grin, Lar'ragos retrieved his rifle and took aim.

Ahmet Kutav and the Baron thrashed wildly about the control center, both men locked in a life-or-death struggle that Sandhurst observed with a detached calm the he couldn't explain. The captain felt the artificial energy and numbness from Kutav's injections begin to wane and realized that if he were going to be able to do anything helpful, it must happen soon.

He flopped onto his side and began to pull himself across the floor towards the base of the control dais. His breath roared in his ears and his vision grew dim with the effort, but after a few moments he reached his goal. The access panel at the base of the device came loose with surprising ease, and Sandhurst thanked every deity he could think of that he'd not been forced to fight with the thing.

Beneath it were the internal components of the command console. Sandhurst stifled a groan as he realized that the mechanisms and circuitry he was looking at were unlike anything in his experience. He had always harbored a fascination with alien engineering, the more exotic the better. Over the years he had become something of an expert in bio-mechanical devices, as he'd had the opportunity to study a few examples of such highly foreign technology in his career. But all this was something new.

Without a tricorder or a schematic to guide him, Sandhurst reached into the mass of wires, tubules, circuitry and lights and set to work.

“Nineteen kilometers from the surface and holding, sir.” Lightner’s announcement prompted Ramirez to glance back at Ashok. It seemed as if the engineer’s console was nothing but flashing crimson.

“Structural integrity has degraded to seventy-three percent, Commander. I’m reading stress related microfractures in both nacelle support pylons, and shield generators four and seven are exceeding thermal tolerances.” The lieutenant noted this stoically, as if he’d already made peace with the fact that this incursion was doomed to end badly.

Ramirez sat as far forward as the command chair’s restraint harness would allow, “Hold position here, Ensign.” Without looking behind her again, she addressed Ashok. “How long can we stay here, Lieutenant?”

He replied in a listless tone, “Five minutes, sir. Perhaps less.”

Plazzi pulled his eyes away from his Science display to fix a concerned look on the XO. “Now what, Commander?”

She would have shrugged, but her safety restraints wouldn’t allow it. “I really have no—”

A massive cone of golden energy projected from the surface flashed upward to engulf the starship. At the same instant, the doors leading to turboshaft two exploded inward and sent smoking shards of debris scything through the bridge. Ramirez gasped in pain as something hot sliced into her shoulder, and she looked to see a piece of superheated tritium embedded in her flesh. Her eyes moved up to the smoldering doorway leading to the empty turboshaft, just in time to see a large hand gain purchase on the deck.

“Intruder alert,” she cried. “Security response to main bridge!”

Chapter 20

Sandhurst picked through the unfamiliar technology and tried to differentiate which component did what as he struggled with his trembling hands and increasingly blurred vision. He could hear the brutal struggle being waged on the other side of the dais, the grunts and gasps of two men locked in mortal combat.

As Kutav's drugs leached from his system, Sandhurst became conscious once again of the agonizing injuries he had sustained. His breathing became shallow; it hurt too much to inhale deeply. His hands grew increasingly clumsy, and he found himself fumbling and dropping various pieces of hardware within the console housing. Sandhurst knew he must act quickly, that time was precious, but his mind kept wandering and he had to fight to maintain his concentration.

There was a series of wet smacking sounds, punctuated by a voice which bellowed incoherently with each fist fall. Then... silence. Footsteps echoed in the room, and Sandhurst found himself murmuring an ancient prayer from his childhood that somehow the Orion had proved the victor. A pair of human-looking hands grasped Sandhurst roughly and dragged him out from under the control table. The captain stared up into a youthful but unfamiliar face, now bruised and bloodied following the brutal struggle with Kutav. Sandhurst winced, coughed and said, "Compliments to... your cosmetic surgeon."

The Baron roared as he picked Sandhurst up bodily and threw him against one of the spiraling support columns. Collapsing at its base, the captain struggled feebly to move, but found that he could not. He watched the Baron's approach as he readied himself to meet his end. At least he had gone out fighting. It wasn't much, he thought regretfully, but it was something. "What the hell... are you... anyway?" Sandhurst croaked.

The Baron grinned wickedly as he reveled in his new body, all swagger and arrogance despite the damage inflicted by the now unconscious Kutav. "Less a man than a *god*," he growled and reached for Sandhurst's throat.

Time froze, or it seemed to. The Baron's hands, centimeters from Sandhurst's neck, were immobilized. Sandhurst wondered briefly if, on the cusp of death, his brain had short-circuited somehow. It was then that he spotted the man.

Clad in the strange garb of a nineteenth century Union soldier from the American Civil War, the man stood outside the inner ring of the command room, backlit by one of the Baron's pedestal displays. He stepped forward into the light to study both Sandhurst and the Baron. The expression on his unremarkable face was one of anguish.

Sandhurst's head swam and spots appeared in his vision as he battled to remain conscious.

“Here for the show?” he asked. “You’ve... arrived for the best... part.” It took every ounce of will Sandhurst could muster to raise his hand and point tremulously at the Baron. “...’bout to kill me.”

The man dressed in soldier’s garb held out his hand, palm up. There was a brief flash of white energy that vanished to reveal a miniature light show taking place just above his hand. It took Sandhurst’s fatigued mind a moment to place the image; a display of the battle raging throughout subspace. An amorphous blob of greenish energy, presumably the Baron’s creature, was surrounded by a swirling formation of orange spheres. Tiny pinpricks of energetic aggression lanced between them in a confused ballet of violence.

Sandhurst coughed into his hand, then spit out what looked suspiciously like a clotted piece of lung tissue. His chest wheezed threateningly as he asked, “Q... I presume?”

The stranger’s face was not the one Sandhurst had seen in briefings on the god-like Q, and he wondered idly if this was some other member of the vaunted Continuum. The soldier appeared to ignore the human’s question and shook his head sadly as he continued to watch the clashing foes. He murmured, “This is unbearable. That it has come to this...”

The undulating field of green energy vanished, followed a second later by the rest of the image. Suddenly, the soldier stood cradling another man in his arms. The new arrival wore a uniform similar to that of the figure who held him, only his was grayish in color, its chest and shoulders stained with blood from what looked to be a mortal head wound.

The soldier in blue lowered his face. His eyes glistened and then closed tightly as he kissed the crown of the dying man’s head. “I’m sorry.”

Sandhurst watched the bizarre reunion and found himself speaking without intending to. “A friend?”

The soldier opened his eyes and choked back tears before he replied in a voice thick with grief, “My brother.”

He inclined his head towards them with great effort and Sandhurst asked, “Who... did this?”

“I did,” was his sorrowful reply. “I killed him.”

“Condolences,” was all Sandhurst could think to say.

The soldier smiled wistfully as tears now coursed down his cheeks. “It was war. And he was so damnably stubborn.” He clutched his fallen brother to him and continued to speak, as if listing his sins to a confessor. “I cut him down on the field of battle, and thought he was dead. I hadn’t realized I’d only wounded him, hurt him so grievously that his mind shattered, though his body lived on.” He shook his head gently, “Killing each other over divergent ideals. How corporeal of us.”

Sandhurst fought back against a wave of dizziness that threatened to overwhelm him. He tried to anchor himself as he commented, “Join the club.” He

pressed his hand on one of the more vicious wounds to his leg, the surge of pain helping him to focus. "Why have you... come for him... only now?"

"Until he was unleashed on your universe through the portal, we didn't know what had become of him." The soldier appeared to gather his emotional reserves and now looked somewhat less grief stricken. "Your 'Baron' tore our brother from his grave and used him for his own malicious ends."

"He's... rather good at that."

