



GHOSTS OF THE IKHOZI

STAR TREK
THE NEXT GENERATION

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OF THE
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Star Trek: The Next Generation

Ghosts of the Khozi

©by T. August Green 2020

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This is a sequel to “Night of the Raven”

These events occurred shortly after

The Dominion War and the end of

“Deep Space Nine”

Chapter 1

The view of the *U.S.S. Raven* hanging in Spacedock had become a familiar sight and Commander Augustok wondered how much longer the ship would be undergoing refit. Information regarding the work had not been forthcoming and crew members had been shipping out on a weekly basis. Access to board the ship during the refit was restricted and he hoped the upcoming meeting would shed light on the subject.

Limited access during a refit was nothing new to Cmdr. Galan Augustok, a half-Vulcan Romulan defector. Looking at the ship brought back a flood of memories and a strong reminder of how he got here. Six years ago, he was supervising the refit of another ship, the D'Deridex class warbird that eventually became known as *Nokturak*. As one of its lead engineers, the ship was equipped with a pioneering nutronium/tritanium alloy for an ablative armor that could not only withstand direct phaser hits but rendered the hull a dark color for easier cloak and better camouflage. *Nokturak* could also fire its weapons while cloaked, making it a lethal enemy.

Appointed as First Officer under Cmdr. Sela, Augustok realized the vessel he helped create was only a tool for

another war. On its maiden voyage, *Nokturak* all but destroyed Deep Space Seven where he saw his chance to balance the scales. Sent to the wounded station to gather intel, he killed a Tal Shiar agent and then faked his own death with a hypo-spray in the hopes of being taken prisoner by the *Enterprise*. Intercepted sub-space comms told them the Federation flagship was responding to the distress call so his opportunity to defect would never be better.

In the months that followed, there was the harrowing process of convincing everyone that a Romulan defector was genuine and willing to serve Starfleet. He gave them every bit of technology and was fortunate enough to help the Nebula class *U.S.S. Phoenix*, docked for major refit be transformed into the formidable dreadnought, *U.S.S. Raven*. With her black armor, quad nacelles stretched out like staggered outriggers on separate pylon wings, fed by dual warp cores, an improved overhead weapons module and the mighty Type X+ phaser cannon mounted under her saucer section, the *Raven* was a fearsome sight.

After her construction was complete, Cmdr. William Riker was given command for her maiden voyage, which ultimately destroyed *Nokturak*. Serving as her Science Officer, Augustok worked hard to win the trust of the crew, especially Chief Security Officer, Lt. Cmdr. Br'tah. The

half-human, half-Klingon was an intimidating figure with his muscular build and radiant blonde hair. Daring to face him in Klingon exercise programs won his respect, despite the cost of broken bones, bruises and bloody cuts. A reward well worth the cost.

After the mission was complete, Riker returned to the *Enterprise* and First Officer Gregory Thomas assumed command. For the next three years, Augustok advanced to the seat of First Officer under Capt. Thomas and helped him turn back many Romulan incursions along the Neutral Zone. These actions made him well renowned among his former people, turning him into a prize to be captured, and executed, for crimes against the Romulan Empire.

Catching his reflection in the viewport, he pondered his own features. The darker shade of skin similar to his Vulcan mother, the height and strong jawline of his Romulan father, the long hair, braided into a ponytail as encouraged by Br'tah after he finally regarded him as a warrior, but most of all, his uniform. Wearing Starfleet Class-As to meet with an admiral, especially with a belt clasp bearing the Raptor of his heritage suddenly felt hard to believe. But here he was, serving the Federation and while some would always be suspicious, he'd made a difference despite his mixed bloodline. A fact no Romulan ever let him forget.

He'd been summoned to the office of the Starbase 39-Sierra commander, Rear Admiral Taylor, but upon entering, the assistant's desk was strangely vacant. He waited patiently for a few minutes until a fit, middle-aged man with blonde hair stepped in.

Augustok nodded to him. "The assistant hasn't returned. Are you here to see the Admiral as well?"

"No, Commander," he replied while moving to the office door. "Admiral Taylor will not be joining us. I'm here to see *you*. Please come in."

"You have me at a disadvantage, sir. I see no rank on your uniform." Augustok stepped inside and stood easy.

"Let's dispense with needless formalities, Commander. Please, have a seat."

"Starfleet regulations serve an important need in..."

"Yes, yes, Commander, they certainly do, but now is not one of those times." The man leaned forward on the desk and interlaced his fingers, a serious expression on his face, "Have you ever heard of the El-Aurians?"

"Yes, they were a race of humanoids wiped out by the Borg over a century ago."

“The term *wiped out* would not be entirely correct, Commander. My name is Pocuva and I am a survivor of that attack. I was very young, but I will never forget that day. I’m sure you have events that stand out in your life. I have followed your time in Starfleet with great interest, especially your meteoric rise to the rank of Commander.”

Augustok bowed his head slightly. “The honor is to serve, and Captain Thomas was a generous leader. I owe a great debt to him for the opportunities he gave me to grow as an officer.”

“You’re modest for a Romulan.”

“I am also half Vulcan...”

“Even more unusual for a Vulcan,” Pocuva raised an eyebrow in curiosity. “As you may know, the El-Aurians are renowned as *listeners* but that is only one of our abilities. So, Commander, why do you think you were called here today?”

“I don’t know, sir. I was summoned to meet with Admiral Taylor. Seeing you instead only invites conjecture. May I ask you to be more direct?”

“Ahh, there is the Vulcan logic! I will be direct in telling you that Captain Thomas has stepped down from his command of the *Raven*. It seems he was somewhat

discontent with border patrol duties. Did he ever express those views to you?”

Augustok was surprised and paused, feeling any answer would incriminate his Captain.

“This is not an investigation into Captain Thomas, Commander. Your comments here are completely confidential. If it makes you feel any more at ease, I hold the rank of Captain myself, but I am not here to take the *Raven*. So, did he express negative views about your mission?”

“That was not my impression, Captain. He lost fellow officers, friends and colleagues in both the Borg conflict of Sector 001 and the Dominion War. It saddened him that a ship with the firepower of the *Raven* was relegated to Romulan border patrol when we could have been a valuable asset in both of those battles.”

“That is one possible view.” Pocuva leaned back, appearing more relaxed. “But consider how many incursions into Federation territory the *Raven* has put down since it assumed border patrol. How many in the past three years?”

“Sixteen, sir.”

“At various locations all along the Neutral Zone, correct?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Do you think it’s possible the Romulans were trying to take advantage of our resources being deployed in other sectors?”

“Absolutely, sir.”

Pocuva spoke with focused intent. “Do you think it’s possible they may be diverting our attention from something more ominous?”

“It would be consistent with Romulan tactics, sir.”

“Based on your history, would you agree we need to match those tactics?”

“If you are asking me to return to Romulus as a spy,” Augustok frowned harshly, “I will not, even under threat of death!”

Pocuva raised a hand and shook his head. “I will ask nothing of the sort. While there are resources of that nature that is not my mission.”

Augustok asked sternly, “Then what is your mission, sir?”

“Your Romulan brow lines are showing, Commander. You are indeed everything I expected you to be, but I will ask the questions.”

“Forgive me, sir. My reaction was uncalled for.” Augustok bowed his head.

“Quite the contrary, Commander. Your reaction was expected and required.”

“Required?”

“Yes, Commander. I’m with Starfleet Intelligence and there is a covert mission that needs to be carried out. We feel the *Raven* is the ideal ship for the task, but she must also have the right crew and a commander with a full scope of the situation. A commander with the proper attitude to take any necessary action that may arise.”

Augustok was puzzled. “Intelligence? What kind of necessary action?”

Pocuva folded his arms in a relaxed manner, as though he was suddenly more comfortable. “Commander, why do you think Starfleet would place an El-Aurian in my position?”

“Your long lifespan would avail you a great depth of experience.” Augustok studied the lines on Pocuva’s face, curious as to how old he actually was.

“Partially true, but so much of what we do is about perspective and perception. Consider the risks you took to

defect. Did you know all the variables before you took action?"

"Unknown factors were always a possibility."

"Exactly. This mission is about uncovering whatever it is the Romulans may be hiding and the possible answer to why they slaughtered thousands at the Norkan Outposts."

"The Norkan Campaigns?" Again, Augustok was surprised. "Why would Starfleet be conducting a covert investigation into a conflict from so long ago?"

Pocuva rubbed his forehead with a bit of frustration. "Commander, if you will please sit down, I will explain. However, it's my job to be confident I am choosing the proper personnel before I reveal classified information. If you don't feel you're willing to proceed, then we can end the meeting and you will be re-assigned. Please consider your decision. You have ten seconds."

"Ten seconds?"

"If you cannot make a command decision despite unknown factors in less than ten seconds, you're not equipped to handle this mission. You have four seconds left."

Augustok took a seat and raised an eyebrow as if he were impatiently waiting. Suddenly, it became clear why so many crew members had been shipping out.

“Your body language speaks volumes.” Pocuva smiled, liking what he saw in this officer with each passing exchange. “The mission is not an investigation into the Norkan attacks, but it appears activity in the Norkan system is too persistent to ignore. We have multiple reports of unauthorized cloaked vessels in the vicinity of Nimbus II, near the Neutral Zone and further into Federation space near Arvada, Vanados, Atrea and Cabral. Each of these reports also lost contact with said vessels on headings toward the Norkan system. Any attempts to re-establish the outposts have been met with renegade resistance attacks and sabotage. All of this leads us to believe there are larger forces at work and we need to confirm who and why.”

“Nothing you have said so far sounds like a mission worthy of a covert operation.”

Pocuva nodded in agreement, “That’s exactly how we want it to appear. What do you know about Section 31?”

“Only rumors, and if they do exist, I would equate them with the Tal Shiar. Is that who you represent?”

"If I were, would I tell you?" Pocuva looked amused but inside he was impressed. This was proceeding as he hoped. "If I confirmed myself or their existence, I wouldn't compare them to the Romulan Secret Police. But I will say Starfleet Intelligence has watched you and the *Raven* with great detail since your arrival. We have also taken steps to utilize the resources you made available to us."

"What resources?"

"Come now, Commander, even you admitted after your defection that Romulan operatives had been gathering information on Federation transwarp technology. You also knew they would seek to monitor the progress of the construction of the *Raven*."

"Yes," Augustok admitted. "But measures were taken to protect that process."

"We did exercise such measures," Pocuva agreed. "We allowed them to know exactly what we wanted them to report back to Romulus. Do you recall telling us that Romulan scientists were working on a trilithium weapon?"

"I only had fragments of information, but it was important to understand the potential threat."

"Yes, very much so." Pocuva's eyes narrowed as his tone turned much more serious. "What I am about to tell you is

classified, do you understand? There is no turning back from this point.”

“I understand, Captain.”

“Our intelligence from inside the Romulan Empire tells us the trilithium research is not about creating a weapon. Our scientists agree the Romulan star is showing signs of instability and may go supernova within a decade. The research may be a Romulan effort to delay the reaction. Even if they are successful, it could only buy them time. The reversal of the forthcoming supernova is impossible to stop. Given that information, we believe the Romulans may be devising a plan to expand their borders by annexing nearby star systems. Their survival may be at stake and that could make them very dangerous indeed.”

“That is a logical conclusion, but there are populated star systems inside their borders they could migrate to. Why risk war in the face of global disaster for both Romulus and Remus?”

“Why indeed, Commander?” Pocuva projected a star chart on the desk between them. “Why continue to risk treaty violation after so many years by venturing across Federation space to the Norkan system? What is there that holds such value? What would make you start a war in the face of annihilation?”

“The Norkan system does hold three planets capable of sustaining life.”

“A distinct possibility, Commander.” Pocuva pointed to the chart. “But Norkan IV has consistent atmospheric disturbances that prevent sensors from accurately scanning the surface. They appear to be naturally occurring, but we can’t be sure without a closer look. With all the violent activity plaguing the outpost sites, sending a dreadnought will not look out of place. A science team will be assigned for archeological research on the surface. They will have to be shuttled down since the atmosphere inhibits transporter function. We will have operatives placed among your crew. The *Raven* has been outfitted with multiple automated systems to allow a smaller crew complement. You will be receiving a commission to assume command of the *Raven* and this mission. You must choose your security team and bridge crew. All available personnel on this list have been approved by Starfleet Intelligence so pick as you will.”

“May I ask a question, Captain?” Augustok stood with the list in his hand. “How has Norkan IV been left untouched by Federation research for so long?”

“The planet is Class M but with only animal inhabitants and varying vegetation. It was decided to leave it to natural

development as per the Prime Directive. The atmospheric issues with communication and transporters made it unsuitable for outpost use. However, a previous science expedition suffered heavy casualties. This, combined with recent events, has changed our priorities.”

“I understand the sensitivity of the Romulan information you shared.” Augustok joined his hands behind his back. “But I still fail to see how this is a covert operation.”

“The best operations hide in plain sight, Commander,” Pocuva replied. “Only our operatives, you and your security team will know the objective of discovering possible Romulan involvement and intentions in the Norkan system. To everyone else, this is a science expedition with an armed escort into a possibly hostile star system. That is all they need to know unless circumstances dictate otherwise. There will be no need for you to contact Starfleet regarding protocols. In short, Commander Augustok, this mission is entirely in your hands.”

Pocuva stood and walked toward the door, “By the way, Rear Admiral Taylor will be in shortly to issue your promotion and assign you to the *Raven*. He will tell you about the ship upgrades, escorting the science team and charge you with their protection. That is all he knows. This meeting never took place and I was never here.”

Augustok was speechless as Pocuva left the room and he headed toward the door to follow but Admiral Taylor walked in.

“Oh good, you’re already here,” Taylor smiled. “Please have a seat, Commander.”

Looking over the list as he walked toward his quarters, Augustok was troubled by how many crew members he knew were not there. Good, dependable people with exemplary service records. Why would they not be allowed on this mission? Those thoughts preoccupied him as he entered the cabin only to find Special Ambassador T’Lier in his armchair.

She sipped a glass of brandy and looked amused. “It appears my talents as Ship’s Counselor are not needed for this mission.”

“They are fools,” Augustok replied. Hers was the first name he noticed missing. “When could you not be more vital than now?”

“This is not first contact, my love,” T’Lier answered in a whisper of passion. “I agree it is not logical but covert operatives seldom are. You’re allowing your emotions to get the better of you.”

“Says the Vulcan who embraces emotional responses,” he whispered back as he took her in his arms. Feeling her close was a sensation he was already missing.

“Tempered by logic as needed,” she replied as she closed his mouth with a kiss. As she held him close, her fingers slipped onto his face and she gazed deep into his eyes. “Part of me will always be with you, Galan.”