"Then it was too dangerous to approach him in his current state. His higher functions were destroyed; he was acting largely on impulses provided to him by the Baron. Look at what chaos he's wrought on this star system in his struggle with the Sentinel spheres. Had he seen the Continuum's arrival as a mortal threat, he might have lashed out at us in blind terror, and without the normal constraints on his powers provided by an intact mind-state, he could have easily annihilated your entire plane of existence."

"That would be... bad," Sandhurst assessed gravely.

"Indeed," the soldier replied. "It wasn't until your people had drawn him to the surface and the Sentinels' portal had sufficiently weakened him that I could risk recovering him without undue peril." He frowned slightly. "Which reminds me..."

A loud buzzing sound filled the room, followed by a sudden, echoing 'pop.' An orange sphere grew from a single speck to its full two-meter diameter in an instant. It hovered directly in front of the Union soldier.

His eyes hardened with resolve as the soldier said, "I'm taking him home. He deserves to be laid to rest among his own kind."

The sphere pulsed in quick succession. Something unspoken passed between it and the soldier.

"I know, and for what it's worth, I'm sorry for all the torment he caused you." He cast a hard look at the Baron's frozen form before the soldier looked back to the sphere. "What was inflicted on my brother was a ghoulish crime; he was not acting of his own free will."

Again, the sphere pulsated.

The soldier nodded slowly. "I understand." He shifted the burden in his arms and looked momentarily discomfited with the weight of the body. As he clung to consciousness, Sandhurst found that strangely amusing. The man continued, "Were it not for your efforts and those of the humans, the Continuum wouldn't have discovered the scope of this tragedy." He looked down at the man he embraced. "Even during his incarceration, you were never cruel to him. You did your duty without malice, and I thank you for it. That's far more than can be said for the monster who desecrated his remains."

The sphere appeared to answer as it simultaneously swept the Baron's stationary visage with a fan of golden light.

The soldier frowned. "I'm afraid I cannot allow that. I brought you here only to explain my actions and convey my appreciation. As much as I wish all manner of horrors upon this man, you will have to locate him with your own means." In answer to Sandhurst's unasked question, he turned to the captain. "We're under new management. New rules of conduct. No interference."

Sandhurst's heart sank. His fantasies of a miraculous rescue crashed down around him. The sphere vanished with another pop of displaced air, and Sandhurst was left staring at the two men. "I hope... you find some pe— peace," he offered.

The soldier held Sandhurst's gaze as he thought hard about something. "You and my brother are both his victims. I empathize with your plight. I truly wish I could help."

Sandhurst coughed. "Your people... have broken the rules before."

"I cannot deliver you from his clutches, Captain. Stiff penalties will be levied against anyone of us who break ranks among the new order."

Sandhurst nodded towards the dais. "Could you push a few buttons for me?"

The soldier considered this. He shifted his brother in his arms and approached the control station. He appeared momentarily torn, but then shook his head with finality. "I cannot." As he gave the human a last, remorseful look, the Union soldier vanished in a burst of light that took his Confederate kin with him.

Sandhurst closed his eyes and prepared himself for the Baron's onslaught.

Lar'ragos typed frantically on a padd with one hand as he struggled to change out his rifle's power cell with the other. As Parlan reached back to launch an energy pulse down the turboshift at him, Lar'ragos managed to erect a forcefield three meters above where he stood atop the damaged lift car. He flinched involuntarily as the purplish bolt slammed against the field. He muttered to himself as he drove the new power clip home, repeating over and over, "Lucky old man, lucky old man..."

He attenuated the field to the frequency of his phaser rifle and fired up through the now permeable barrier. His blasts struck the android's fluctuating defensive shield as the juggernaut began to climb up through the shattered lift doors and onto the main bridge.

As he sensed the machine's growing weakness, Lar'ragos pressed the advantage.

Ramirez watched in horror as Parlan began to clamber onto the bridge. The lift tube behind him was lit with brilliant flashes of light as someone further down the turboshift pelted the android furiously with pulse blasts.

The surging adrenaline in Ramirez's system sparked an acute hyper-awareness, and her movements felt unnaturally slow and cumbersome as she struggled to access the phaser housed in a recessed compartment in the command chair.

Before she could bring her weapon to bear, multiple phaser beams from other bridge personnel converged on Parlan to impact his wavering forcefield. Ramirez added her sidearm's discharge to the melee, and their combined effort drove him backwards. Parlan's protective field suddenly collapsed as the phaser beams scored across his torso to punch through his outer casing and into his internal structure. The giant was thrown backwards into the void where he vanished soundlessly down the shaft, a puzzled expression etched into his artificial features.

Lar'ragos cursed and threw himself to the side as Parlan's smoking frame thundered down the turboshaft. The giant spun wildly and caromed off the walls before slamming into the forcefield just over Lar'ragos' head. The lieutenant was both amazed and relieved when the field held firm on impact and the colossus' body began to thrash against the crackling barrier. Lar'ragos put another dozen pulses into Parlan's convulsing form for good measure.

He allowed the field another few seconds to further deplete the android's reserves before shutting it off. Parlan landed atop the turbolift car with a resounding clang, his body still twitching as the blackened holes in his torso sparked and sizzled. Lar'ragos stood over him and placed his foot atop the android's chest as he pointed the rifle's emitter at Parlan's head.

Though gravely wounded, many of Parlan's secondary and tertiary backups were still functional. At speeds exceeding that of light, his positronic network analyzed his present situation. He could not self-destruct, for in so doing he would destroy the starship that was acting as bait for his master's plan. He could not allow himself to be captured, as that would allow his enemy valuable insights into his functioning should the Baron send his smaller cousin aboard to finish the job. Instead, he found the only acceptable course of action was escape. He activated his internal distress beacon that linked to the timeship's transmat system. A black wall of energy rose from the floor to engulf Parlan and the unwitting El Aurian and whisked them both away.

The immediate threat having been dealt with, Ramirez turned her attention back to the ship's dilemma. The strain on *Gibraltar*'s spaceframe had become so great that they were losing structural integrity by the second. Lightner had been

forced to stand the ship on its tail to direct the impulse drive downward in order to maximize thrust. The overtaxed impulse engines screamed in protest as they fought for purchase against the inexorable pull of planetary gravity.

Ramirez had to yell over the growing roar of the engines to be heard as she called back to Plazzi. "Where's that energy field coming from?"

Plazzi looked ashen as the clash of artificial shipboard gravity and its natural counterpart sent conflicting messages to his inner ear. He swallowed hard and the older man tore his eyes away from his display long enough to answer, "The meteorological station, sir. The power readings are off the charts, but it looks like a massive meson field."

"Commander!" Ashok bellowed from the Engineering station. "We've got thirty seconds to begin our ascent, or we're going to lose the impulse drive before reaching escape velocity. The fusion reactors are at critical, and I can't force any more coolant into the system without rupturing a line!"

Ramirez bit unconsciously at her lower lip as she struggled to keep the images of the *Phoenix*'s shattered bridge from her mind. Her own voice chanted denials in her head, *Not again - not again - not again*. "You heard the man, Ensign!" she called to Lightner at Flight Control. "Get us out of here!" She ardently hoped that they had fulfilled the spheres' requirements, but she wouldn't sacrifice the ship and crew needlessly.

The starship *Gibraltar* trembled ominously as it clawed its way back up through the atmosphere of Pierosh II, withstanding stresses that her designers could scarcely have imagined.

The Baron's hands had just begun to close around Sandhurst's throat when the sound of a transmat field activating caught his attention. He looked up in time to see Lar'ragos and Parlan deposited mere meters from where he and Sandhurst were situated.

Lar'ragos glanced around in confusion for a moment, but then quickly absorbed his new surroundings. His eyes determinedly fixed on the Baron as he ramped his phaser rifle to maximum and incinerated Parlan's now defenseless form.

The Baron stood to look around frantically for his crystalline hand device. He would not suffer to be shot down like some animal by an inferior. It would not end this way for him; it could not.