“I know,” he said softly, gently holding her hands in place, relishing the touch of her thoughts as well as her physical contact. “I thought I lost you once. I never want to feel that way again.”

“Do not be troubled.” She comforted him with a smile. “I must return to Federation Headquarters on Earth. I will come as soon as you return. You are the one going into harm's way. I will carry that burden for both of us.”

Chapter 2

Captain's Personal Log

Capt. Galan Augustok

I am seven days into my first command and three since departing Starbase 39-Sierra. To be so close to the center seat as a First Officer is supposed to prepare you, but the reality is quite different. Knowing my mission and not being able to disclose classified details to all affected is challenging, especially given the unknown factors. I find it particularly difficult to not share these details with my First Officer. To my knowledge, that was never the case between Capt. Thomas and myself. Lt. Commander B'rtah took the information in stride as I knew he would. Part of me is pleased that he chose to remain Head of Security instead of accepting the promotion to First Officer. That leaves me with the task of understanding and evaluating Cmdr. Arvid Heyerdahl, a tribal Norseman from the Scandinavian region of Earth. He was Lt. Cmdr. in charge of Ops aboard the USS Ganymede until it returned from the Gum Nebula for damage repair. Heyerdahl's record is unspotted, but the gap of reassignment and his promotion

in rank for this posting raises questions. I have placed Specialist Lt. Maya Cheyton in charge of the Science Team.

Lt. Cmdr. Riley has expressed great concerns about the reliability of the automated systems installed during our refit and I agree the ship needs more drills for proper shakedown. Fortunately, this is an excellent way to assess my crew. The ship needs to be ready for any encounter we may face in the weeks to come.

Augustok looked around the Ready Room and recalled the conversations with Capt. Thomas that took place there, but now he was on the other side of the desk. The burden of command felt heavy upon him and he closed his eyes and began breathing deeply, pulling his concentration into focus. This was the time he must try and think like his ancestors; to play their deadly game of chess and calculate a strategy. Part of him felt empty as he was forced to leave his beloved T'Lier behind. As Ship's Counselor aboard the *Raven*, she served as diplomat in cases where negotiation with Romulans were required. She was a Vulcan, but a proponent of reunification and a progressive mind of utilizing emotions. They met on Romulus and she was instrumental in his decision to defect. When he thought she

was lost in a shuttle accident, he was devastated but then enraged when he learned it was Tal Shiar sabotage. The death of the agent on Deep Space Seven was hollow revenge but that melted away when she showed up at Utopia Planitia after the *Raven* returned from its first mission. Informed of the plans by the Tal Shiar, she managed to flee on a different transport, avoiding the tragedy of the fiery crash. Augustok had never been so overjoyed to see anyone as much her beautiful face that day. Having her aboard for the past three years had only brought them closer but being forced to leave her again was gut-wrenching. This was also an indication there was little expectation for peaceful resolutions and any diplomacy would fall on his shoulders. No surprise coming from a man like Pocuva and the more he considered the meeting that never was, the more he was sure this Section 31 was involved. Despite Pocuva's denial of Tal Shiar similarities, the tactics were all too familiar. His thoughts were broken by the door tone. "Enter."

Lt. Maya Cheyton stepped in and stood at attention. "Good day, Captain."

"How may I assist you, Lieutenant?"

"Sir, the Science Team is requesting additional research data on the Norkan System and a possible ETA."

“All relevant data has been made available via the ship’s computer. Any data regarding ongoing plans on the outposts is restricted. Norkan IV should be their only focus for study. As far as the ETA is concerned, we are *en route* but the ship and her readiness for the mission are top priority. As soon as I have more precise information in that regard, I will share it with the entire crew. Is that satisfactory, Lieutenant?”

Cheyton appeared uneasy. “I believe the Science Team is growing tense about the lack of more detailed information, sir.”

“Lieutenant, what are your science ratings?”

That question made her think about the years she spent gaining her education. Bouncing from planet to planet to attend the best courses she could get but leaving her with a wealth of knowledge and no plan for how to apply it right away. Her grandfather came from the Yucatan Peninsula on Earth and he would take her on hikes through the jungles, always hungry to explore. Those visits were so much fun and prepared her for big changes, just like going back home to the wintry world of the Canadian Yukon. Summers there were awash with wildlife and her father carried on the exploring tradition of her grandfather. Choosing Starfleet felt like a good way to get out into the

galaxy at the time and she wanted to do well, following in her mother's footsteps, but her brain would always wander elsewhere. She gathered her thoughts and rattled off the list of educational accomplishments the Captain had asked for. "I'm rated in archeology, anthropology, zoology and microbiology, sir."

Augustok leaned forward on the desk. "A most impressive list, Lieutenant, which is why I chose you for this post. But enlighten me, in the study of any of those fields, are there not unknown factors?"

"Always, sir."

"Is that not where the greatest discoveries are to be found, when we venture into the unknown?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then I would suggest you pass that wisdom on to your fellow scientists," the Captain replied as he turned his attention to the desk viewscreen.

"Permission to speak with candor, sir?"

"Granted."

"I believe the true nature of their apprehension is not the expedition itself, sir. I believe it's because they have never been transported via a dreadnought and they fear the worst.

The unknown always poses risks, which they understand, but scientific exploration is not typically conducted inside a war zone. They fear being used as a front for something far more dangerous.”

Augustok stood. “Are we at war, Lieutenant?”

“Not formally, sir.”

“Elaborate?”

Cheyton drew a deep breath. “Sir, the *Raven* has seen many conflicts and never under a clear declaration of war. Her reputation is well known and boarding her for transport raises many questions.”

A smile crept up one side of the Captain’s face and he nodded in agreement. “Observant, Lieutenant and well done. You may inform the Science Team they are indeed traveling to a system that has seen its share of unrest, but you may reassure them they are being protected by the best border patrol vessel in Starfleet. You may also inform them that I have been charged with their safety and I intend to fully accomplish that mission. If that is not satisfactory, I will prepare a briefing to outline the activity against the outposts and the risk assessment of our mission.”

“Thank you, sir.” Cheyton smiled, content that she made her point professionally. “I appreciate your time.”

“Trust me, Lieutenant,” Augustok added as he sat down. “I’m as interested in the findings on Norkan IV as you are. Dismissed.”

Cheyton left the room as Augustok gazed out the viewport. The mission was barely underway and already suspicions were growing. He knew this would happen, but he must keep the rumors to a minimum with a show of strong leadership. That was the best course of action. In time, all would come to light because if any Romulan involvement was discovered in the Norkan system, he would expose them. Starfleet Intelligence and Section 31 would have to live with the outcome.

He strode out of the Ready Room and locked eyes with his First Officer. “Commander, you have the bridge.”

Heyerdahl stood. “Aye, Captain. Is anything wrong?”

“No, Ex-Oh, just walking the decks.”

Heyerdahl smiled with curiosity as he took the center seat. “Surprise inspection, sir?”

“Assessment, Ex-Oh.”

“Roger that, sir.”

The turbolift would make the next choice. Wherever it stopped would begin his walk. Wandering the decks

always helped him think but being the Captain meant being noticed everywhere you went. Even as First Officer you were viewed closer to the crew, but he was sure that would change in time.

Deck 12, a MedTech was waiting and the Captain headed to Medical. Stepping into Sick Bay revealed empty beds, a nurse calibrating equipment and Doctor Missy November busy in her office. Augustok was always cautious approaching Dr. November. As a joined Trill, she appeared to be a woman in her thirties but her symbiote carried several lifetimes' worth of medical experience. Each new Trill host added a layer of personality to the total being, but her razor tongue and saucy attitude were well documented by the two captains before him. She was not quite two meters tall and her brown hair was pulled tight on the back of her head, but her smile was the x-factor. On any given day it could be jovial one minute and sly but deadly the next. Which version you got was unpredictable, but one thing was certain, she would speak her mind without reserve. The Captain moved to her doorway.

The doctor never looked up. "What can I do for you, sir?"

"A rare but pleasant sight to see Sick Bay empty, Doctor?"

"I didn't know Romulans did sarcasm, Captain."

“I thought you would be pleased.”

“It’s too early for that.” November tilted her head as she cut a glance.

“Day watch is five hours old. No coffee as of yet?”

“I don’t do coffee,” she replied dryly.

“Plomeek Tea?”

“I didn’t mean too early in the day, Captain. I meant too early in the mission. It’s been three days since we launched, and you haven’t called battle stations or fired on anything. No one with a plasma burn or concussion – isn’t that some kind of record for you?”

“I fail to comprehend your disdain, Doctor. Would you rather be at capacity?”

“I don’t find it pleasant that Sick Bay is empty, Captain. Given the history of this ship, I find it to be a calm before a storm. That doesn’t fit my definition of pleasant. There is no normal day aboard the *Raven*.”

“I assume you were given the opportunity for re-assignment while at Starbase Sierra. Why did you elect to stay?”

Dr. November rose from her chair. "Because nowhere am I more sorely needed than here. I know you were given the option to choose your crew when you assumed command. Why did you keep me?"

"For the precise reason you just cited. I will endeavor to prolong your *calm*, if at all possible. Carry on, Doctor." Augustok nodded and turned for the door.

"I was wrong, Captain."

"About what?"

November grinned. "Romulans *can* do sarcasm."

"It certainly isn't my Vulcan half." The Captain looked amused before walking away. He admitted to himself that verbal sparring with Dr. November helped keep him sharp. A trait he hoped his new Ex-Oh would begin to show.

A slow circle of the deck led him back to the turbolift. The doors opened to reveal Lt. Cmdr. Riley wearing a distressed look. "I was just coming to find you, Captain."

"Is the comm system malfunctioning, Mr. Riley?"

"No sir, I just wanted to have a word in private...about the ship."

"Are we in danger? Do we need to return to port?"

“Not like that...” Riley grumbled.

“Main Engineering,” the Captain ordered. As the lift began to move, he glanced at Riley and thought how lucky he was to still have the Chief Engineer. Riley had come aboard the *Raven* as a Lieutenant, serving on several starships as Engineer’s First Mate. Any other officer with such skill would easily have been promoted but when your family history reaches back to the *Enterprise*, NCC-1701, it can be hard to exceed expectations. Riley’s grandfather served under Capt. Montgomery Scott and that legacy chased him relentlessly. His work on the *Raven* was exemplary, and Capt. Riker wasted no time moving him up in rank. At this point, Riley held himself to higher expectations than Augustok ever did, but the Captain learned to trust the instincts and expertise of his Chief Engineer. Riley’s dark hair gave him a brooding look, but his mood was forever upbeat, and the slight Irish touch of his voice set him apart in conversation.

“It might be best if you show me your concerns, Mr. Riley. I have never seen that look on your face before when it comes to the ship.”

“Aye, Captain. That might be a fair way of putting it.”

“The automated systems?”

“Aye, sir. Starfleet eliminated over half my engineering crew and the systems will function under normal use, but I don’t trust them to perform in battle conditions.”

Augustok was concerned as they stepped out of the turbolift, knowing how often the *Raven* saw action, this was not a matter to take lightly. “Most of the systems are already computer controlled, correct?”

“Aye, Captain, but with the crew at their stations, they can initiate changes, re-route power and select manual override if need be.”

“The automated systems are capable of everything but manual override, true?”

“Technically, Captain, but the response time the computer takes to weigh those factors is just not fast enough. These systems were designed for transports and deep space exploration so those vessels can operate with minimal crew. They were never intended for battle conditions, especially the power relays between the primary and secondary warp cores. Those are simply too vital to weapons and propulsion in combat.”

The Captain pondered the implications of Riley’s opinion as they moved around the main engine cores. He was never given to unbalanced assumptions or claims that lacked

substance. “Why would Starfleet install such systems on this ship with full knowledge of its history of conflict?”

“I’ve got no good answer for that, Captain.” Riley shook his head, “But I will get to work on breaking up the sub-routines to allow the main computer core to have fewer choices per operation. That should speed up response time and any power switching can still be controlled from the stations here or on the bridge.”

“Mr. Riley.” The Captain joined his hands behind his back and stood tall with a look of pride. “I suspect I will be recommending you for promotion in rank by the time this mission is complete.”

“Sir, I have loved this ship since the first time I laid eyes on her, but it pains me to say it’s the only time I’ve been concerned about her seeing action. I’m honored you feel I’m worthy of the rank, but I’ll be happy just to get back in one piece this time.”

“I have every confidence in you, Mr. Riley. Carry on.”

The Captain walked away and the burden on his shoulders got heavier. It was one thing to embark on a dangerous mission, expecting possible Romulan resistance, but quite another to do so with a handicapped ship. In the past, even against three-to-one odds, the *Raven* had proved she was

up to the task. Now, with his Chief Engineer casting doubt on that capability, his confidence to engage the enemy was in doubt for the first time.

Chapter 3

The sound of boots tapping on the polished stone floor echoed in the empty hall. The hour was late as Commander Sindari strode toward the office of Brigadier Vaebn of the Tal Shiar. It was not a meeting she looked forward to. The dimly lit Command base was in stark contrast to the beautiful night sky of Glintara. High above in that starry sky, her ship held station in orbit awaiting her return. The *Mrr'vaaht* was the first of four new warbirds, the Stormbird-Kre Class (Stormbird II) developed in conjunction with the Tal Shiar. While she reveled in being given command of such a vessel, failure to perform under the Praetor's Special Police carried dire consequences. No matter, if she failed with such power at her disposal, she deserved to feel the Praetor's wrath. She touched the entry pad and the door slid open.

"Brigadier, by your command." Sindari snapped to attention but couldn't help wondering how a man the age of Vaebn managed to survive the rigors of the Tal Shiar for so long. The streaks of gray in his hair and the worn lines of his face were hardened. Obviously, at one time he was a formidable warrior and operative, but the years had taken

their toll. Still, his mind possessed the cunning and savvy many commanders lacked, and he'd proven he was not to be trifled with.

"At ease, Commander," Vaebn ordered, concentrating on his desk screen with a stern look. "Tell me, Sindari, how would you evaluate your missions into Federation Space?"

"Complete success, sir."

Vaebn's head turned with glaring eyes. "That is bold, Commander."

"Yes, sir, but correct." Sindari let the pride of her smile show. Any Romulan without confidence and guile did not deserve command of a warbird.

Vaebn frowned. "Were you detected outside of the Neutral Zone?"

"Affirmative, sir, but only when we chose to be."

He pointed an accusing finger. "Why would any Commander make such a foolish judgment?"