A strangely peaceful look descended across Lar'ragos' features as he deactivated the rifle. He ejected the energy magazine and threw it and the rifle in separate directions as he slowly rounded the dais. Though he had never before seen the Baron's new face, Lar'ragos evidenced no confusion as to the man's identity as he moved towards his intended target.

The Baron eyed him warily, scarcely believing his luck. He recognized the man as the officer from the starship's bridge who had vowed revenge on him. The fool wanted to engage him in hand-to-hand combat. Regardless of the injuries he'd sustained in his fight with Kutav, he had a vigorous new body and countless centuries of unarmed warfare training. He had just bested a man nearly twice his size, and he still had stamina to spare. The Baron reflected elatedly that this young man's conceit would spell certain doom for he and his captain.

Sandhurst's eyes fluttered as he reached the limits of his endurance. Before he slipped into unconsciousness, he muttered, "Just don't... kill him, Pava. That's all I ask..."

The Baron assumed a defensive stance and took measure of his foe. He scanned up from the officer's feet to judge weak spots in the man's physiology that he would exploit. It was when he reached the man's eyes that the Baron first experienced doubt. There was cold certainty there, as if the contest's outcome was a foregone conclusion. The Baron sensed then that his enemy was not merely human, as he had assumed, but something different. Something more. For the first time in a very long time, fear tickled at the edges of the Baron's mind.

"WARNING: Structural integrity failure in twenty-six seconds." The computer's infuriatingly calm voice projected their fate with utter stoicism.

Various alarm klaxons yowled, apparently trying to drown one another out amidst the pandemonium that had consumed *Gibraltar*'s bridge. All shipboard power, including artificial gravity, had been routed to the impulse drive and the thrusters. Like the astronauts of yore, Ramirez and the others were pressed into their seats by five standard gravities. They struggled to breathe as their vessel groaned and juddered around them.

As he fought to keep from blacking out, Ashok watched with dread as the microfractures he had detected earlier in the nacelle pylons worsened. He summoned his voice despite the uncomfortable weight pressing down on him to shout, "Shearing stress on the pylons is too great, Commander. It's causing sympathetic vibrations that are carrying into the secondary hull and are compromising our antimatter containment. We're going to lose the engineering section, probably the whole ship!"

Pinned to the command chair, Ramirez fought for enough breath to respond. "Eject the nacelles and the pylons!"

Ashok's eyes went wide without the assistance of multiple gravities. "Sir?"
"Do it!"

The well-muscled engineer forced his hand onto the console and grunted with the effort. He struggled through three separate security overrides before the computer

was convinced that he did indeed want to blow the warp nacelles free from the vessel's superstructure.

Monotanium sphincters constricted to stem the flow of warp plasma to the nacelles seconds before a series of explosive charges detonated in succession that sheared the graceful pylons and their respective nacelles from the secondary hull. The warp engines blasted free to fall lazily back towards the planet as *Gibraltar* punched through the exosphere and strained to achieve escape velocity.

The fight unfolded like a painstakingly choreographed dance. The Baron threw strike after strike, but his blows were deflected by his opponent with unbelievable speed and an uncanny prescience.

Lar'ragos parried the Baron's attacks fluidly to follow with punishing counterstrikes that took a discernable toll on his foe. The Baron was good. Better than good, in fact, the man bordered on fantastic. But this wasn't a fair fight. The words of Pava's first unarmed combat instructor echoed in his ears. "*Always cheat, always win. The only unfair fight is the one you lose.*"

Lar'ragos delivered a knife-hand strike to the Baron's throat. *Can't breathe, can't fight.* He gouged the time traveler's left eye with his finger. *Can't see, can't fight.* He dropped to a crouch and slashed out with his foot to blow out the man's right knee with a sickly crunch. *Can't brace, can't fight.* Lar'ragos then rolled across the Baron's body as the man collapsed. He grasped the Baron's left arm and jerked the limb to dislocate shoulder from socket before taking hold of the man's head and slamming it against the floor in a series of concussive blows that finally settled the matter.

As much as he might have wished otherwise, the El Aurian took no satisfaction from his systematic deconstruction of the Baron. It was pure instinct, channeled impulse. His senses guided his body to where the enemy's next blow would land. It was the ultimate perversion of a Listener's abilities, honed by centuries of hard-won survival across the great expanse of the galaxy.

When it was finished Lar'ragos stood over the man as the Baron lay still and blood pooled around him. He was terribly hurt, broken and contused, but he would live. Lar'ragos had his orders, after all.

Only then did Pava go to his friend.

Chapter 21

Lar'ragos counted himself as fortunate to have found the timeship's medical ward so quickly. The room was filled with all manner of analytic and treatment equipment, some absurdly antiquated while other tools were advanced beyond the lieutenant's comprehension.

It did, however, support an automated diagnostic and treatment chamber. Lar'ragos placed Sandhurst into this 'autodoc' and activated the machine. Tiny armatures scanned and prodded the captain's mangled body. Intravenous feeds were inserted, and the device opened a small laparoscopic incision in Sandhurst's abdomen and began a minimally invasive procedure to stem the man's internal hemorrhaging. The device's output monitor indicated that the machine was only capable of stabilizing Sandhurst and would endeavor to keep him alive until more complex medical technology could be brought to bear on his severe injuries.

To Lar'ragos it simply meant that for the time being, his friend would live. His first priorities were clear: incarcerate the Baron and the Orion captain, and then learn how to operate this unlikely craft. He was so consumed with the tasks at hand that the irony of hoping for more time to complete his work while aboard the Baron's temporal ship was completely lost on him.

USS *Gibraltar*

The gravitational stresses from the planet had dwindled to nothing and Ramirez gratefully gulped air with lungs no longer compressed by multiple gravities.

Plazzi called out from behind the commander, "One thousand kilometers altitude. We've achieved orbit."

On the other side of the bridge, Ashok throttled back the traumatized impulse engines and silenced the cacophony of alarms that issued from his workstation.

The bridge was silent as a tomb. Ramirez had experienced her share of close calls during her career, and a bit of self-congratulatory celebration was not unheard of among personnel who had just survived a particularly harrowing incident. There was none to be had here. People sat quietly as they wrestled with their emotions or attempted to puzzle out why they were still alive. The exhaustion written on their faces was palpable.

Ashok lurched for the turbolift, anxious to determine the full measure of the damage done to the ship.

Ramirez let loose a long, slow breath. "Mister Lightner, issue a general mayday. Code one-alpha-zero... ship in distress."

USS *Sovereign*, Entering Pierosh star system, Full Impulse.

Captain Rixx sat with his customary rigidity, his ever-present aura of calm unperturbed by the mounting anxiety of the bridge crew. Localized subspace distortions in the Pierosh system had prevented long-range scans of the second planet and its vicinity, as well as made communications with *Gibraltar* impossible. They had heard nothing in the past three days, and even Rixx had to admit the silence was ominous.

“Penetrating system boundary now, Captain.”

The ship jostled slightly as the heavy cruiser pierced the front of ionized gas that had apparently accreted at the farthest edge of the star’s gravitational influence. This unusual phenomenon was only one of countless mysteries surrounding the discovery of the illicit research station and the subsequent attacks on Starfleet personnel.

Seated next to Rixx, the increasingly frosty Special Agent Ixis sat perusing her padd for the umpteenth time in the last hour as she rechecked her team’s readiness to deploy at a moment’s notice. Ixis had still not forgiven him for cutting short her attempt to intimidate *Gibraltar*’s first officer. Rixx knew there would be hell to pay for crossing an operative of Temporal Investigations, but he was confident that he possessed enough seniority and political leverage in Starfleet to ride out any unpleasantness.