Sindari dared look him in the eye. "Part of my mission was to prove the capabilities of the *Mrr'vaaht* and we prove them we did. Allowing the ship to be detected and the Federation vessels to give chase, proved our superior stealth and cloaking technology. We not only disappeared

but were able to evade, maneuver and place our enemy in our sights. We could have destroyed them, but I was not tasked with those orders. However, I did hunger for the glory of the kill.”

The frown on Vaebn’s face changed to a smile and then a reserved laugh. “So you did, Commander. I see it was a wise choice to place you on the bridge.” Just as quickly, the smile turned to stone and he rose behind his desk. “I need not express the importance and high priority of Project Dravek. It is at the very core of our being, the heart of what it means to be Romulan and failure in any way will not be tolerated. Dravek must succeed and the Pi Hydrae System will be ours. It is written in the blood of our ancestors and so it shall be done.”

“By your command, Brigadier!”

Moving around the desk, he stood in front of Sindari. “It has come to our attention that the Federation vessel that plagues our borders has been dispatched to Norkan IV and is now commanded by the traitor, Augustok. Both he and that ship must perish for his crimes against the Empire. See to it that is not forgotten by you or any of the Stormbird-Kre commanders.”

Sindari stood at attention placed her fist over her heart. “I serve Under the Raptor’s Wing!”

“Or perish by His talons, Commander. You are dismissed. Report to me again when you return from Pi Hydrae.”

“I obey with pride, Brigadier,” she bowed her head and stepped back before leaving the room. In the hall she drew a deep breath and clenched her fist with joy. Sindari was one of the youngest women to rise to the command of a Tal Shiar warbird. Her stature may have been small, but she made up for it with ruthless enthusiasm. Many Romulan males made the mistake of saying she never would succeed but she made sure to enjoy her revenge on every last one of them. The stakes were high, but she could taste the glory to be won and she relished it with great anticipation. “*Mrr’vaaht*, ready to transport.”

The night sky beckoned as she beamed away.

Page after page of information scrolled by and it was all starting to look the same. The kind of data you might find presented to a high school science class. Those years were long past for Catori Lonetree. After being the child of scientists that warped all over Federation space (and a few

places outside those boundaries) this was simply too elementary.

Home was always the Tribal lands of North America and the quiet plains of grass south of the Badlands. A short speeder ride away was the regal mountain carving of Crazy Horse. The stone sculpture of the Lakota War Chief towered almost two hundred meters above the campus below and was a constant inspiration to all Native tribes to never give up and reach for higher goals. She studied three years at the university there, easily the most interesting and heartbreaking years of her life. Despite the scars on her past, those sights and grassy fields always brought her peace and she yearned for them now.

The Badlands had been home to Native tribes for centuries and it was an area rich with archeological artifacts, but its scientific value aside, the landscape was a sight to behold. The grasslands spread out for thousands of square kilometers, but as you head north, the terrain transforms into a high desert plateau. Dividing the two areas was a massive expanse of intricate canyons that reached into the grasslands like so many fiords. She still recalled the first time she saw it for herself. It was as if someone drained the ocean from the Scandinavian coast, leaving the box canyons like a fortress wall protecting the land beyond. Exploring deep into those canyons felt otherworldly but

still grounded in family roots. No place else felt so much like home.

While the data made it clear that atmospheric disturbances on Norkan IV prevented accurate sensor scans and hindered probe transmissions launched to the surface, it made no sense that only one expedition had been deployed to the planet during its history of Federation territory. Half of that team was lost and several others injured, but no detailed explanation given as to why. This missing information cast a dark cloud over what was to be the greatest opportunity for discovery in her life. What could possibly have gone wrong that would make Starfleet seal the team records, especially given the high cost of lives? She switched off the terminal and got a glass of water from the food slot before relaxing on the sofa, wistfully watching the stars streak by.

The door tone was completely ignored, but after a third try her communicator sounded. “Ms. Lonetree, are you alright?”

She tapped the badge. “Yes, I’m fine. I’m sorry, please come in.”

The door slid open to reveal a dark-haired, athletic man, his Spec Ops uniform couldn’t hide the physique as he stood silently in the “at ease” position. Catori turned her

head but only stared, making no expression at first, but a look of surprise finally crept in. “Dak? Dak Cheveyo?”

The officer returned her smile. “Lieutenant Dak Cheveyo, ma’am. May I come in?”

“You never asked permission to come in my room before...”

“You don’t ask when you’re sneaking in.” Dak laughed. “It’s great to see you, Cat.”

“I thought you must be dead by now?”

“That’s a helluva greeting after so long.” He grinned as he sat in the chair across from her.

Cat sneered, “I didn’t say you could sit down.”

“I didn’t ask.” Dak chuckled. “Did you seriously think I was dead?”

“I’ve never known you to shy away from a risk in your life and apparently that hasn’t changed. Maquis incursion, Dominion War, Cardassian Invasion Task Force, need I go on?”

“So, you’ve been keeping up with me.” Dak grinned as he moved to the other end of the sofa.

“Don’t go getting comfortable, you won’t be staying very long.” Cat downed the rest of her water. “I kept expecting to find you on a casualty list. You always liked shooting things best of all.”

“That’s not true.” Dak relaxed and crossed his legs. “I don’t enjoy it, I’m just good at it. I’m also good at coming back alive.”

“Just not very good at staying in touch.” She went back to the food slot. “Pina Colada with a straw.”

“No thanks, I’m not thirsty,” he joked, loving any chance to needle her.

“I didn’t ask.”

Dak looked around the room. “Nice quarters. Nicer than mine. Come to think of it, I don’t recall hearing from you either.”

“Kinda hard to get comms to someone behind enemy lines or on Spec Ops mission if you’re not next of kin. Don’t change the subject, there’s nothing you like better than shooting things. Good at it? Yes, you are. Don’t enjoy it? Try again, phaser brain.”

“You know I never liked that name.” Dak shook his head and frowned for a second, but moved on. “There are other things I enjoy much more.”

“Such as?”

“You dragging me out to the Badlands to dig in the dirt all weekend...”

Cat thumped her glass on the table in anger and blurted out. “Dragged you?”

“Cat, be fair! I wasn’t crazy about the idea the first time, but would I have gone back out there with you so often if I hated it?”

She flopped back in the chair in disgust, “Men will do a lot of things if they think a reward is waiting...”

Dak stood and walked across the room, staring in her eyes the whole way. “You don’t believe that, not for a microsecond. If you’re mad about my being away, I understand. But it hurt to watch you fly off to Alpha Centauri, so you aren’t alone on this one.”

“University of Alpha Centauri is one of the best scientific schools in the Federation! It was a huge honor to go there,” she shot back, her voice shaking as she fought the lump in her throat.

Dak moved around the table and his voice softened. “Don’t you think I know that? Do you think for one second I resent you going there?”

“You just said...”

“I said it hurt to watch you go, not I thought you should’ve stayed.”

Cat was on the edge of tears. “If I had stayed, you still would’ve left.”

“I know.” Dak took her hand gently in his and stroked her fingers. “We both made our choices. The Federation needed warriors and that was me. Wasn’t it the same with our ancestors? The warriors went away to protect the homes and families, doesn’t your own research tell you that?”

“Dammit, Dak, I hate it when you act intelligent.” Tears slipped down her cheeks.

“I have one more intelligent thing to say...”

“Shut up!”

“Not this time. I love you, Cat. That has never changed, and I enjoy that more than anything in the galaxy.”

She grabbed his hair and kissed him, holding on with all her might. “Why are you doing this when you know we’ll have to leave each other again?”

He stroked her long, black hair and lifted her chin to see her eyes. “I’ll worry about that when this mission is over. My unit is here to make sure your team stays safe and comes back alive. No mission has ever mattered more than this one. No one has ever mattered more than you. For now, you’re stuck with me and when the time comes, we’ll make that decision together.”

She kissed him again. “I was wrong about what I said before.”

“About what?”

“You should get comfortable.” She smiled. “You will be staying.”

The soft glow of green light bathed the bridge of the *Mrr’vaah*t as Commander Sindari let her fingers dance on the arm of the command chair. She loved the darkness of this chamber under cloak on Moon Watch and the pride in her ship swelled in her chest. They had crossed the Neutral Zone undetected and continued across Federation space without a single enemy scan. Their long-range sensors

were tracking the starship *Raven* but they kept their distance...for now.

Sindari sat tall. "Has the Federation vessel altered course?"

The navigation officer turned. "Only small deviations, my Commander, but still tracking toward Pi Hydrae at low warp."

"Continue tracking, cloak status is maximum priority."

"Yes, my commander."

A Centurion approached her chair holding a report pad. "A message was received, Commander. Coded for you only."

Sindari applied her hand to the device for the encryption and read over the orders in a few short moments. She handed the pad back and stared intently at the Centurion. "Transmit the following on high scramble encryption to all Romulan vessels, this sector. This is Commander Sindari of the *Mrr'vaah*t and I speak the words of the Praetor. Hear them! The Federation vessel *Raven* is bound for the Pi Hydrae system. All ships are to remain cloaked and hidden until I alone express orders to action. We all know the wounds this vessel, built with our stolen technology, has inflicted on the Imperial Fleet and now we confirm it is under the command of the traitor Augustok. We shall destroy him and his ship, but that task shall fall to the

Stormbird-Kre warships only. It will take a coordinated attack to eliminate the *Raven* so be warned, any commander who seeks glory on his own and attacks without my direct orders will pay dearly for their insubordination. Proceed under cloak to the Pi Hydrae system, remain hidden and await further orders. We are about to strike a blow of vengeance that will soon make Pi Hydrae a rightful system of The Empire. Sindari out.”

“I obey, Commander!” The Centurion saluted and moved with speed to his communication console.

“Come, Augustok,” Sindari snarled. “My ship will wet her talons with your blood by the light of the Pi Hydrae star!”

A sonic shower had become a regular routine to start the day for the captain of the *U.S.S. Raven*. After getting dressed he was surprised how he’d taken to the Earth drink coffee over Romulan tarka. A robust flavor with a touch a cream brought a soothing effect as opposed to so many who said it chased away lingering sleep. He’d also been able to program the food slot to closely replicate a scrambled Hlai egg. Not quite as good as the original, but

very close, and a welcome taste of the culture he left behind.

With breakfast done he touched the comm panel. "This is the Captain. All Norkan science team members and Spec Ops unit please report to Holodeck 3, Deck 11 in 15 minutes for mission briefing. Captain out."

He checked his rank insignia, smoothed his hair and placed his communicator badge on his chest. The clasp that saved his life, now worn on a belt with his dress uniform lay on his desk. Feeling its texture before picking it up to gaze at the Raptor logo, he recalled how far he'd come in a few short years. Surely there were those who still questioned if he should be in Starfleet at all, while others viewed him as a spy, working his way into a position to be of use to the Empire. It was times like these he sorely missed the touch of T'Lier's mind and the calming caress of her body close to him at night. Her ability and passion to find the harmony where logic and emotion came together made her unpopular on Vulcan, but on Romulus, she found the silent voices trying to bring the distant races together. The way she could reach his mind in ways his mother never could helped teach him to center his inner self. Those intimate moments led to their hearts finding each other. T'Lier's presence on Romulus was always a danger and every meeting with her was a risk but the bond he found with her

could not be broken. Thankfully, she found a role with the Federation to advocate a brighter future. Despite her absence, those thoughts gave him resolve to complete his mission so he could return to her.

The hall outside his quarters was empty but the turbolift doors opened to Lt. Cheyton's smile. "Good morning, Captain."

"Lieutenant, I trust you are well today?"

"Yes, thank you, Captain, and on a personal note, I appreciate you taking the time to brief the science team. I know it's not protocol."

"True, Lieutenant. This would normally fall to the Ex-Oh, but after you expressed their concerns, I felt answers would be most credible coming from the Captain himself."

"I agree, sir, and I think they will too."

Augustok turned to Cheyton. "It will have to suffice, Lieutenant. It would be illogical for me to do so more than once."

"Aye, sir." She suppressed a chuckle. "A point I'm sure you will not fail to make."

"Did I say something humorous, Lieutenant?"

“Not at all, sir.” Cheyton held her composure and looked forward. “I stopped by Sick Bay this morning and Doctor November had some, shall we say, interesting views on your command style, sir. She tends to be a bit...colorful?”

“Say no more, Lieutenant. The Doctor and I have a... unique rapport. One that should remain between her and myself. Do we agree?”

“Of course, Captain.”

Augustok let a slight smile show Cheyton that he wasn't without a sense of humor and nodded as the doors opened. “After you, Lieutenant.”

The two walked quietly to the holodeck, but despite Dr. November's comments, the truth was Cheyton admired Augustok a great deal and was envious of his Vulcan composure. She knew if she was ever going to advance in rank, that kind of leadership quality and confident decision making was something she had to improve. The reason she'd gone to him in the first place wasn't so much about the science team doubts but the chance to see his command style in person. She felt it couldn't hurt to improve here until better opportunities came along.

Upon reaching the holodeck, Cmdr. Heyerdahl was waiting. The Captain turned to Cheyton. "Lieutenant, get everyone settled and I'll join you in a few moments."

She nodded and went inside as Heyerdahl waited for the doors to close.

"Captain, I've been searching for a *creative* helmsman as you requested, and I believe we have candidate. Ensign Ula Golos was reprimanded and removed from Red Squadron at the start of her senior term at the Academy. Her CO cited the reason as an over-aggressive attitude and a penchant for high-risk maneuvers. Repeated measures of discipline did little to reign her in, so she was grounded until graduation."

"Well done, Ex-Oh." Augustok was pleased. "What made you choose this one over others?"

"She is Orion, sir."

"Fascinating, but her planet of origin shouldn't be a factor. Explain?"

"Orions tend to be wild by nature, sir. Much like my own ancient ancestors, but that does not make them insubordinate or disloyal. In fact, they are fiercely dedicated, but more often they follow the spirit of the rule rather than the letter."

This was the kind of evaluation the Captain hoped he would get from his First Officer and it was one more step in building a strong rapport.

“It sounds like this one strikes a personal chord with you, Ex-Oh. Am I correct?”

Heyerdahl let a small grin show. “I wasn’t what you’d call a model cadet myself, sir.”

Augustok shared the expression. “I had an inclination that might be the case. Based on that, we’ll follow your recommendation, Commander. Get her to the holodeck and run the battle tactics simulations we agreed on. Take the center seat for those drills so you can make adjustments as you see fit. Bring me the evaluation as soon as it’s complete.”

“Right away, Captain.”

Heyerdahl turned to walk away but the Captain called out: “Commander...”

“Yes, sir?”

“I think the word in your native tongue is...Herlov?”