Rixx mused darkly that Commander Ramirez, providing she and her crew had managed to survive, would have no such protection.

“Sensors clearing, sir.”

Rixx raised his head slightly as he awaited a complete report. Ixis fidgeted beside him, conspicuously uncomfortable at having to await the captain’s clearance to deploy her team.

“Reading... *Constitution*-class starship in orbit of Pierosh II. She appears intact, but has suffered serious structural damage, Captain. Life signs are strong and clear. The ship is running on auxiliary power and is missing both warp nacelles.”

The captain nodded with evident relief. “Warm up the tractor beam, Lieutenant Evenson. It appears they’ll be needing a tow back to DS9.”

“Incoming signal, sir. They’re hailing us.”

The Bolian captain stood and ignored Ixis’ sullen look as she folded her arms across her chest.

The screen shifted from an image of the battered century-old starship to the tired but confident visage of Liana Ramirez.

Rixx offered the slightest of smiles. “Commander, once again, apologies on our tardiness. It appears congratulations are in order...”

“I am not your foe, Starfleet.” Kutav had been grateful to find himself alive after his thrashing at the hands of the Baron. He had been less pleased, however, to find himself hanging once again in the temporal chamber’s suspensor field.

Lar’ragos gave a look of exaggerated skepticism. “You don’t say? Those bridge recorder images of you slitting my security man’s throat suggest otherwise, you cowering *vuut*.” The El Aurian took silent pleasure from watching the conflicting emotions clash on Kutav’s face at his use of an extremely profane Orion insult. To his credit, despite the fact that he’d have killed Lar’ragos for such a slur under other circumstances, the *ahmet* refused to be provoked.

“We can help each other here, Starfleet. Your captain swore he’d release me in return for my help in freeing him.”

Lar’ragos grimaced. “My captain is in an induced coma, clinging to life. Whatever deal you had with him can’t be confirmed and is of no consequence to me.”

“Then where do we go from here? Do you kill me?”

Lar’ragos shook his head as he answered coldly, “No. We strike a new deal. You help me gain control of this vessel, and I’ll let you live.”

“You’ll release me?” Kutav pressed the issue.

“I said I’d let you live. That’s the best you’re going to get from me. You *will* pay a price for your actions, Orion. Count on that.”

“And what of the Baron? Is he dead? Why haven’t you negotiated an agreement with him instead?”

“Too dangerous,” Lar’ragos replied bluntly. “He lives, but he’s locked safely away in stasis. There he’ll stay until I turn him over to the proper authorities.”

Kutav assessed the man, and quickly decided that this peculiar Starfleet officer was fully capable of killing him, injured prisoner or no. The *ahmet* had not achieved his present rank and station without the ability to read other humanoids with uncanny accuracy. It seemed that after a lifetime of preying upon others, it was now his fate to serve as a pawn in the schemes of lesser men. “So be it,” he sighed.

Gibraltar was now safely cocooned within *Sovereign*’s tractor beam. The larger starship’s engineering personnel swarmed over their smaller cousin as they helped to stabilize her primary systems in preparation for departure.

Meanwhile, the Temporal Investigations teams were scrutinizing every meter of *Gibraltar*, the remains of the runabout *Brahmaputra*, and the meteorological research station. Special Agent Ixis had abandoned the *Sovereign* with enthusiasm,

and now spent her time micromanaging all aspects of the DTI containment team's investigation.

There had still been no word as to the fate of Captain Sandhurst or Lieutenant Lar'ragos. The security chief had gone missing along with the android Parlan, vanishing from the pockmarked turboshaft. The DTI investigators had found no traces of transporter energy in the vicinity but surmised that something must have spirited them away.

The Sentinel spheres had remained in sporadic contact with the ship as most of their time and effort had been directed towards stabilizing the system's star and trying to undo some of the damage wrought upon the Pierosh system in their battle with the Baron's creature. They stubbornly refused any contact with DTI personnel directly and insisted on utilizing *Gibraltar*'s senior staff as intermediaries.

Ramirez smirked slightly as she relayed that detail in one of the dozens of after-action reports she was required to file as acting commanding officer. She had alternated between the stiflingly mundane reports and the achingly painful death notifications to the next-of-kin of those personnel killed during the mission. This was usually a burden assumed by starship captains, but for the second time in as many months Ramirez found herself forced to shoulder the responsibility. First to the loved ones of the *Phoenix*'s fallen, and now to the families of her own shipmates.

She found herself struggling to relay some small bits of personalized information into each of the letters, to let the families back home know their loved one was valued and appreciated as an individual, not just some nameless cipher. The fact that this mission was being classified at the highest levels of Starfleet didn't help matters any. *Your daughter died sacrificing herself to protect the Federation.* From whom, they'd ask. Under what circumstances? No answers would be forthcoming.

The entrance to the ready room chimed and prompted Ramirez to call, "Come in." The doors parted to reveal Special Agent Ixis, still clad in the norexaprene bodysuit that served as a body temperature regulating garment worn beneath Starfleet environment suits. Ramirez glanced up at her from a stack of padds and a data terminal, unable to keep a scowl from taking over her features. "Is it casual Friday already?" she quipped. "Nobody told me."

Ixis strode into the room, her bearing equally hostile. "Commander."

Ramirez set down her padd and leaned back in the chair. "I'll make an educated guess that this isn't a social call?"

Ixis moved forward to brace her arms at the far edge of the desk and lean across it as she directed a baleful glare at the XO. "I came here to tell you that another starship will be arriving in orbit within the next few days. It'll be a dedicated science vessel that my teams will be staging from. *Sovereign* will tow your little ship back to DS9 where all the king's horses and all the king's men will endeavor to put it back together."

In response, Ramirez offered her most insincere smile. "Goody."

Ixis' feral grin widened. "I also wanted to serve notice that my official report of this incident will contain some very unfavorable observations on your level of cooperation and professionalism." She leaned back and released her grip on the edge of the desk, unconsciously putting some distance between herself and Ramirez. "I wouldn't get too comfortable in Captain Sandhurst's chair. When I'm done with you, First Officer on this scow will have been the highlight of your career."

Ramirez sat forward slowly. "So, it's come to making threats, has it? I'm really perplexed as to why that is, Special Agent. The situation here has been resolved favorably. The dimensional breach is closed, the Sentinels have reported that the creature is no longer a threat, and we've countered what could have been a disastrous cross-dimensional incursion. How is that not a 'win' for everybody concerned, aside from the traumatized crew of this ship and her missing captain?"

"The Baron's timeship was the objective here, Commander. Even having that black-hearted bastard in our custody would have made a nice consolation prize, but you couldn't provide that, either."

Ramirez stood. "We got the job done, Ixis. That's what counts here. You've never served in Starfleet; that much is obvious. If you had, you wouldn't be holding loyalty to one's captain against us, and against me in particular."

Ixis rolled her eyes and chortled, "Oh, please! Don't give me that 'captain-my-captain' crap. I've read your service jacket, Commander. After Sandhurst pulled you off Admiral Covey's staff, you filed no less than half a dozen formal protests and requests for reassignment. You don't even like the man!"

She folded her arms across her chest, and Ramirez gripped her elbows to keep her hands from trembling with anger. "Regardless of how I felt about my reassignment here, regardless of my personal relationship with Sandhurst, and regardless of whether he's dead or alive at this very moment, the man is *my captain!*" She fixed her fiercest gaze on the Efrosian woman. "I owe him the same respect and loyalty that I will expect from my XO when I've earned the rank of captain."

Ixis whirled around and looked back over her shoulder as she stalked out of the ready room. "Not if I have anything to say about it. And don't think Covey can save you, Ramirez. My contacts in Starfleet Command go a lot higher than a lone rear admiral."

The door to Ensign Kuenre Shanthi's guest quarters chimed. This roused him from a troubled sleep. In truth, the intrusion was less an interruption than a blessed reprieve from his tormented dreams. Image upon haunting image had overlapped in his mind until sleep had become a purgatory from which he struggled to escape.

Elisto Plazzi stepped through the door at Shanthi's beckoning. He smiled at the tired young man and the senior Science officer apologized for waking him.

Shanthi waved away the effort dismissively. "It's okay, sir. I wasn't getting much rest anyway."

The ebony-skinned young man padded to the replicator station in bare feet to order himself a cup of strong coffee. He joined Plazzi in the sitting chairs as he tightened his bathrobe around his waist as he sat. "What can I do for you, Commander?"

Looking uncommonly earnest, Plazzi countered, "Call me Elisto, please. I actually came here to see what I could do for you, Ensign."

"How so, sir?"

Plazzi's grin broadened as the younger man nibbled at the bait. "I want to offer you a job, Mister Shanthi. Mine."

Shanthi sipped at his coffee while looking skeptical. "You going someplace?"

The older man bobbed his head, answering simply, "Back into retirement. I was reactivated for the war. The war's over."

He made a show of glancing around the guest cabin and then Shanthi finally let his gaze rest back on the senior officer. "Not exactly the most prestigious berth in the Fleet. What's a tour on this ship going to get me, besides killed?"

Plazzi chuckled. "Not all our assignments are this dangerous. Here you'll get to make a name and career for yourself. Nobody can ever accuse you of currying favoritism from Command on a small support ship. And," he offered with a wink, "it's a helluva lot roomier than a runabout."

He found Plazzi's grin infectious, and Shanthi answered with one of his own. "You're saying I could find a home here?"

Plazzi's demeanor shifted to become more somber. "Absolutely. This is a terrific crew, and I've served on some exceptional vessels in my time, so I know what I'm talking about." He gestured to the ensign. "Your talents will be invaluable to these people, and you'll be appreciated for who you are... not to whom you're related. As for what they're getting out of the deal, they'll be getting a top-of-his-class academy graduate."

Shanthi blew softly across the surface of the coffee to cool it, looking thoughtful. "Why me, Elisto? Seriously, my graduation standing aside?"

Inclining his head, Plazzi noted, "You're bright, you're likeable, you do your job without any expectation of fanfare or accolades." He began to tick off these bullet points on his fingers. "You're observant, we wouldn't have located the Baron's craft in the cargo bay without you. You've no problem picking up a phaser when it's called for, and you can hold your own in a fight."

As he cradled his mug, Shanthi closed his eyes and tried to imagine himself on the bridge of *Gibraltar*. He opened them to look at the older man, his expression serious. "We'll see, Elisto. I liked Captain Sandhurst. Not many men in his position would take the time to sit and comfort some no-name junior officer who's not even

assigned to his vessel. But Sandhurst's gone, and I don't know if I want to sign onto a ship that's just taken a pasting and lost its captain."

Plazzi smiled knowingly and cautioned, "Don't count Donald Sandhurst out just yet. The man has been proved to be one surprise after another since I've been aboard."

Olivia Juneau turned off the padd and let it drop onto her chest as she lay atop a biobed in Sickbay. The away team members' reports had referred to her leadership under fire with such phrases as 'inspired' and 'outstanding.' She had never before had words like that associated with her. The most damning thing of all is that she couldn't remember *any* of it.

She'd supposedly experienced some grand epiphany, made some kind of fantastic breakthrough that had apparently allowed her to tap unknown resources of strength in order to lead men and women in battle. But whatever it was she had learned, whatever had motivated this amazing transformation, it was gone. Once again, she was left the junior lieutenant whose latest claim to fame was losing a runabout under her command and getting someone killed. Tears welled in her eyes at the thought of all that she'd lost on the surface of Pierosh II.

Beside her lay a sleeping Master Chief Tark. He had similarly awakened after hours in an inexplicable near-comatose state, his mind also a blank when trying to reference the events of the past two days. Unlike her, however, he had absorbed the missing memories with nothing more than a characteristic bout of colorful swearing. Having vented, he'd done little more since than sleep and make irascible demands on medical staff.

Juneau was so wrapped up in her own pain and misery that she almost failed to hear the low humming sound that accompanied the transmat beam that deposited Captain Sandhurst on the ward's main examination table. A nearby med-tech gasped, then tapped his combadge to alert Tailee of this miraculous event.

The squalling winds here bit so fiercely they made the blustery gusts of Pierosh II seem warm by comparison. Snow and ice blew in all directions to score *ahmet* Kutav's skin the instant Lar'ragos pushed him through the timeship's doorway. The Orion fell heavily into a snow drift and gasped with the sheer onslaught of sensation as cold permeated every cell of his body.

The El Aurian, his face partially obscured behind the high collar of an ancient woolen coat, sneered at the man. "Enjoy. Compliments of the starship *Gibraltar*." He closed the door of the black pillar, ignoring the pirate's pleas for mercy as the man

struggled to his feet and pounded on the side of the timeship until it became insubstantial.

A sensor pod detected heat and movement where there should have been none, and telescoped up through the snowpack to observe.

Kutav gathered his meager clothing around him as best he could, though the thin fibers offered little resistance to the twin assaults of freezing temperatures and clawing wind. He knew that he had only moments to live and could not begin to fathom where the Starfleet officer had deposited him. Kutav had done everything Lar'ragos had asked of him, from helping him to learn the fundamentals of piloting the bizarre craft to assistance in placing Sandhurst in medical stasis. Despite the sheer audacity of the emotion under the circumstances, Kutav still felt a keen sense of betrayal.

The hiss of hydraulics momentarily drowned out the howling wind, and Kutav turned to see a hatch opening, a dark maw that extended up through the icy crust. Bulky figures moved within the shadows there, and emerged to reveal bodies clad in animal fur, leather, and metal.

Klingons! Kutav marveled. *What is this...* Agony flared suddenly as one of the figures drove a Klingon pain stick into his side that knocked the Orion to his knees.

A squat Klingon draped in furs smiled cruelly down at him. "We do not receive many unannounced visitors here on Rura Penthe. You are most welcome!" Throaty laughter from the others confirmed Kutav's darkest fears. "Bring him inside, men. Let's show our new Orion friend here our idea of hospitality."

And with that, *Ahmet* Kutav, merchant-prince, formerly of the Rigellian flagged high speed courier *Sethret* was dragged below the surface to meet his destiny.

Chapter 22

Ramirez watched silently through the operating theater's observation window as Taiee and her medical team labored. They had been attending to Captain Sandhurst's injuries for well over two hours now, and if Ramirez had correctly gauged the urgency of the surgical team's actions, they had much work yet to do.

She watched the careful precision of the EMH, the hologram disconcertingly uncovered in the presence of Taiee and the other nurses, clad in blood-red surgical smocks and masks. Exhausted as she was, Ramirez found she had to remind herself repeatedly that the artificial doctor was only photons and forcefields; it exuded no bacteria, carried no viral agents with which to infect the patient. The EMH led the repair of Sandhurst's major organ systems while Taiee and her assistants attended to bone fractures and worked to stabilize his cellular chemistry.

As she reflected on the events of the past few days, Ramirez found herself wondering what she would do should it fall to her to lead these people on a permanent basis. She had assumed the responsibility without thinking on the cascade of crises that had enveloped them. Now, however, faced with the possibility of Sandhurst's death or permanent incapacitation, Ramirez discovered that she was beginning to doubt her desire to fully take command of this ship. She had wanted to earn a captaincy on her own merits, not inherit one by default.