“Yes, Captain, and thank you, sir. I won’t let you down.”

The word *Herlov* in Norse meant *a prize gained in war*, which is exactly what might be the case in the days to come. Finding a helmsman that can pilot the *Raven* under intense conditions felt like a must-have commodity. Neither of the previous helm or navigation officers were on the list given by Pocuva. The loss of the *Raven*'s previous helmsman, Lt. Duglas of Bajor was significant. Heyerdahl had gone above and beyond on this one and a simple *well done* felt inadequate. Augustok was slowly feeling better about their chances for success.

He proceeded inside the holodeck to find the teams seated and ready for the briefing. This was not a surprise for a Spec Ops unit, but the science groups had the reputation of being more informal. Lt. Cheyton stood up front as she announced his entrance.

“Commanding the *U.S.S. Raven*, Captain Galan Augustok.”

The Captain took a moment to survey the room and observe the faces of those gathered. They were attentive but some were obviously concerned while others openly showed discontent.

“It has been brought to my attention that many of you feel the information provided by Starfleet with regard to Norkan IV is inadequate or that further data is being

withheld. Let me assure you I share that opinion. As captain of this vessel, I am charged with completion of this mission and with your safety. I do not take either of those duties lightly. A lack of information always breeds suspicion and invites danger. I was also informed some of you are concerned that being transported aboard a dreadnought-class vessel indicates an underlying mission of more dangerous intent.

“The *Raven* has been no stranger to conflict during its time as a border patrol ship and I will not deny that is always a possibility. However, there is no other mission we are tasked with at this time. Part of our current assignment was to investigate sighting reports of cloaked vessels in this sector. Those reports originated from Deep Space Four, Starbase 219 and Starbase 247. We have been actively scanning for any readings that fit those criteria since we departed Starbase 39-Sierra and to date they have been negative. With regard to the violence in the Pi Hydrae system itself, the sabotage that has been plaguing the outpost rebuilding efforts have been carried out by mercenary groups. It is only natural to suspect the Romulans could be involved but Starfleet has no evidence to that effect at this time. It is not, I repeat not, part of our current assignment to investigate those attacks. Obviously, if we were to discover any such evidence while on our

expedition to the surface of Norkan IV, we will act accordingly. Starfleet determined, and I'm sure you will agree, that sending a defenseless science vessel for a thirty to forty-day surface expedition in a system where mercenaries are known to operate, would not be a prudent choice. Any mercenary vessel would think twice before attempting to engage the *Raven*. All incidents so far have been ground operations with no space or orbital conflicts reported. This is why the Spec Ops unit was assigned to accompany the science team. Typically, a Security detail would suffice but the loss of life on the previous expedition dictated otherwise."

Lt. Cheveyo stood. "Captain, given that outcome, why have those records not been released? My team would like to have some idea of what we may be facing down there. It's clear we'll be at risk."

"I completely agree with you, Lieutenant. I have pressed Starfleet Intelligence on the matter for exactly the reasons you cited but they have not been forthcoming with any further information. I have no reasonable explanation for their silence. It is my intention for your unit to make the first excursion to the planet surface, prepared for armed conflict and assess the situation accordingly. On the surface, you will have command and if you deem the

environment to be too dangerous, I will abort the mission on my authority immediately.”

“Not so fast.” Dr. Struev Yong of Bajor jumped to his feet. He was an aging but experienced scientist that lived through the Cardassian occupation. His short, stocky build and bald head reminded many of a Bajoran three-horn bull rhino with the rebellious temperament to match. “The science team is not part of Starfleet. You have no authority to abort our expedition! I am the senior member of this research group and we will decide if the danger outweighs the potential of rare findings.”

“Dr. Struev, I can appreciate your passion.” The Captain cast a steely gaze. “But on this ship, I am in command. As long as I am charged with your safety, I will make the determination to stay or abort. No matter if it occurs aboard the *Raven* or on the planet surface, my judgment will prevail. Do I make myself clear?”

“And if I refuse to leave the planet surface?”

“Then the Spec Ops officer will place you in custody and you will be returned to the ship and confined to quarters. If at that time, Starfleet agrees to comply with your decision, you will be returned to the surface and left behind. That will be your choice, but you will not, under any circumstances decide the fate of the entire research group.”

The Doctor looked smug. “And if more than just myself refuse to comply?”

Augustok joined his hands behind his back and stepped closer to the group, his tone was one of direct authority. “Doctor, let us not waste time over hypothetical scenarios. If I do decide to abort the mission, it will not be a judgment I make lightly or without logical cause. Staying or leaving over scientific discovery will not be the debate in question. The risk or loss of life will most certainly be the deciding factor and on that point, I will entertain no further argument. Do you claim to speak for the lives of all those present?”

Struev took a long pause then shook his head. He answered with stubborn submission. “Of course not.”

“In that case, are there any other questions?”

Dr. Lonetree spoke from her seat. “Are there any details at all you can tell us about the previous research team? How many were there? How long were they on the surface?”

The Captain drew a deep breath, trying to measure his frustration with Struev but Lonetree’s request was legitimate. “There were twelve scientists and a six-person security team. They were on the surface for a week. All but one of the security team were reported killed and four of

the science team. Two others died of injuries aboard the shuttle during the escape before assistance arrived. The Med Tech was part of the security unit lost on the planet surface. Any other details remained classified. Is that helpful doctor?"

"The Norkan files say there is no known humanoid life on the planet..."

"No *known* humanoid life, Doctor."

Dr. Lonetree sighed. "So the previous team was decimated by what? Natural wildlife?"

The Captain raised any eyebrow, growing weary of vague questions. "As a scientist I'm sure you know of many aggressive predatory species throughout the galaxy that pose a mortal threat to humanoid life."

"Of course, Captain, but few that could take such a steep toll so quickly before an escape, especially with an armed security team on hand."

"I agree it is unlikely, Doctor." Augustok nodded and returned to the front of the room. "If I could answer that question, we all would be much better prepared. I do not know the reason the report remains classified, but the mission will proceed, cautiously, and hopefully we will find the answers without similar results."

“May I ask a personal question?”

“Yes, Doctor, if it is relevant to the mission.”

“If you were in my place, would you be willing to go to the surface?”

“Yes, Doctor, I would. The Spec Ops team is well trained and highly capable. If assistance is required, the *Raven* can quickly dispatch help despite the communication difficulties via beacon locators. The *Raven* will also remain on station in orbit for the duration of the expedition in order to facilitate whatever needs may arise. Does that answer your question?”

“Thank you, Captain.”

Lt. Cheveyo stood again. “Sir, request permission to use one of the holodecks for tactical assault training for my unit?”

“Granted, Lieutenant. See Commander Heyerdahl to schedule your training. You have seventy-two hours before we reach Norkan IV.”

Lt. Cheyton stepped forward and faced the group. A glance at her Captain gave her the nod of approval. “If there are no further questions for the Captain, you are dismissed.

There will be a briefing twenty-four hours before we embark for the planet surface.”

Dr. Struev took a detour to Ten Forward where he ordered a glass of springwine and took an empty table near the viewport. Thoughts rolled through his mind about Norkan IV and he was determined to explore that planet no matter the cost. There had to be reasons it was left undisturbed for so long. No other M-Class world in the Federation was surveyed with such minimal results, especially one in the same system as Starfleet outposts. Pi Hydrae was unique in that three of its planets were capable of sustaining life and that was a scientific oddity. Why build on two of the planets but ignore the third? The atmospheric conditions were a poor excuse. Something was afoot and he fervently wanted to know what.

Too many years had passed on Bajor with his people being the victims of political power struggles. Too many brilliant minds exploited for military use and other destructive purposes. All of this smacked of the hollow cries of oppressors and he intensely hated such doings. War and corruption cost him his family in painfully slow progression so now, there was nothing left for him to lose. He wanted scientific discovery for the right reasons and

any strategic significance could burn in the heart of a star for all he cared.

Dr. Lonetree sat down across from him without asking, thumped her elbows on the table and shot an irritated look his way. “Little early in the day for springwine?”

Struev swirled the glass and took another sip. “There is no unsuitable time for a proud Bajoran tradition. This replication is actually quite good, not the best but...”

Lonetree snapped, “Did you get what you wanted?”

“I did order springwine...”

“Don’t be cagey, Yong. You know what I mean.”

“I respect you, Dr. Lonetree, but you and I are not on a first name basis,” he replied sternly.

“You are a brilliant scientist, Struev, but you showed little respect today.”

“In what way, Doctor?”

“What did you hope to gain by challenging a Starfleet captain?”

The aged Bajoran clunked the glass on the table as if he meant to break it. “There is never a poor time to challenge authority when it holds no right to do so.”

“Not everything is an act of oppression or a Maquis revolt.” Catori rolled her eyes.

“Ahh youth.” Struev chuckled but Lonetree quickly grabbed the top of his glass.

“Don’t you dare lecture me like a child and don’t pretend to know everything about your ancestors being betrayed! I’ve got centuries of history on that subject so save it for your entry level classroom.”

“Make your point if you have one, Lonetree, while my patience still holds.”

She released the glass and settled back in her chair. “Starfleet is here to help us so what are we gaining by putting the captain of this ship on the defensive?”

Struev looked around the room as if being watched and answered in a low voice, “Starfleet helps the science community when it serves their purpose and I promise you, that point will be made before this is over. You accuse me of being contentious, yet you countered the Captain about the previous casualties. Why? Weren’t you satisfied with their report?”

“The loss of life was significant, and I think that deserves more than simple numbers.”

“Exactly.” Struev downed the rest of his drink. “So, it appears we are not so different after all. Tell me, Doctor, in your honest opinion, what do you think killed those people?”

“I don’t know.”

“But you don’t believe it was anything natural. You said as much to the Captain.”

“Yes, I did.”

“Then what?” Struev leaned forward with a clenched fist, then answered his own question with ominous intent. “If not something natural, that only leaves one other option... an enemy.”

“That’s pure speculation,” Lonetree huffed.

“It is, but as Captain Augustok is so fond of saying, it’s logical. Mark my words, young lady, when we reach the planet surface, we will either find an enemy of the Federation, most likely Romulan or a mercenary group that has been using the planet as a hiding place. A secret location they are willing to kill to protect.”

Lonetree shot back, “Isn’t that what the Spec Ops unit is for? Doesn’t that show Starfleet’s good intent?”

The Bajoran gazed out of the viewport as his voice turned painful and sad.. “Your ancestors do indeed have a long history of betrayal and conflict, but I have seen the ugly face of war with my own eyes. I have watched groups of dedicated men and women, people with hearts and souls of mighty will fight to their last breath. I have watched them burn and be vaporized in a terrible, brilliant flash and all their valiant loyalty die with them. I’m sure the Spec Ops are fine soldiers, but one unit of warriors doesn’t last long against an entrenched enemy – the kind I fear we will find, but even with that threat, why has it been left this way for so long?” Struev turned to her with angry frustration in his eyes, “I want answers, Doctor. All of which stands in the way of a planet covered in scientific discovery and that is a crime against us all!”

“Maybe you’re right.” Lonetree stood, not willing to continue the argument and motioned to the waiter. “Bring this man another springwine.”

“Why, thank you.” The old man smiled.

“Be careful what you wish for, Struev. You might discover something you’ll be sorry you found.”

Chapter 4

The sound of Bat'leth practice blades hitting together made a loud cracking noise that rattled through Augustok's bones. Sparring with his Security Chief had become a regular activity aboard the *Raven* and he was happy to get back to it after such a long absence. Lt. Cmdr. Br'tah might only be half Klingon but his attack possessed all his ferocity. The Captain held his own but as usual, Br'tah wore him down and eventually executed a kill stroke.

“One day, Mr. Br'tah, one day I will get the upper hand.”

“I genuinely hope so, Captain.” Br'tah offered his hand to help Augustok to his feet. “If you do not, then my training will be for naught.”

“I wouldn't go that far. You're a formidable opponent, even a draw would be worthwhile.”

“You have bested me in the past, Captain...on occasion,” Br'tah admitted in a sly look of satisfaction.

Augustok laughed. “On the occasions when you took pity on me, I think.”

“Pity is for the weak,” Br’tah scoffed. “I would never dishonor you with such an act.”

“We’ll just say you were off your game those days. At any rate, I greatly appreciate all you’ve taught me. I have no doubt it might save my life one day.”

Br’tah hung the practice blades on the storage rack. “I was disappointed to see you cut your braided hair. It was worthy of a warrior.”

“I knew you would be, but after being given command I thought it might be a more fitting look for the time being. It was never meant to dishonor you. I was glad you asked me to train with you again.”

Br’tah stepped closer and lowered his voice. “I must be truthful and admit it was an excuse to meet with you in private, out of uniform and off the record. It is a matter of personal honor to me.”

“That sounds serious,” the Captain replied with concern. “You know how much I trust you. What’s this about?”

“Captain, in uniform I am bound by my duty to Starfleet and its orders, but here, between warriors, those things are not binding. I have disabled the recording protocols for this holodeck and if what I say warrants action in your eyes, I will accept whatever discipline you see fit.”

The Captain clasped hands with Br'tah. "Between warriors, let us sit upon the ground and speak of these things. I am yours."

"Computer, program four," Br'tah ordered and the setting changed dramatically to a sunrise against a sky filled with clouds and smoke. A large lake stretched out before them and on the opposite shore, a volcano rose majestically with streams of lava trickling down from the summit. On the beach before them sat circle of stones with a small campfire and Br'tah folded his legs and faced the flame. Augustok followed and sat across from his friend.

"This place is on Q'onoS." Br'tah pointed across the waters. "That is the volcano Kris'tak, where Kahless took the lava he plunged into this, the Lake of Lusor and forged the first bat'leth. Here, the songs are sung of his mighty battles. There are no lies or deception in this place. Though I have never been here in person, my mother would bring me into this holo-program to teach me the Klingon ways."

"I am honored to share something so personal to you." The Captain solemnly bowed his head. "Now, tell me this burden you carry."

"I was approached by Starfleet Intelligence before we left Starbase Sierra, by an officer named Pocuva. I did not trust him."

“I assumed as much,” Augustok said in agreement. “Since you chose to remain as Chief of Security, you know of our underlying mission.”

“Yes.” Br’tah clenched his fists. “I was greatly honored when you offered me the position of First Officer, but I had been ordered by Pocuva to remain Security Chief. That did not set well with me. Then, I was given information that I was instructed to withhold from you. This is an order of dishonor and I can carry it inside me no longer. I respect you too much as my captain and as a warrior to do so! I no longer fear its consequences.”

“I assure you, my friend, the information would have to be perilous for me to consider any action against you. I, too, am quite suspicious of Pocuva.”

“I bear no malice against your First Officer, Galan, but he was placed in his posting by a division called Section 31. He has been given orders to evaluate you at various stages of our mission and to relieve you of command if he feels you are compromised. I do not approve of such tactics in the chain of command. It is without honor and in my eyes, a potential act of mutiny. Leadership must have integrity and these orders do not.”

“So, Section 31 still thinks I may be a spy?”

“I will not entertain such a thought,” the Klingon said, gnashing his teeth. “They also ordered us to be wary of you when you discovered information about something called *Project Dravek*. All I know is that it was intercepted from a coded Tal Shiar transmission sent to Glintara. Why would they not want you to know?”

“Did you say, Project Dravek?”

“You know of this project, Galan?”

“I know of no project by that name, Br’tah, but Dravek is a Romulan legend. It was said D’era had a vision of raptors that lived as we do, in a civilization that ruled with those descended from Vorta Vor. It was said one day they would be sent to find us, to guide us home to paradise. It is no more than a religious fable, but the term *Project Dravek* sounds like the mission of a fanatic.”

“I would not discount religious beliefs, Galan. To many, including Klingons, our rituals and songs hold great meaning.”

“Yes, they do, and I meant no disrespect. But the things you hold dear to your heart are not projects or intelligence operations. I fear someone inside the Romulan Empire is trying to use a legend as a means to start another war.”

Br'tah shook his head in anger. "Why must they always act with such deceit? There is no glory in any victory gained in this way!"

"My Vulcan half agrees with you, my friend and my Romulan half is ashamed to admit that this is a way of life to my ancestors. I honestly worry what the future holds for them. Pocuva told me they have scientific evidence that the Romulan star may go supernova within a decade. That knowledge could make them very desperate...and more dangerous than we have ever faced in the past."

"The only warrior who fears death is one without honor!"

"Yes, my friend, your Klingon blood is indeed proud." Galan nodded and smiled. "But I'm afraid I've always held fast to a healthy fear of death...in order to stay alive!"

Br'tah laughed heartily. "Then I do pity this day! But do not give up hope, Galan. Someday, you may feel it is a good day to die!"

"Perhaps." Augustok laughed as well.

"And what of my breach of orders, sir?"

The Captain rose, offered his hand and helped Br'tah to his feet. "What has been said in this place shall remain here, in

the bond of warriors and friends. In battle, we must be able to trust those beside us. So shall it be with us.”

“You possess an honor above any other Romulan!”

“I have good teachers.”

“And what of Commander Heyerdahl?”

Galan looked back at the volcano and pondered a few moments. “Who knows? Maybe he’s as uncomfortable with his position as you were. Perhaps we should bring him into the inner circle, share our information and see how he reacts? If he is receptive, then we are stronger but if he feigns ignorance or surprise then we know where we stand. Agreed?”

“Agreed, Captain. Computer, end program.”

Commander Sindari tried to relax in her quarters but the anticipation of the coming conflict made her blood race. Augustok was a brilliant scientist and an officer she once looked up to. But now, he had committed the unforgivable sin of being a traitor to the Empire. Defection alone was a crime worthy of death but to serve the enemy was beyond insulting. In her heart, she wanted to capture the ship and execute members of the crew while the traitor was made to

watch, but it was unlikely she would be afforded the time needed for that course of action. That vile excuse for a ship must burn! But first, she would see his face and revel in his demise. Her thoughts were interrupted as a young officer walked in unannounced.

“How dare you enter my quarters without permission!” she snapped. “Do you wish to be disciplined under my hand, Sub-Lieutenant?”

“Remain calm, Commander,” the young man responded, composed and unaffected by her threat. “Sub-Lieutenant is my rank and uniform, for the benefit of your crew. I am Velkac, under direct command of Brigadier Vaebn, a member of his personal Tal Shiar guard. I was placed onboard to be his eyes and ears and ensure the security of this mission. I have been in coded contact since we left Glintara. So, Commander, while you do outrank me, in our present capacity, it is I that have the ear of Brigadier Vaebn so I suggest we not waste time with hollow threats.”

The Comander stood, still angered by his audacity. “Does the Brigadier not trust me?”

“Trust is a relative term, Commander and seldom of high value where intelligence matters are concerned.”

“So, what is it you wish to know, Mr. Velkac?”

“Do not address me as *Mister*, Commander. We do not share that relationship, either Velkac or Sub-Lieutenant will suffice.”

“As you wish. What information does the Brigadier require?”

“None at this time, Commander. However, he does remind you of the value of this mission and the importance not only of success but that we are not caught or identified in Federation space. Do not attempt to engage the *Raven* without complete confidence of success. Vaebn also sends strict orders to NOT pursue anyone who may escape to the planet surface via escape pods or shuttle craft. Destroy them if possible but if they are lost in the atmosphere, the ground units on Dravek will deal with them.”

Sindari was fuming at this little whip of a man reaching above his station. Even if he was part of Vaebn’s guard, who was he to counsel her on combat tactics? “What constitutes complete confidence in any battle situation?”

Velkac frowned. “The commander of one of the most lethal warships in our fleet needs to be educated on tactics?”

“Only on such a foolish question, Velkac,” she hissed, resisting the urge to push a blade slowly through his throat.

“I will boast three-to-one odds at Dravek! If I did not possess complete confidence on carrying out my mission, I would surrender command. In the future, you should simply bring your message or report what orders I give you. Insult me again and the Brigadier will need to replace a member of his guard.”

“I warn you, Commander, Tal Shiar operatives do not take threats lightly.”

“Nor should you, Velkac.” Sindari clenched her fist. “When I burn the flesh from your bones, you will see it is not a threat. The next time you enter my quarters without permission, I will view it as an attempt to eliminate me and I will respond as such. Now get out!”

“I will send my report, Commander.”

“See that you do, Sub-Lieutenant,” Sindari shot back sharply. “Completely unredacted!”

Half empty cups of coffee and glasses of orange juice sat on the table around plates of toast and bowls of cereal. Dak Cheveyo downed the last of his coffee and wiped his mouth before grabbing the last slice of toast.

“Go ahead, I didn’t want it anyway,” Lonetree said with a laugh. “I’m getting spoiled by having breakfast with you.”

“I’m getting ribbed about not being in quarters with my unit.” Dak chuckled as he munched on the toast, absolutely loving the look on her face in the morning. “Leaving late and getting back early isn’t going unnoticed.”

“Are you in trouble?”

“Not when you’re in command.” Dak winked, knowing he should only push his rank just so far. “But I won’t be able to see you the next couple days before we reach orbit. I planned a tight training schedule and I’ve got to be a hundred percent for that.”

Cat grinned. “Are you saying I’m making you weak?”

Dak leaned over and kissed her. “You’ve always made me weak in the head.”

“And I thought it was physical,” she said as she stroked his face, gazing into his eyes.

“It’s everything with you, Cat,” he replied softly before his tone became serious. “But this time I’ve gotta be on top of my game. We don’t know what we’re facing down there and I’m not gonna risk your safety because I’m not sharp when I need to be.”

“I know, Dak. For once I’m actually glad you’re so good at shooting things.”

The soldier laughed and kissed her again. “NOW she says so!”

Dak closed his jacket and started out the door until she called out: “Wait!”

Cat ran to the door and embraced him. “Dak, I know I’m not supposed to be, but...I’m scared.”

“I know, Cat. I’ll be there, I promise.”

“And...I love you.”

“I know that too.” He lifted her chin so she could see him smile, “In the end it’s gonna be me and you, understand? Me and you, Cat...always.”

“Do you promise that too?”

“You bet I do.”

“If you don’t I’ll shoot you myself.”

Dak grinned. “I’d be okay...you’d miss.”

Cat listened to his heartbeat. Their spirits belonged together. She always knew that deep inside but now she feared they might be ripped apart forever.

Dak felt that way too and as he moved down the hall toward the turbolift, his thoughts wandered back in time. He grew up in a town called Little Eagle on the Standing Rock Tribal lands in North America. The high plains where bison grazed were all around and not far east was the beautiful Missouri River. His family took canoe trips down the river in the summer and his father took him hunting on the plains and down to the Badlands. Sometimes Dak was surprised how two people born less than three hundred kilometers apart could go so long and not meet until college. While their common heritage was an appealing trait, their time together at Crazy Horse was a catalyst for both of them that they never expected. Cat meant everything to him now but it seemed impossible sometimes to convince her of his honesty. Both of them being assigned to this mission might have been coincidence, but to Dak, it was the prize of a dream catcher.

The walk to Sick Bay always made the Captain prepare for the razor-edge attitude of Dr. November, but today would prove challenging. Disputes over personnel were never a pleasant task but this was unavoidable. Augustok drew a deep breath and strode in with purpose. He noticed Dr. November preparing a series of hypo-sprays.

“Good morning, Doctor.”

“What is this? Three times in the same week? When did I suddenly become so vital to your routine?”

“I can tell your demeanor does not change with the passage of time, Doctor. However, I do have an important issue and I would rather it be voluntary instead of under orders.”

She placed the hypos aside and turned to face the Captain. “Voluntary you say?” She asked with amused sarcasm. “Now you have my attention. I can’t wait to hear this!”

“You have a Lieutenant Sean Gardner on your staff and I would like to make him part of my bridge crew. He is a highly rated navigator and cartographer.” Out of curiosity he asked: “How did he become part of your staff?”

Dr. November picked up the next hypo with faux preoccupation. “I asked him. Next question?”

“Doctor, I believe you gain slightly too much enjoyment from verbally sparring with me. Could we be a bit more professional?”

“More professional?” She tilted her head and held back a laugh. “Did I grab someone off the duty roster before you got around to it, Captain? Why, how unruly of me.”

“I suppose I should thank you, Doctor. There certainly is no one else aboard who successfully places my logic and emotions in direct conflict with one another as you do.”

“I call that high praise,” she acknowledged with a nod.

“That would be a matter of perspective. Off the record of course, there are times I might consider more...drastic action shall we say?”

November laughed. “Like busting a chair across my teeth?”

“I will not degrade myself with any further description. It would be unbecoming of my station.” Augustok actually caught himself responding in a similar amusing way as the Doctor. He mentally jumped back on track, “May we get back to Lieutenant Gardner, please?”

“Well, you finally said it out loud,” she confessed with great satisfaction. “I chose Gardner because he finished first, by a wide margin I might add, in Starfleet survival training along with carrying an injured team mate to the finish with him. He not only provided excellent first aid but kept him alive. That is exceptional and exactly the kind of asset I want for an away team. He also took a year off between graduation and taking his first commission to hike locations on five different continents on Earth. His

orienteering skills are sharp and that's someone you need, not just want on a strange planet surface. Does that answer your question...sir?"

"Quite efficiently, Doctor." Augustok walked around the table and casually looked at the hypo-sprays.

"None of them are loaded with poison, in case you were curious." November never missed a chance to throw a well-placed barb.

"No, Doctor. Not at all." The Captain smiled. "All the reasons you mentioned, along with his superior navigation skills, would be precisely why I want him on the bridge."

"You can't have him," she smirked.

"This brings us back to that voluntary vs orders dilemma I mentioned before."

"You...cannot...have...him."

"Then it is to be orders, I assume?"

"You see?" She laughed. "You are getting the hang of this after all."

"I have a better solution, Doctor," The Captain replied with almost smug satisfaction.

"This I gotta hear..."

“Lieutenant Gardner will assume the navigation post on the bridge. In the event I authorize an away team that requires emergency medical personnel, he will be part of that team. In that capacity, we shall both benefit from his skills. Agreed?”

“Well, I’ll be damned.” She put her hands on her hips. “You got a deal, Captain. I’m impressed...today.”

“Be cautious, Doctor,” Augustok said as he headed for the door. “What impresses you today may truly frighten you tomorrow.”

“I’ll never doubt that, Captain...as long as you’re in command.”

Augustok looked over his shoulder. “Nor do I, Doctor. Every time I ponder being wounded and falling under your care, I am reminded that fear is a very real emotion.”

Dr. November laughed to herself as the Captain walked away. Once more she was unsuccessful in making him lose his temper and that made her admire him all the more. She sat halfway on the exam bed, twirling the hypo in her fingers and realized, in her three years aboard the *Raven*, not once had Augustok ever been seriously injured. Oh, there were the occasional sprains and bruises from his *exercise sessions* with Br’tah, but never a time when he

was laid out on the table. A time where he would have to trust her. She knew he had confidence in her to care for the crew, but that was different from trusting someone on a personal level.

Her lifetimes as a Trill gave her vast knowledge in the medical field and she'd served under many superiors, but maybe it was time she went a little easier on the Captain. It was easy to feel her experience far outweighed his and she'd won over Riker and Thomas quickly...however this was different. The two previous captains had proven records and, while Augustok's service record was laden with accolades, it remained short in the grand scheme. What wasn't documented was the time he spent in service to the Romulan Empire. The more she considered that aspect, the more she knew those years had to be tough. To grow up with a Vulcan mother had to create wretched obstacles. She respected Vulcans but often found them insufferable. Maybe that's why she enjoyed needling her Captain? He was the first of the pointed-ear variety that actually seemed to have a sense of humor, but it's possible she'd carried that too far.

She put the hypo back with the others. "Maybe I should take it down a notch or two?"

"Take what down, Ma'am?"

November jumped. “Damn! You scared the hell out of me, Gardner! Make some noise when you come in, will you?”

“I’m sorry, Doctor. You sent for me?”

“Yes, Lieutenant, report to the Captain on the bridge for your new duty assignment.”

Lt. Gardner beamed. “On the bridge?”

“Yes, now get out of here.” She pointed at the door, then smiled as he left. She knew from the Ex-Oh that morning the Captain would ask about Gardner. Telling the Lieutenant to report in two hours seemed like enough time.

Chapter 5

Captain's Log,

The Raven has entered the Pi Hydrae system and my Science Officer, Lt. Layla Fai, has informed me of trace tachyon readings near two of the planets. Not strong enough to justify a cloaked ship and questionable given the proximity to the magnetic polar regions, but still cause for concern. The Lieutenant is young, and this is her first posting as lead Science Officer, but she is Aldean and their intelligence and attention to detail tends to be impeccable. Ex-Oh concurs with her findings and this makes me all the more cautious as we approach our destination. Commander Heyerdahl did an excellent job screening and preparing Ensign Golos for helm duty and I'm pleased she has assumed her station alongside Lt. Gardner. The question of my First Officer's role, if any, regarding Section 31 still weighs on my mind and I'm struggling for the proper way to address the situation.