She had been tested on this assignment as never before, and some small part of her grudgingly acknowledged that she had doubtless learned more about the realities of command aboard *Gibraltar* than she would have setting appointments and fetching coffee and scheduling appointments for a member of the admiralty. Ramirez had suffered the loss of a starship under her command, struggled with the morality of the Federation/Klingon occupation of Cardassia, and had withstood the abduction and torture of her commanding officer. These were the kinds of experiences that many younger, more naïve officers craved. Right up to the moment when they actually happened.

Her troubled reverie ended when Ramirez felt a whisper of air ruffle her hair. She frowned and turned to determine the source just in time to see a dark doorway close into nothingness. Pava Lar'ragos now stood with her in the viewing gallery. Ramirez was surprised, but not shocked at the unorthodox officer's unexpected entrance. She managed a wry smirk. "About time, Lieutenant." She looked the man over and added, "You're out of uniform, mister."

Lar'ragos was clad in the fashions of some long bygone age, a worn leather jacket over threadbare tunic and loose slacks. His hair had grown noticeably, and the presence of a well-kept beard spoke of weeks, perhaps even months away from the ship. He inclined his head towards Ramirez by way of greeting. "Sorry, sir. It took me a while to learn how to pilot the Baron's ship." He returned her smirk and held up a yellow, tear-drop shaped crystal in his hand.

The exec cast a glance at Sickbay's entrance. "Does Temporal Investigations know you're back?"

"No," he shook his head fractionally. "This was my first stop." Lar'ragos stepped forward to join her at the window. "How's he doing?"

She crossed her arms and rubbed her eyes tiredly with her thumb and index finger. "I'm not entirely sure. Taiee's initial report was that he'd suffered a great deal of damage, some of which had been rather clumsily repaired. That, plus evidence of his having been placed in prolonged post-traumatic stasis has thrown off his cellular chemistry and exacerbated his injuries."

Lar'ragos' expression hardened. "I did what I could for him, Commander."

She reached out a hand and placed it on Pava's arm as she directed a concerned look his way. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to criticize your efforts. I'm sure you did everything possible."

Lar'ragos was silent for a long moment, his eyes fixed on the efforts of the medical team. "I never wanted this for him. He shouldn't have to know this kind of darkness."

Ramirez gave him a curious glance that begged elaboration.

"When Donald and I first met, we were both in our plebe year at the academy. I was a hardened, cynical old wanderer. I'd swore to myself that I'd never put on another uniform, and yet when I got my Federation citizenship, I signed up anyway." He smiled at the memory. "I found myself surrounded by the pampered, idealistic children from dozens of planets who hadn't tasted real war in generations."

Ramirez blew out an amused breath. "Sounds like your version of Hell, but you managed to stick it out."

The El Aurian nodded slowly. "I wouldn't have if I hadn't stumbled upon this painfully shy, awkward young man who was more comfortable field stripping a warp coil than he was conversing with other flesh-and-blood people."

The exec looked at him incredulously. "What could the two of you possibly have had in common?"

Without meaning to, Lar'ragos reached out and touched the transparent partition separating them from the operating theater. "He reminded me of myself as a young man. Before the Borg. Before the wars. Back when I still had faith." He retracted his hand to stare down at the deceptively youthful-looking appendage. "I took it upon myself to bring him out of his shell. In turn, he renewed my belief in the basic goodness of people, though he was unaware he'd done so."

"And now?"

"Now?" Lar'ragos closed his eyes as if shielding them from a sight too terrible to behold. "Now I'm afraid he'll have lost that innocence, that purity of spirit. The last thing I'd ever want is for him to end up like me." He sighed and opened his eyes as if forcing himself back to the here and now. "What have I missed?"

Ramirez recounted everything that had transpired since the final battle with Parlan and the ship's plunge into the planet's atmosphere. Lar'ragos absorbed the information with detachment, remarking, "So, what this all boils down to is that DTI is looking for a new toy. They could care less about thwarting the Baron's plans or rescuing the captain."

"That's a fair assessment."

Lar'ragos looked at Ramirez appraisingly. "And this Agent Ixis of theirs; she's trying to torpedo your career?"

The exec's jaw tightened at the mention of the other woman. "Not trying, Pava. After she files her report, I'm done for. At best I'll end up riding a desk for the remainder of my career."

As he pondered that Lar'ragos mused, "Perhaps not."

Ramirez turned to face him. "You think you could stop her?" She frowned as she realized to whom she was speaking and her mind conjured dark thoughts. "Don't you dare..."

He held up a hand. "Nothing like that, Commander, though it'd be no less than she deserves." A smile spread across his features. "I was thinking more along the lines of leverage, sir."

"Leverage?"

Ixis ran her hand across the anachronistic looking control console and marveled at the mix of absurdly outdated switches and levers integrated into a mechanism so advanced that it would take the department decades or longer to decipher its secrets.

From behind her, Field Agent Rupert Barnaby looked on with a mix of excitement and apprehension. He wasn't sure which unnerved him more; their presence within an actual time machine, or the avaricious expression that radiated on Ixis' face. That the young woman was driven and ambitious didn't bother him *per se*, but the fact that she had no moral reservations with discrediting or destroying anyone or anything that stood in her path did. He had joined the DTI out of a sense of scientific wonder and service to the Federation. Barnaby thought Ixis saw her position within the department as a means to an end.

She glanced back at him and deliberately ignored the silent form of Lar'ragos, who observed her exploration of the timeship from near the entrance. "What do you think, Barnaby?"

The older man quirked an eyebrow, reticent to share in Ixis' gloating. "I feel like a cave man who's been handed a tricorder." He thrust his hands deeper into the pockets of his jacket as he warded off an ominous chill. "It's going to take us a century to reverse engineer this thing."

“Perhaps,” she said as she craned her neck to observe the spiraling pillars that arched up into the darkness overhead. “But imagine the benefits, Barnaby. We could field fleets of temporal starships, patrolling time as well as space.”

Barnaby cocked his head. “Swell. Yet another front for us to police.”

Ixis wheeled around to glower at the older man. “There’s a time war on, or hadn’t you heard?”

Barnaby met her venomous stare evenly. “We’ve no concrete proof of that. You and the others in your ‘time war’ camp point to ancient fables, temporal echoes, and a thin scattering of conflicting artifacts and call them evidence.”

She appeared about to launch into a diatribe, but he held her in check with mollifying raised hand. “And if... *if* there *is* a time war, who’s to say we didn’t start it,” Barnaby gestured to the surrounding craft, “with this?”

Lar’ragos interrupted their little quarrel with all the subtlety of a used spacecraft salesman. “So, I take it you’re interested?”

She shifted the focus of her ire and Ixis scowled at the El Aurian. “What do you mean, interested? We’ve just taken possession.”

He had deliberately refrained from putting his uniform back on in case of just such a confrontation. Lar’ragos frowned menacingly at Ixis from within his beard. “Says who?” He held up a glowing crystal control module in his hand. “This seems to indicate the vessel is mine.”

“I *order* you to release this vessel into our custody!” she seethed.

Lar’ragos gave that about two second’s worth of mock consideration. “Mmmmmmm... no.”

“I’ll have you thrown out of Starfleet and jailed!” Her face had contorted into a mask of rage, her usually attractive features colored by an unnamed darkness somewhere within.

He shrugged theatrically. “Don’t care. I’ve got a timeship. What the hell do I need Starfleet for?”

She withdrew a small disruptor from within her coat and aimed it at Lar’ragos, which prompted Barnaby to throw his hands in the air in a gesture of utter frustration. “Oh, for Pete’s sake, Ixis!”

The crystal glowed briefly in Lar’ragos’ hand, and his eyes took on a steely glint. “Be my guest.”

The weapon clicked uselessly in her hand as she depressed the trigger repeatedly. In response, she screamed in frustration and threw the disruptor at Lar’ragos. It missed his head by just a few centimeters, but he refused to give her the satisfaction of flinching.