The light from the Pi Hydrae star was bright through the viewport of Augustok's Ready Room and for some reason it reminded it him of home, or what used to be home on Romulus. Oddly, the *Raven* had been his home for the past few years. During its construction at Utopia Planitia, he was assigned temporary fleet yard quarters and at the Academy it was a dorm room. Literally, it had been years since he had a place to call his own. He kept his officer quarters on Deck Eight and gave Heyerdahl the rooms Captain Thomas occupied. Part of him thought he should consider the entire ship his home, but this was the chosen life of a defector. Maybe he would find a Federation world that spoke to his heart one day, a place where a family could grow. T'Lier would certainly have thoughts on such things. Serving the last three years together brought them closer but their duties kept them from making solid future plans. Still, watching her talk down ambitious Romulan Commanders in intense situations was absolute poetry. Those skills would never be wasted on children.

The thoughts of the mission overpowered the musings of life outside Starfleet and the information Pocuva provided swarmed in. The raids on the Norkan Outposts had been a bold campaign by the Romulans given how far across the Neutral Zone they dared to tread. Pi Hydrae was not a fringe system on the edge of Romulan territory, so what

was important enough to make them eradicate the Federation colonists? No reason was given at large by the Empire but that was not unusual. Any other system this far into Federation space should be no cause for Romulan trespassers, but every instinct in his brain was screaming Red Alert! Something on a deeply emotional level disturbed him about this system and there was no logical reason why. The Captain tapped his communicator, "Ex-Oh and Mr. Br'tah, I'd like to see you in my Ready Room."

Ex-Oh replied, "Aye, Captain."

"On my way," added Br'tah.

The best course of action might be the most direct? Just drop the information bomb and see what happens? This would be one of those times when emotion overruled logic. The two men walked in and Augustok continued to face the viewport.

"Reporting as ordered, sir,"

"Aye, Captain."

"Gentlemen, please have a seat." The Captain returned to his desk and closed the viewscreen there. "As we enter the Pi Hydrae system, I felt it would be prudent to meet with my senior staff. As we all know, there are significant

unknowns confronting us in the days to come and as the two senior officers in the chain of command, I believe we should be of one focus. Agreed?”

“Agreed, sir.”

“Aye, Captain.”

“Mr. Br’tah and I met previously to discuss ship security measures during our stay here. Have you taken any additional steps toward our readiness, Ex-Oh?”

“In addition to your drills, Captain, I assigned personnel to man the dedicated weapons scanners in the overhead module, on the chance we might detect any other cloaked ship activity once we entered the system.”

“Very good, Ex-Oh,” Augustok laced his fingers, wanting to proceed cautiously. “While we have carried out our orders on investigating the ship sightings, we gathered no other useful information and this gives me pause. We will obviously be alert for any possible enemy activity once we reach the planet surface but while in orbit, especially when we begin the shuttle transport of the teams, we will be vulnerable. I do not expect an all-out attack, but we must be prepared all the same.”

“I respectfully suggest we maintain at yellow alert status until the teams are on the surface,” Br’tah answered.

“So ordered,” the Captain replied. “Ex-Oh, how much exposure have you had to the Romulans?”

“Almost none, sir, except you.”

The Captain nodded “Then I assume you’ve done extensive research?”

“Aye, Captain.”

“How extensive?”

Heyerdahl was taken off guard. “I reviewed all the incidents the *Raven* encountered during its time on border patrol. Those records showed the Romulans are given to deceptive tactics and almost never take direct confrontation. Is there something else you wish me to review?”

“To know your enemy, you must understand what drives him,” Br’tah spoke up. “Romulans are not to be trusted!”

The First Officer looked stunned that Br’tah would make such a statement in front of the Captain. “Respectfully...”

“It’s quite alright, Ex-Oh,” Augustok added calmly. “Mr. Br’tah and I went through an intense transition period when I came aboard. I earned his trust and his opinion of Romulans does not apply to me. This is exactly what I am talking about when I say extensive research. As my First

Officer, command of this vessel could fall on you at a moment's notice and I want you to be prepared."

"I agree, Captain, but I don't think I have time for an in-depth course on Romulan culture at the eleventh hour of our mission."

"You know all Romulan ships are designed with birds of prey in mind, but do you know why?"

"Yes, Captain, there is a mantra from their history, a rally cry, '*Under the Raptor's Wing*' and it survives to this day. The image of the raptor is found throughout the Empire, in government, military and even civilian life."

"All true, Ex-Oh, but it goes deeper than that. Have you ever heard of the Dravek Legend?"

The pause and look on Heyerdahl's face told Augustok he struck a nerve. What would follow could mean everything.

Heyerdahl stumbled out an answer, "Is this something essential to our mission or just a culture lesson?"

It was now evident to the Captain that his Ex-Oh was no polished operative. Any worthy spy would have lied or twisted the truth without hesitation. "I believe it to be quite essential, Ex-Oh, both to our mission and to our command."

“To our command? How so?”

Now came the moment of truth. Augustok clenched his jaw. “The Legend of Dravek is a tale told to Romulan youth and a story many carry into adulthood almost as a religion. I recently received a coded message from Starfleet Intelligence in reference to something called, *Project Dravek*, so understanding its implication could be crucial.”

To his credit, Br’tah never flinched, knowing the Captain had not received any such transmission and Augustok was impressed. The secret was on the table and hopefully the gamble would work.

Heyerdahl appeared restless. “Captain, could we have a word in private?”

“Mr. Br’tah is our Security Chief, Ex-Oh, or is this a personal matter?”

“Aye, Captain, I believe it is...”

The Captain nodded to Br’tah and he paused at the door. “I’ll be on the bridge if you need me, sir.”

“Thank you, Mr. Br’tah. I think we’ll be fine.”

The two officers sat in silence for a moment as Heyerdahl gathered his thoughts. Just as he was about to speak, the communicator interrupted.

“Bridge to Captain,” Br’tah’s voice reported. “We are approaching Norkan IV, standard orbit, sir?”

“Acknowledged, Mr. Br’tah, make a polar orbit pass and then proceed to standard orbit. Let’s have a look around.”

“Yes, sir, proceeding to polar orbit,” Br’tah replied.

“I apologize, Ex-Oh.” The Captain turned his attention back to the matter at hand.

“Captain, this is a sensitive subject.” Heyerdahl leaned forward and lowered his voice. “But I feel it must be addressed.”

“There is no cause for apprehension, Ex-Oh, our conversation can remain in complete confidence.”

“The problem is...,” but Heyerdahl never finished his sentence as an impact rocked the ship so hard it threw both men from their chairs.

“Red Alert! All hands to battle stations,” Br’tah’s voice rung out over the comm system. “Red Alert! This is not a drill! Captain to the bridge!”

Augustok charged out of the Ready Room as another impact rocked the ship and he stumbled to the command chair. “Report!”

Br'tah shouted, "Returning fire! Captain, triple torpedo strike came from a cloaked vessel below us. No warning. Our shields were down. Hits to secondary hull and inboard port warp nacelle. Hull breach in Engineering. Nacelle severely damaged and inoperable."

Lt. Fai spoke loudly, "Sir, atmospheric interference is causing distortion to the enemy cloaking shield. Not much but enough to target. Transferring data to tactical."

"Good work, Lieutenant." Augustok turned forward. "On screen. Helm, line us up for the phaser cannon. Tactical, prepare quantum torpedoes, full spread!"

"Phaser cannon is not charging, sir," Br'tah grunted.

"Then lock torpedoes and fire," the Captain snapped. "Engineering, report, Mr. Riley."

"Firing torpedoes," Br'tah clenched his teeth. "Direct hit, but what kind of ship is that?"

The cloaking device fluttered and the *Raven* got her first look at the Stormbird-Kre warship. The vessel turned hard and fired its disruptors, pounding the Federation ship once more.

"Mister Riley! Report!" the Captain shouted as he held tight to his chair.

“Hull breach, Captain, emergency procedures,” Riley gasped for breath. “Three crewmen lost in the blast. Automated systems are not responding due to destroyed relays. Main core coolant system has been ruptured and I can’t get to the manual valve to isolate the secondary core. We’re in trouble, sir!”

“Can you get the phaser cannon operative?”

“I’ll try, Captain, Riley out.”

The ship pitched hard from another impact as Br’tah sounded off, “Hit from astern! Shields at sixty percent. There is a second enemy vessel.”

“Ensign Golos.” The Captain stepped closer to the helm station. “Get us as close to the atmosphere as you can. If it can help us target them while cloaked, it’s worth the risk. Mr. Br’tah, fire at will on any available target.”

Golos dove the *Raven* hard under the oncoming Romulan ship, then turned sharply toward the planet’s southern polar region. A full spread of torpedoes shot from both of the *Raven*’s aft tubes, hit the shields of each Romulan. The enemy no longer bothered with cloaking, opting for full defensive shields instead. Their disruptors fanned out a volley of green fire and Golos continued her erratic course to the south pole of Norkan IV.

The bridge of the *Mrr'vaah*t was still bathed in the green glow of the cloaking device but that wouldn't be for long as Cmdr. Sindari could taste the kill through her gnashing teeth. "Drop our cloak and raise shields, stand by all weapons and execute intercept course for head-to-head combat!"

"By your command," came the reply from her bridge crew.

"Hail that ship, Centurion," Sindari shouted. "I want that traitor to see the eyes of his executioner!"

"Captain," Br'tah looked intense. "Another Romulan is de-cloaking, approaching from beneath the planet. They were hiding in the magnetic polar flux."

Augustok looked puzzled. "Do we have any identification on that design?"

"None, sir," Br'tah replied.

"I know what it is," added Heyerdahl as he turned from the second tactical station. "It's called the Stormbird-Kre."

"I'll ask later how you know that," Augustok said with a vindictive stare.

“We were interrupted, sir,” as he nodded toward the Ready Room.

Br’tah growled. “Does it have any vulnerable areas?”

“A dorsal or ventral strike to the central hull that houses main engineering would be the most effective, but it is heavily armored.”

The Captain pointed at the screen. “The bridge is in the head module?”

“Affirmative, sir.”

“Riley to bridge!”

“Go ahead,” Augustok listened intently.

Riley’s voice was frustrated. “I’ve shunted the main engine overload directly to the phaser cannon. The surge will burn out the emitters after a few shots, but it will buy us some time before we go critical and have to eject the core. I can’t activate the secondary core because I can’t isolate the coolant leak. I’m sorry, Captain. It’s the best I could do given the damage.”

“No apologies, Mr. Riley,” Augustok said sharply. “Do what you can and get your people to safety.”

“We just lost the *Raven*,” Br’tah hissed.

“Not yet, Mr. Br’tah, not yet!” the Captain proclaimed with intensity.

Heyerdahl looked surprised. “Captain, we’re being hailed.”

“On screen, Commander.”

The image of Sindari appeared flanked by two of her officers clad in their golden war helmets. The raging joy on her face could not be hidden as her voice rang out, “This is no opportunity for surrender, Augustok! No, this is a proclamation of justice! I am about to carry out your execution for the crimes of treason against the Praetor and his Empire. You will not see Vorta Vor because today you will burn at my hands! The talons of the *Mrr’vaaht* shall be your death scythe!”

Augustok strode toward the screen and spoke boldly. “Therefore to our best mercy give yourselves, or like those proud of destruction, defy us to our worst!” He turned quickly to Heyerdahl and motioned across his throat to end the comm.

“Helm, bring us head on with our adversary.” The Captain pointed to the screen. “Mr. Br’tah, you heard Mr. Riley, we only have a few cannon shots, make them count!”

“With pleasure, sir!”

Golos abandoned the evasive maneuvers and turned hard toward the *Mr'vaaht*. Sindari was game for the joust and turned to meet the challenge, opening fire with full disruptors and the anti-proton cannon. Two shots landed on the *Raven's* hull before the phaser cannon unleashed a furious bolt of energy that lit the main viewer like a nova. The last-minute turn by the Stormbird-Kre could not escape the blast and the Romulan shields fried away in a dazzling lightstorm.

“Golos, hard about,” Augustok ordered. “Let’s give our two other glory-dogs a taste of that power while we still can.”

“Aye, Captain,” Golos grinned as she inverted the *Raven* quickly and brought the cannon to bear.

The Captain was pleased watching Golos pilot such an aggressive move. “Let’s give tactical a good target aspect, Ensign. Mr. Br’tah, you may fire when ready.”

“Firing,” Br’tah acknowledged as once again the *Raven* let loose a hell-fire blast that sent a shudder through the deckplates. The shot hit the port wing of the Stormbird, sending it reeling toward the planet. The *Raven* shook hard as the *Mrr'vaaht* fired a torpedo volley from behind.

“Aft shields down to fifteen percent, one more hit and they will fail,” reported the Ex-Oh. “The second Romulan ship is turning away from orbit.”

“Turn with them and fire,” the Captain ordered.

“Perfect ventral target,” Br’tah growled as he fired the cannon again. This time the blast generated a howl that rumbled through the saucer section and the strike on the Stormbird-Kre incinerated the shields, inverting the ship from the impact.

“Riley to bridge!”

“Go ahead, Engineering.”

“Captain, if we fire the cannon again it may take us with it. We have a minute, maybe two before I’ll have to eject the core. Impulse is all we’ll have left. The shield relays are fried. I can’t get them back up unless I use a pressure suit and try to get to the other side of the breach.”

“Negative, Mr. Riley, get your crew to the saucer section and prepare to remote eject the core from the bridge engineering station. Do you copy?”

“Roger that, Captain. I’m on my way.”

“The other two enemy ships are forming up behind us,” the Ex-Oh announced.

“Helm, full impulse,” Augustok ordered. “Give us some distance then turn back toward the upper atmosphere. Interference may affect their weapons lock.”

“Aye, Captain, full impulse,” Golos executed a sharp bank, showing the dorsal side to the Romulans to protect the vulnerable rear shields.

The Captain turned to his tactical officers and touched the comm on his chair. “All hands, this is the Captain. We are about to execute a dangerous combat maneuver that could have dire consequences. If we survive, we will still be unable to escape on impulse power alone. Therefore, our best chance for evading our enemy and preservation of the crew will be a forced landing on the planet. All personnel should move to the saucer section for emergency procedures. Let us be sure the Romulans never forget the name...*Raven*. Captain out.”

The bridge crew stood in awed silence as the Captain continued, “Mr. Br’tah, have the weapons crew place an armed torpedo in each launch tube set for remote detonation. Then evacuate all personnel to the saucer section and prepare to jettison the weapons module.”

Ex-Oh looked stunned. “Jettison?”

“Yes, Commander.” Augustok turned to his pilot and navigator. “Ensign, I want you to split the Romulan ships. Take a course between them and turn the *Raven* on knife-edge at the last possible second. We will eject the core and jettison the weapons module simultaneously.”

“Aye, Captain,” Golos answered nervously.

The Captain patted her shoulder. “You are more than capable, Ensign. Concentrate on correcting your angle of attack afterward so we don’t enter the atmosphere too steep.”

Golos nodded and glanced over at Lt. Gardner. “Find me a place to put this big bitch on the ground without killing us all.”

Gardner tried not to laugh. “Do you want to drown or chop off the top of a mountain?”

“Someplace with a beach would be nice. We might be there a while,” the helmsman smiled. “Either way, you’ll have to look fast. We’ll be coming in hot...really, really hot.”

“The beach it is,” Gardner winked and flashed a thumbs up.

Returning to his chair, Augustok looked up at Br'tah, "We get one shot at this. We need a phaser blast to detonate the weapons module and another for the warp core if it hasn't exploded upon ejection. If we don't make it to the planet, it has been a great honor to serve with you and a greater honor to call you a friend."

"Today may be a good day to die, Captain but I believe we will live to sing the songs. Qapla!"

The turbolift doors opened to a dirty, bloody, Lt. Cmdr. Riley. He dashed to the chair at the engineering station, "Forty-five seconds to warp core eject, Captain."

"How good of you to join us, Mr. Riley," the Captain joked. "Stand by."

The *Raven* shook and pitched as she skipped on the atmosphere but they were closing on the Romulan vessels fast. Not bothering to veer away, the enemy let loose a barrage of disruptor fire, pounding the *Raven* as she closed the distance between them. The anti-proton cannon overloaded the shields so only her ablative armor remained.

"Do they mean to ram us, Commander?" the Centurion asked, "Escape maneuver?"

“Hold your course,” Sindari ordered. “They will not survive our assault! Fire torpedoes!”

“Torpedoes!” Br’tah shouted but the Captain remained poised.

“Golos, begin your rotation. Auxiliary power to structural integrity field. Mr. Riley, give me the count.”

“Forty seconds to critical, Captain.”

The blasts continued to shake the *Raven* hard but she charged forward with relentless force, shedding pieces of her damaged armor as she hurtled toward her foes.

“Direct hit, starboard warp nacelle destroyed,” Ex-Oh reported.

“Thirty seconds.”

“Steady as she goes, helm, right down the middle,” Augustok ordered with nerves like steel. “Communications, launch the log/ distress probe. Signal Deep Space Four.”

“Twenty seconds.”

“They are moving apart,” Gardner reported.

“Too late now,” the Captain commented. “Tactical stand by for my mark.”

“Ten seconds.”

“Full Impulse, emergency thrust!” Augustok barked. “Jettison weapons module and lock phasers for detonation. Mr. Riley, eject the core NOW!”

The *Raven* sliced between the two Stormbirds as they tried to pull away. The weapons module bumped into the wing near the central hull of the Romulan and as it spun from the impact, the phaser shot from the fleeing *Raven* set it off. The initial blast followed by the secondary detonation of the torpedo magazine store erupted like a volcano. The explosion ripped the wing and head module free of the main hull, which then exploded and destroyed the rest of the ship. The warp core ignited on its own and as the *Mrr'vaah*t turned hard trying to jump to warp, the blast and shockwave sent it tumbling toward the atmosphere. That same shockwave hit the stern of the defenseless *Raven*, tearing away the outboard pylon wings and the remains of the damaged port inboard nacelle. Now in an inverted attitude, she plunged into the atmosphere sharply.

The crew held fast to whatever they could as they tried to regain their senses after the blast. Ensign Golos struggled back to her seat and fought to get the ship into a controlled

descent. Lt. Gardner had a gash on his chin and blood dripped onto his uniform as he tried to work with the cracked navigation panel in front of him. He realized after a few seconds it was his own chin that broke the display. Resisting the pain surging through his jaw, he could only begin to see the topography of the planet below, but interference still made the reading erratic.

“Mr. Riley, are you still with us?” Augustok called out. “Re-route available power to maneuvering thrusters. Full control to the helm!”

“Aye, Captain,” Riley coughed. “Re-routing to helm.”

The Captain ordered Ensign Golos to level out if possible, but she was already banging away on the controls. At the moment, she would’ve given anything for a stick and pedals found in a Delta Fighter, but no time for that now.

“One enemy vessel destroyed, another severely damaged but no readings on the third,” Ex-Oh held tight to the tactical console. “Losing sensor contact as we descend, sir.”

The Captain hit the comm panel again, “All hands brace for impact. If you have access to an escape pod and can safely abandon ship, do so now. If you are not in the saucer section and cannot get there, abandon ship now.”

Lt. Gardner mumbled to himself, “That’s not confidence inspiring.”

“I can hear you,” Golos grunted. “Talk to me, Gardner. I’m leveling attitude but which way do I go?”

Augustok chimed in, “Mr. Gardner, please find us a suitable landing site.”

“Landing, sir?” Gardner asked with disbelief.

“Forced landing, Lieutenant, a crash you do not choose,” the Captain replied, showing his composure for all to see.

“You promised me a beach,” Golos glanced quickly at her navigator, trying to break the tension.

“*Promise* is a vague word right now,” Gardner frowned at his console. “Transferring terrain navigation to main viewer.”

“I like this better than clouds,” Golos replied. At least now she could make out the landscape and the screen looked more like a simulation exercise rather than plunging to your death. “Estimate impact in one minute, present speed.”

“Bridge crew, get to a seated position and prepare for forced landing,” Augustok ordered. “You have served this ship proudly, now we hope she saves us.”

Br'tah knelt behind the tactical console and braced himself against the bulkhead. He looked up at the image of the damaged ship on the engineering station and the warrior's heart swelled inside him. "Today, you fought well and so you shall die well. I shall sing the song of the *Raven*!"

"Come left ten degrees," Gardner called out and Golos followed. "Just beyond the ridge is a large lake. Aim for the shoreline."

"If we clear the mountain ridge," the helmsman's voice was filled with doubt. "Thrusting up."

Gardner continued, "Past the ridge, five degrees right. Wider space with fewer trees and rocks. The water depth looks shallow in that area. That could help slow us down."

Golos took a deep breath. "I haven't been surfing in years."

"You wanted the beach," Gardner chuckled. "Ridgeline in ten-thousand meters."

"Attention all hands, impact in thirty seconds," the Captain announced.

"Ridgeline approaching," Gardner gave the count. "Passing in five...four...three...two...five degrees starboard."

“Five starboard,” Golos acknowledged. “Impulse power, full reverse, maneuvering thrusters, maximum. External visual on main viewer.”

“External view,” Gardner complied. “So, you’re gonna eyeball it?”

“Shhh, I’m busy,” Golos stared intensely at the viewer as the ship roared out of the sky. The Captain and bridge crew watched with wide eyes and held breath as the helmsman guided the huge space vessel like a personal aircraft.

The lake and shoreline grew large in the viewer and as the horizon filled the screen, suddenly Golos fired maximum upward thrust on the bow, forcing the secondary hull to drag into the lake. The water splashed like an ocean liner dropped from a hundred meters and the immediate braking effect sent crew and cargo flying forward into bulkheads. The saucer section slammed into the water as the secondary hull dug a trench in the lake floor. The trench continued and the bow of the saucer dug in just past the shore, throwing sod, shrubs and small trees hurtling into the sky. Two hundred meters past the shore the *Raven* came to rest and all aboard gasped for breath, wondering if they had acutally survived.

Augustok struggled to his feet and made his way over to Golos, who was slumped over the helm console. He

checked her neck for a pulse but she coughed and managed to sit up. A large bump was swelling on her forehead but she looked up at her Captain. "I think I'm alright, sir."

"You are much more than that, Ensign," Augustok grasped her hand and spoke with immense gratitude. "That was the most outstanding piece of flying I've ever seen. We are breathing thanks to you."

"Yes, sir, but breathing hurts right now," she winced.

Lt. Gardner was soon at hand and pressed the side of her torso. Golos grunted in pain and Gardner confirmed, "She's got some broken ribs, sir."

"Well done, Lieutenant." The Captain tapped his communicator. "Sick Bay, report status."

"I'm alive if that's what you want to know," Dr. November shot back. "But it's gonna be a while before we know anything about how bad off we are. In case you didn't notice, the ship just CRASHED!"

"Thank you, Doctor," Augustok wanted to laugh but breathed a sigh of relief. "Now I know you're okay."

"I think she'll be fine here for now, sir," Gardner looked back at Golos. "I'll check on the rest of the bridge crew."

“What about you, Lieutenant?” The Captain asked, noticing the cut on his chin.

Gardner laughed and wiped the cut with his sleeve. “I’m not spitting blood or seeing double...I’m fine, sir.”

“Carry on, Lieutenant,” Augustok looked around at all the broken panels and fixtures when a rough-looking Lt. Cmdr. Riley stood up, dusting off his torn uniform. “All in one piece?”

“Aye, Captain.” Riley rubbed his forehead. “This is not how she should’ve gone down.”

“It was three-to-one, Mr. Riley, and we’re standing here talking about it,” The Captain answered with pride.

“Aye, that’s true...”

“And she’s not done yet.”

“How so, Captain?”

“We can’t communicate or beam off this planet,” Augustok pointed at the main viewer. “So, unless you plan to put down roots and live here, we have to figure out how to get back to orbit.”

Riley was puzzled, “Didn’t we send the distress probe?”

“The Romulans destroyed the probe,” Br’tah grumbled as he got to his feet. “The signal may have gotten out for a few seconds but it only shows how vile they are in combat.”

The Captain placed a reassuring hand on his Chief Engineer’s shoulder, “Get someone from Medical to check you out and your team. See to their health, but then we need to get started on a damage assessment and see what options we have.”

“What about the science team?” Br’tah asked.

“Well,” Augustok paused. “We are on the planet. I see no reason they can’t proceed with their research as long as it doesn’t interfere with survival.”

The conversation was interrupted by a voice struggling to speak. The Captain turned to see Lt. Fai, tears on her cheeks and gentle touch on his arm, “I think you should... it’s...Cmdr. Heyerd...I think he’s....”

“Gardner,” Augustok called out as he followed Lt. Fai behind the second tactical station where Heyerdahl lay prone on the floor, not moving. Lt. Gardner came quickly and checked for a pulse, then felt the area beneath the ear down to the shoulder. A look confirmed the bad news.

“Pretty sure his neck is broken,” Gardner shook his head. “He’s gone, sir. No pulse.”

“Inform the Doctor we have a casualty on the bridge,” the Captain said solemnly and a glance at Br’tah conveyed all the unspoken thoughts about the late First Officer. No matter what he knew or what his unknown orders were, they didn’t matter now. They had lost a member of their command and he would be honored as such. Any suspicions would be put to rest with their fallen crewmate. What he was about to confess in the Ready Room will never be known and for that, Augustok was saddened. He felt Heyerdahl had true potential and as far as he was concerned, this was blood on Romulan hands.

The bridge crew of the *Mrr’vaaht* fell silent as Sub-Lieutenant Velkac stepped out of the turbolift in his Tal Shiar uniform. He marched straight to the Ready Room and entered without request. The look on Sindari’s face was both surprise and anger as her fist pounded the desk. “What now?”

“Brigadier Vaebn will not be pleased at the loss of a new Stormbird-Kre,” he remarked as he took a seat across from Sindari. “You have much to answer for, Commander and a

mess to clean up before the Federation can implicate us with an act of war.”

“You forget your rank, Sub-Lieutenant!”

“In this matter, my rank means nothing. I speak with the voice of your superior. You have endangered Project Dravek by placing hundreds of Starfleet personnel on the planet surface as well as the wreckage left in orbit.”

“It was a battle! One ship destroyed and two badly damaged but an enemy was defeated!” Sindari stood and leaned forward into his face, “I doubt hundreds survived a starship crash from orbit, perhaps I should call for a salvage team?”

“No, Commander, we have risked too much already.” The Tal Shiar agent remained composed. “But your orders are to mobilize the *Mrr’vaaht* and the *Retaenir* to use tractor beams to collect all remaining wreckage of the *S’ten* and deliver them into the Pi Hydrae star, where they will be destroyed with no remaining evidence. Any wreckage of the *Raven* still adrift in space should be disposed of as well.”

Sindari was livid. “Tow wreckage into the star? Are you insane? Both vessels are still hiding under cloak until repairs can be made to our engines. If get close enough to

Pi Hydrae to draw in the wreckage we might not escape ourselves!”

“The Brigadier is aware of the risk, Commander.”

“If he is displeased with the loss of one Stormbird-Kre, how will he feel if he loses all three?” she snapped.

Velkac rose from the chair and sneered. “Brigadier Vaebn would rather lose all three than have one piece of evidence fall into Starfleet hands in Federation territory. Dravek must be protected at all costs. This is the price you pay for your juvenile blunder.”

Sindari hissed, “If the *Mrr’vaaht* burns, you die with it, Sub-Lieutenant!”

Velkac began to walk out, “If I die, I do so Under the Raptor’s Wing. You have your orders, Commander...to be carried out immediately.”

The clouds were swirling in the sky above, however sunlight was abundant as Augustok stepped out of the bridge module escape hatch onto the hull of the *Raven*. Burned scarring was everywhere, a reminder of the fierce battle that grounded the mighty dreadnought. A feeling of sadness swept over him, remembering the first time he

rode aboard a shuttlepod around the docking frame, gazing in awe at the refit of the *Phoenix* come to life. She was a formidable ship and save for the torpedo shot that so badly damaged the engineering section, he was sure they would have prevailed once more despite the odds. All that was in the past now. Every ship meets her end at some time and in a certain way, he was glad it was in battle and not torn apart for scrap.

The vegetation appeared lush and the abundant trees swayed in the heavy breeze. What a serene-looking place this was, not the foreboding landscape he expected from an atmosphere that generated so much interference. These surroundings could easily lull anyone into feeling relaxed and calm. Could that be exactly what happened to the previous science team? That thought made his neck tingle and the sound of footsteps on the hull plates caught his attention.

Dr. November held up her hand to shade her eyes. “Damn, this actually looks nice. Good job, Captain.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of, Doctor,” Augustok replied, his voice filled with concern.

“A Vulcan, afraid of a sunny day? That’s one I haven’t heard before,” November joked.

“The sunny day is fine,” the Captain looked around. “It’s what’s hiding beyond the trees that worries me. Something or someone that almost killed off the last team who came here.”

“Well, I’ve got good news and bad news,” the Doctor reported. “The bad news is we lost six crewmen in the battle and another eighteen in the crash landing. Nine unaccounted for.”