“My terms are fair,” Lar’ragos began. “You write a nice, flowery report that praises the crew of *Gibraltar*, and Ramirez specifically, for single-handedly preventing what could have been a catastrophic breach of Federation security. In

return, once I'm certain you've fulfilled your end of the bargain, I'll release the timeship to you."

Ixis calmed and appeared to mull this over. "And the Baron?"

"The Baron will be rendered into the custody of the Sentinels."

"Then no deal," she sneered.

"Okay," he raised the crystal as his thumb traced a specific pattern across its facets. "The vessel's transporter works on somewhat different principles than our own, but it's just as effective..."

"No, wait!" she cried out, unprepared for her bluff to be called. "Why the Sentinels?"

"Because I don't trust you, Ixis. You don't have the patience to wait twenty or thirty years for TI's engineering branch to figure out exactly how this ship works. In frustration, you'd cut some kind of idiot deal with the Baron in order for him to help you. Odds are he'd find a way to double-cross you and make off with this ship. And then he'd come looking for me and mine."

She held up her hands in an uncharacteristic gesture of surrender. "Okay. All right. We'll play this your way, Lar'ragos."

"Good." Lar'ragos stepped forward and smiled disarmingly. He walked to within a few paces of Ixis as he lowered his voice so that only she could hear him. There was no trace of menace in his voice as he spoke, as if it were simply a recitation of facts rather than a mortal threat upon her person. "I promise you that if you break this arrangement or seek any kind of retribution upon Liana Ramirez or any other of my crewmates, there is no place in time or space that I cannot find you."

She swallowed and tried valiantly to maintain her proud demeanor. "Is that so?"

He nodded definitively. "It is." His eyes bore into hers to convey a sincerity that she felt all the way down in her marrow. "I know you, Maya Ixis. I know that as much as you may pretend otherwise this iron maiden persona that you've created for yourself is nothing more than a fiction. I *know* what it was you saw your father burying behind the shed at your family's homestead, Maya. I *know* that it's why you've never felt like a complete person since that day. It's why you cloak yourself in anger and aggression, and it's exactly why you've spent your life looking for some way to turn back the clock."

The color drained from her face as the darkest recesses of her soul were laid bare by a man who shouldn't... who *couldn't* know such things. Her mouth opened but no words would form on her lips.

He continued in the same calm, implacable fashion. "I vow that if you cross me, I will hunt you down and end you, and I will do it with no more hesitation than a man would crush an irritating insect." His disarming smile morphed into a blood chilling sneer. "Because while you play at being a stone-cold killer, my dear, I am the genuine article."

Like a prey animal caught in the trance of a predator, she looked deep into his eyes. And she believed.

Warp 5 was the best speed the starship *Sovereign* could make while towing the smaller ship back to Deep Space Nine. Ramirez mused that it was at exactly this velocity that barely two and a half weeks earlier she'd wished for something to break the monotony of convoy duty. *'Be careful what you wish for' just doesn't seem adequate in this circumstance*, she thought as she arrived at the door to the captain's cabin.

Sandhurst called her in at the prompting of the door chime, and Ramirez found him bent over his bed as he packed a hard-shell carryall case with civilian clothes. The transformation was startling. The captain had been carrying at least twenty unnecessary pounds when they'd arrived in the Pierosh system, but now his frame was rail thin. His once heavyset, jovial face was now drawn and gaunt, and his sallow skin now seemed to hang off him. It was his eyes that were the most difficult for Ramirez. They bore a haunted look as if he were plagued by scores of demons only he could perceive. Sandhurst's hair, which had been graying at the temples, was now shot through with random streaks of white.

It was still difficult to believe that in the dozen hours that he'd been held captive by the Baron, over four weeks had passed for the captain and his tormentor. The physical changes to his person were proof enough that the Baron's assertions had been true.

Sandhurst glanced back as Ramirez entered the cabin's sleeping cove. "Good evening, Commander. I'm guessing we're getting close?"

"Yes, sir. We're about thirty minutes out from DS9."

He nodded amiably then closed the case and turned to face her. "You have my travel itinerary?"

"I do, sir." She handed him a padd as she summarized its contents. "The *Enterprise* will pick you up at DS9 and ferry you to the rendezvous with the *Ijav'Re*. They'll take you the rest of the way to Betazed. You're scheduled for six weeks of treatment at the Nimrian-Sodl Clinic in Tinasse. Rumor has it that's it's a lovely hamlet that escaped any appreciable war damage."

He smiled humorlessly. "Well, that's a relief. We wouldn't want the traumatized human causing the traumatized Betazoid war survivors any additional angst."

Ramirez didn't know how to respond to that, and so remained silent.

Sandhurst grimaced. "I'm sorry, that came out... ah..." he sighed. "I'm sorry." "No need to apologize, sir."

He picked up the carryall and walked into the main cabin with Ramirez following. “Why the *Enterprise*? I thought they were going to be hosting the Federation delegation to the treaty negotiations with Cardassia’s new government?”

“They still are, Captain.” Ramirez remained standing as Sandhurst set down the case and sank tiredly onto the couch. She noticed a set of rumpled sheets and a blanket adorned the couch while the bed had been untouched. “The first phase of your treatment will be with Commander Deanna Troi. She’s an acknowledged leader in the field of post-traumatic recovery, and she’s helped numerous people who’ve been through similar ordeals, including Captain Picard himself.”

“And when I get to Betazed?”

Ramirez assumed a somber tone. “The experts at the clinic will help to try and recover and reconstruct your altered memories, sir.”

Conflicting emotions warred on Sandhurst’s face, which eventually settled on a bland expression designed to mask the raging turmoil just beneath the surface. “That’s all well and good, but how the hell are they going to be able to tell which memories have been altered when *I don’t even know!*” He winced, having startled and embarrassed himself by shouting the last words. “God, I did it again, I’m sorry.”

His exec offered a supportive smile. She tried to steer the conversation toward less troubled waters. “Ashok estimates that repairs to the ship will take the better part of five weeks. By the time you return we should be finishing the trial runs with our new nacelles.”

Sandhurst sat forward and gripped the hair on the sides of his head. “This is just... insanity, Liana. I don’t know who or what I am anymore. If a person is the sum of their experiences, how can I ever be whole again if can’t differentiate between which of my memories are real and which ones that son-of-a-bitch planted in my head?” A shuddering sigh escaped from him. “My emotional reactions to things are all over the grid. I can’t find equilibrium; I can’t function.”

“That’s why we’re getting you help, sir,” Ramirez said quietly.

He looked up at her with those tortured eyes. They seemed to beseech her understanding. “Promise me, Liana. If they can’t fix what’s in here,” he rapped his knuckles against his temple. “If they can’t fix me, you’ll take command of *Gibraltar*.”

She felt a part of her heart wither at the idea of stepping into the shoes of yet another fallen captain as she replied, “Of course, sir,” with all the conviction she could summon.

Chapter 23

Maintenance drones, engineering rigs and work-bees swarmed around *Gibraltar* as she rested at her mooring at the end of one of DS9's lower pylons. Temporal Investigations had finally concluded their exhaustive debriefings of the crew. Having sworn them all to absolute secrecy regarding the details of their mission to the Pierosh system, DTI had pulled a number of strings to have the starship's repair and refurbishment made a Level-One priority.

The other captains of larger and more noteworthy ships grumbled about having been bumped down the repair schedule by a ninety-year-old escort while they simultaneously spun wild theories about why the ship's mission and the nature of her damage had been so completely classified.

"...and the timeship was taken aboard a specially outfitted Temporal Investigations transport vessel, escorted by two *Defiant*-class ships no less, and shipped presumably to the Terran moon." Olivia Juneau's alter ego completed her report as she observed the scarred face of her superior on the viewer.

Their communication was filtered through several layers of encryption, and Section 31 computer overrides would ensure that no trace of the conversation would remain.

"So, DTI has custody of the craft. That's good." Her handler, Gennaro Laurent, would have offered a relieved smile, if his wreck of a face could have mustered one.

"Good?" Juneau shifted uneasily in her chair, seated in her junior officer's cabin aboard *Gibraltar*.

"Very much so. The Federation is now in possession of an incredibly powerful time travel mechanism. I much prefer the DTI having control of it than a foreign power, most especially a government hostile to Federation interests."

Juneau directed a disapproving look at Laurent from across the lightyears. "I would have thought you'd want *us* to be in possession of such a device."

Laurent smiled patiently, but Juneau saw the gesture as a ghoulish tightening of his lipless mouth. "We don't have the resources to properly study such a complex temporal craft. We'll let DTI do the legwork for us. Eventually, they'll puzzle it out, label the timeship 'dangerous' and seal it away in some deep bunker on Luna. If and when we should need use of the device in defense of the Federation, we'll know right where to find it."

Juneau chuckled lightly and remarked, "Of course. I should have known."

Laurent cocked his head to the side and gazed at her approvingly. “You’ve done excellent work under difficult circumstances. And amazingly, you’ve also managed to maintain your cover. I hadn’t expected you’d last this long.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Well, that’s a backhanded compliment.”

“Not at all. It’s very hard to keep your shell in the dark when taking control of her body for as long a time as you did.” He inclined his head appreciatively. “Your last two missions have proven successful, and I’ve decided to extend your stay aboard *Gibraltar*.”

Juneau nodded. “Thank you. It’s nice to have even the illusion of stability for a while.” She deactivated her terminal and crawled back into her bed as she surrendered her consciousness once again. As the alter-ego submerged, she wondered how long Juneau’s fragile psyche could withstand the memory gaps. No matter how cleverly hidden, there were little untidy pieces after every episode that didn’t add up. And how would she resolve the dissonance between her uninspired everyday performance and her reported moments of brilliance that she could not recall?

Laurent terminated the transmission. He leaned back in his office chair and stretched, then reached up to deactivate the holographic collar beneath his shirt. His face, or more accurately the image of his old, burned features vanished to reveal a surgically flawless and youthful visage.

Thanks in part to S31 and Starfleet, a catastrophic threat to Federation security had been thwarted. Such things were Laurent’s stock in trade, of course, but he still marveled at how seemingly common such mortal dangers had become in recent decades. As the Federation grew and its influence spread, more and more species took notice, took measure, and took umbrage.

He buttoned the collar of his formal business tunic to conceal the holomatrix beneath and deactivated the subspace scrambler hidden in his wrist chronometer. He instructed the opaque windows to clear and let in the brilliant mid-afternoon Parisian sunlight while he activated his comm. “Datrella, you can send in my next appointment.”

“Yes, sir. Your fifteen-hundred meeting is with the Talarian ambassador. We’ve had to push the Minister of the Exchequer back to oh-nine-thirty tomorrow.”

“Very well.” Laurent stood and prepared to offer the ambassador the customary Talarian greeting as the Section 31 senior operative returned to his day job as Chief of Staff to the President of the United Federation of Planets.

The crewman took the carryall from Sandhurst's hand and placed it atop the transporter pad before he stepped back to his station at the console. Ramirez and Lar'ragos stood with the haggard looking captain at the base of the steps as they said their goodbyes.

Sandhurst extended a hand to Lar'ragos, who held his grip firmly and spoke volumes of concern for his friend with his eyes. "You're going to be fine, Donald. Your ship and crew are in good hands."

The captain nodded distractedly in response and stepped up onto the dais. A sudden, intrusive thought occurred to Sandhurst, who looked to his security chief. "Pava, what happened to Kutav? I promised him that I wouldn't have him locked up in a Federation penal settlement."

Lar'ragos replied stoically, "I kept that promise for you, Captain."

Sandhurst nodded and appeared vaguely relieved. He glanced at his exec and sent a meaningful look Ramirez's way, a final reminder of the obligations she'd sworn to assume. She bobbed her head in acknowledgement, then gave the order to energize.

As the captain vanished in the transporter beam, Lar'ragos let out a long sigh as his shoulders slumped. "I hope they can help him."

"Amen to that," Ramirez said quietly. She turned to the transporter operator. "Chief Towsend, can we have a minute?" The man nodded and left the room as Ramirez turned to find Lar'ragos appraising her cautiously.

The El Aurian looked slightly perturbed. "I'm guessing this can't be good."

"You probably won't think so, at least at first." She offered him the padd that she had been holding discretely since they'd escorted the captain to the transporter room. Lar'ragos took it hesitantly and his eyes darted over the contents as his expression darkened.

Ramirez continued, "You're a good man, Pava, and an asset to this ship. That being said, your behavior of late has been completely unacceptable and is adversely affecting the performance of your department."

Lar'ragos looked up from the padd with hooded eyes. "I'm fine, Commander. I've buried my demons, and I'm ready to return to duty."

The exec clasped her hands behind her back. "I disagree."

He shook his head and Lar'ragos' hands tightened on the padd as his knuckles whitened. "You want me to get my head shrunk, fine. But not by her."

Ramirez quirked an eyebrow. "Lieutenant Dax is a capable, fully licensed counselor and therapist."

Lar'ragos growled, "She's also my friend. It's inappropriate."

"Uncomfortable for you, you mean?"

His lips drew into a tight grimace. "Sure. Fine. Uncomfortable works."

The exec nodded understandingly. “Good, you need a little discomfort right now. You said you’d buried your demons. That’s not good enough. I want you to confront and banish them.”

Lar’ragos struggled to reign in his emotions. “And if I refuse?”

Ramirez gestured to the padd. “I’ve taken the liberty of drafting transfer orders on the chance that you’d fight this. Captain Amasov has an opening for a tactical officer aboard *Endeavour*.” Her expression was coldly neutral. “They’re slated for a deep space exploration assignment coreward of the Tevrian Gap. It should prove quite challenging.”

He focused his senses on her and probed for chinks in her armor, vulnerabilities he could exploit as he’d done with Ixis. “I’m not the only one around here with issues, Commander. Not by a long shot.”

Her face reddened and Ramirez stepped into his personal space. She looked up into his face with focused anger. “You can knock that off right damn *now*, mister. You try playing head games with me and I’ll throw your ass in the brig for the duration.” Ramirez’s face clouded with a derisive scowl. “The very fact that you’d pull something like that with me only demonstrates how far out of balance your priorities are.”

Lar’ragos blanched, caught flat-footed by the truth of her words. “I... I’m sorry, sir.”

“Dax may be your friend, but she’ll have no problems calling you on your self-deluding bullshit, Lieutenant. She’s also the only therapist I can think of that can possibly have a real understanding of what centuries of psychiatric scars can do to as long-lived a species as yours.”

He nodded numbly and his eyes took on a faraway cast. What had he been thinking? He’d been stuck in a fight-or-flight mode for months now.

Ramirez extended a hand and placed it on the El Aurian’s shoulder. Her demeanor downshifted to one of concern as she spoke softly. “I want the old Pava back. The one I could go to with my concerns and doubts. The one the whole crew could always count on in a pinch. I’m sure you remember him.”

He stood rooted in place. His mind tracked back over his behavior for the past weeks as he called up example after example of anger, hostility, and downright abusiveness. “Maybe you’re right...”

“Maybe so,” Ramirez echoed and moved to the doorway. She turned back. “You’ve got your first appointment with Ezri in one hour aboard the station. Your orders, Lieutenant, are to locate and recover one Pava Lar’ragos and bring him home.”

He took a deep breath. “Aye, sir.”

THE END