“And the good news?”

“We only lost eighteen in the crash landing,” November said solemnly. “Could’ve been a lot worse.”

The Captain nodded in sad agreement. Losing crew members in combat wasn’t new but under his command, the impact went much deeper. “Nine unaccounted for?”

“Two escape pods from the secondary hull launched during the descent from orbit. We assume they made it down but we don’t know. You had a good day, Captain, all things considered.”

“I’ll call that high praise from you, Doctor.”

“Call it what you like.” November shook her head. “Eighteen that won’t get to enjoy the view from here. I

can't muster the energy to give you a hard time today, Captain. The bigger question is what's our next move?"

"We've got to secure a safe perimeter and find out what's here." Augustok said with determination. "Then we have to assess options of how we can get back to orbit and call for help. Hopefully the Romulans aren't waiting up there to destroy anything we try."

"Why the hell were they this deep in Federation space, anyway?"

"Good question, Doctor. I know they want me dead for treason and I know they wanted this ship destroyed because it was a product of my defection, but my instinct says something else is in play here."

"Something on this planet?"

"That is a logical conclusion."

"Oh, I feel so much better now," the Doctor chuckled.

"You see?" Augustok smiled. "Your sense of humor is coming back already."

"Not so fast, SIR." She showed a twisted smile. "I came up here to tell you to get your carcass down to Sick Bay to be checked out. That's an order from the ship's Chief Medical Officer."

“Doctor, I assure you I am fine.”

“Says every Captain no matter what.” November rolled her eyes. “Get below, NOW.”

Moving steadily from one room to the next, Lt. Maya Cheyton moved down the list of the science team. Anyone that hadn't been checked out by the medical team needed to be seen or report to Sick Bay. Dr. Struev had a sprained ankle and a few others sustained minor bumps and bruises, but no one knew about Dr. Theodore Alastair. The biologist/geneticist tended to be a recluse, having never left the British Isles on Earth until he was thirty years old, according to Dr. Lonetree. He wasn't responding to communications and recluse or not, it was cause for concern. Lt. Cheyton reached his cabin and touched the entry pad. No response. She entered the override code and the door slid open. The living area was an expected mess with books and other loose items on the floor, but no Dr. Alastair. She coded the door to the berth and could instantly see the room in similar condition but with one difference, a body against the wall. Cheyton quickly ran over to check his pulse when the man stirred and sat up quickly.

“Excuse me, but what are you doing in here?”

Cheyton jumped back. "I'm sorry, Doctor. I came in to see if you were alright."

"Why wouldn't I be? I was asleep!"

"We were checking on all the science team members and you didn't answer..."

The man scratched his short red hair and yawned. "I had the strangest dream..."

Cheyton was puzzled. "Sir? The ship went down. We needed to know if you were okay."

Alastair continued without listening. "I dreamed everything was shaking and flying around. You know, like a mad earthquake or something."

"Doctor, the ship was attacked and we were forced to the planet surface."

"Oh, jolly good," he yawned again. "About time we got on with things."

"Sir," Cheyton paused, trying to get his full attention. "The ship was forced to land. We CRASHED, sir. We need to know if you're okay. Anything hurt? Are you in pain?"

"Crashed?" Alastair finally came around. "Bloody hell! Why didn't somebody wake me?"

“The tricorder isn’t working right, Lieutenant,” complained Ensign Eakins as he adjusted his backpack and trod across the rocky terrain toward the trees.

Lt. Sarant examined his tricorder and compared it to the one Eakins held “The ground contains high concentrations of heavy metals. The readings will not be precise, Eakins. On my homeworld of Vulcan, high temperatures or solar flares can have similar effects. We are only trying to follow the trajectory of the *Raven* to reach its landing site. These readings are sufficient. If we keep a steady pace, we should reach the landing site by nightfall.”

Ensign Hawas spoke with concern. “How are we sure anyone survived?”

Lt. Sarant continued hiking onward. “The ship did not fall without power. Probability suggests they would have had some control and therefore execute a successful forced landing.”

“If the ship blew up, we’d see a huge cloud of smoke, you idiot,” Ensign Birch laughed.

“Insulting comments are not useful or becoming of a Starfleet officer, Ensign Birch,” Sarant added as he stopped and turned around. “Ensign Chung, you are the only one

who has been silent so far. What is your assessment of our situation?”

“Our mission is survival, sir,” the young woman spoke with purpose. “We were trained for this. Those at the landing site may need our help and it is our best chance for success.”

“Exactly, Ensign,” Sarant replied. “I suggest we all keep that in mind and focus on reaching the ship as soon as possible. If you read the mission brief, you know a previous science team was attacked on this planet with dire results. We must be alert and move onward.”

The three crewmen fell in line behind their Lieutenant and continued their hike. They left the rocky terrain at the base of the mountains where the escape pod landed and began to cross fields of high grass and shrubs.

“Stay alert for life form readings,” Sarant ordered as he led on but dark clouds began to gather and a light rain started to fall. The team picked up their pace to reach the trees ahead and hopefully some shelter from the rain.

As they reached the tree line, Hawas stopped, held up a fist, indicating everyone to stop and made a sweep with his tricorder. “I thought I saw movement.”

“It might be a signal echo of us,” Birch replied. “I’m not reading a lifeform anywhere.”

“I’m only reading our party,” Eakins added.

“Keep moving,” Lt. Sarant ordered and the team plodded onward. The rain was short-lived and they came upon a clearing with several fallen trees.

“This doesn’t look like storm damage,” Chung observed as she looked at the broken branches.

“No telling how long it’s been that way,” Hawas looked at another tree close by, trying to determine how it was damaged.

The sound of a branch snapping made everyone freeze and Chung quickly pulled her phaser. Lt. Sarant motioned for everyone to spread out when suddenly, leaves and branches flew. Something pounced from a nearby brush pile and landed with its foot on top of Ensign Birch. Pinned to the ground, he screamed in pain as a large claw pierced his chest like a spike.

Hawas gasped in horror, “What the hell?”

The creature was over two meters tall and appeared to be a reptile. Scales and tough skin, a long, thick tail, walking on its hind legs but with well-developed arms. Claws on the

feet and hands, opposable thumbs, large eyes and aggressive teeth all said this was a carnivore. Eakins was frozen by the sight of Birch stabbed to the ground under a foot that covered his entire chest. In the scant seconds since it hit the ground, it quickly grabbed Eakins and bit his body in half with a ripping motion. Chung crouched and fired her phaser but it appeared to have no effect. Sarant fired along with Chung again and it only seemed to stun the creature enough to draw its attention. It dropped the mauled half of Eakins body and striking like a viper, bit off Ensign Birch's head. As it quickly swallowed the pieces of crewmen, it turned toward the trees and bellowed a rumbling growl. The blood of the team ran cold as another reptile emerged from the trees, plodding slowly toward them.

Lt. Sarant shouted for full phaser fire as Hawas ran in the opposite direction. Chung and Sarant fired again as the reptile near the trees began to run, almost baited by Hawas' fearful reaction. The combined phaser shot caused the creature to stumble but it regained footing and started to move once more, this time toward Chung. The Ensign ran backward, firing as she went when the sound of phaser fire was completely drowned by a screech to make your hair stand on end. Sarant grabbed his sensitive Vulcan ears and a wide shadow grew larger by the second until a massive

bird of prey, easily the size of the reptile, smashed into the creature with such force it slammed it to the ground. The massive talons squeezed the neck and head of the reptile until the sound of bone cracking rendered the animal lifeless. The huge bird spread its wings and Chung noticed it had another set of smaller talons at the bend of its wing, similar to the claws of a bat. The bird dipped its head low and let out the raging screech once more. The reptile running from the trees stopped in its tracks and began to pace backward. The bird turned and advanced a few steps in the beast's direction, uttering another screech, this time lower and more ominous, to which the reptile beat a full retreat.

With the threat neutralized, the bird turned back toward the fallen reptile until it placed one foot on the crushed body.

Standing to full height, Chung could see the bird was almost two and a half meters tall. Its plumage on the back and wings was brilliant red, black near the wing tips and around the eyes. A crest of black feathers began on the head and continued down the spine, while under the beak, down the chest to the legs was bright yellow. The eyes were very dark and they closed as it bowed low over the lifeless bodies of Birch and Eakins. There was a low chirping sound, almost painful as it nudged each body. Then it turned to the reptile it held under its talons, ripped a

chunk of meat from the neck, took it from its beak with its wing claw and tossed it in the direction on Ensign Chung. Bending down once again, it tore another chunk of flesh, held it in its beak and began to walk slowly toward the cowering Ensign Hawas.

With each step, its pace was more cautious, crouching lower to the ground until finally, it stretched its neck as far as it could, dropping the flesh as close as possible to the trembling Ensign. Again, the low, chirping, cooing sound was made and it nudged the lump of raw flesh closer before backing away.

Lt. Sarant was awed and intrigued by such a parental, protective display by an alien lifeform. He put away his phaser and began to approach the bird when it suddenly turned to face him, flared its feathers and opened its beak to produce a vicious hissing sound. Sarant froze and then knelt in a submissive posture as the bird stood tall. With a mighty screech, it launched itself skyward with two beats of its massive wingspan. As it became airborne and passed over Lt. Sarant, the bird urinated, spraying the Vulcan as it flew away.

The Lieutenant got to his feet and tried to shake his clothing free of the excess. Ensign Chung ran to Hawas and tried to help him up, but he was still shaking in pure

fear. As Sarant came closer, the smell was potent and brought Hawas out of his state of shock.

“Sir...that smells horrible,” Hawas coughed.

“I am aware, Ensign.”

“We need to find water,” Chung added.

“That would be beneficial.” Sarant checked the tricorder. “There is a lake to the east. From there we can follow the shoreline to the crash site.”

Chung was spellbound from the experience. “Sir, what do make of the food ritual? Do you think the bird was trying to feed us?”

“I am uncertain, Ensign Chung. I do find it odd the creature ate none of the kill for itself. The attack was almost one of protection, possibly even vengeance. It suggests a higher intelligence than a simple wild animal of nature. The urination marking is territorial in many species, but this was personalized, not a claim of hunting grounds.”

Hawas held his nose and walked away. “Can we just get to the lake?”

“And what about you?” Chung continued, still concerned for Hawas. “It paid close attention to you. As if it wanted to be sure you were unharmed.”

“Why don’t you ask Birch and Eakins?” Hawas snapped and kept walking.

“An excellent idea,” Lt. Sarant pulled off his backpack. “Continue toward the lake. I will join you shortly. I believe the science team aboard the *Raven* would be very interested in a skin sample from a creature that can resist phaser fire.”

Chapter 6

Captain's Log,

It's been two days since we force-landed the Raven on Norkan IV. I'm quite surprised the Romulans have shown no sign of pursuing us on the ground, beyond the obvious reason of being deep in Federation territory. I still suspect they are on the surface somewhere, possibly related to Project Dravek, whatever that may be.

Lt. Cmdr. Riley has done an outstanding job of turning our downed vessel into a functioning base of operations. While the secondary hull took the brunt of the impact, the saucer section survived relatively intact. The Engineering and Damage Control teams have been working tirelessly to get all essential systems running for the benefit of those who survived. They even have the food processors operating and that alone is an enormous load off my shoulders.

I debriefed the survivors of the escape pod and their account is nothing short of extraordinary. The members of the second escape pod still have not been located and I fear for their lives. As a result, I ordered the Spec Ops

units to set up a close perimeter around the ship in order to protect the scientists who have begun work on soil and vegetation analysis. They are armed with phaser rifles set to kill. There have also been several sightings of the large bird-like creatures but no other close contact. I now understand how the previous science team could have been attacked and suffered such high casualties. We may be in grave danger here and must find a way to reach orbit if we are to be able to contact Starfleet Command.

“Are you hiding up here?” Riley asked as he entered the open door of the Ready Room.

“Not at all,” Augustok answered as he turned from his desk screen. “In here I can monitor our progress and I feel more accessible than my quarters. Please, have a seat.”

“It seems odd seeing the bridge almost empty,” Riley glanced back as he sat down. “But not much need for it now I suppose.”

“In here, I feel useful,” the Captain added. “Out there, I feel like a museum display.”

“Don’t take it too hard, Captain. You made the right call and she’s a tough ship. That’s why she’s still taking care of us now.”

“That she is,” Augustok happily agreed. “What can I do for you?”

“I came to report we now have two shuttlecraft operational and the Captain’s Yacht will be up and running by the end of the day.”

“Outstanding work, Mr. Riley!”

“But there is a downside...”

“Isn’t there always?”

“Aye, Captain. With the fusion generators from the impulse engines supplying all the power to keep the systems running, we’re burning through our deuterium fuel supply fast. The main deuterium tank was in the secondary hull and we know that’s useless. We’re running out of the auxiliary tanks in the saucer, but we can process more fuel from seawater. There’s an ocean inlet south of the mountain range about fifty kilometers away. I’d like to start using the shuttlecraft to collect seawater to process.”

That sounds like an excellent plan, Mr. Riley,” Augustok nodded in agreement, silently thanking the stars his Chief Engineer survived this ordeal. “But let’s do some multi-tasking while we’re at it. Have the shuttlecraft fly search patterns in both directions. I’d like to locate the other escape pod as soon as possible.”

“Consider it done, Captain.”

“Mr. Riley,” the Captain smiled as both men stood. “When this mission is over, I’m recommending you for promotion to Commander.”

“Aye, thank you, Captain. Just don’t promote me out of Engineering.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” Augustok followed his Chief Engineer out of the Ready Room only to see Lt. Fai at her science station post. Her diminutive size made her easy to miss and her short hairstyle might pass for a male seated from behind. Whatever she was doing, it was completely engrossing. The Captain went to investigate and stood quietly behind her as she worked. She appeared to pay no attention to him standing there.

“What brings you to the bridge, Lieutenant?”

“Captain,” Fai remained focused as she worked. Her voice was small but direct. “Evidently there is a damaged relay between the sensors and the computer terminal in my quarters.”

“Report the malfunction to the damage control team. I’m sure they can correct the problem.”

Fai turned quickly, her blue eyes glaring. “Is there a problem with my coming to the bridge, sir?”

“Not at all, Lieutenant. I simply thought correcting the problem would be helpful.”

“Captain, I believe the atmospheric interference is not entirely natural,” she replied, turning her laser focus back to her work.

“Say again?” Augustok went from casual to curious in short order.

“The interference appears to be natural, but the sources on the planet are not strong enough to generate such blanket coverage. I believe it is being augmented artificially.”

“Augmented? Do you know how?”

“Not exactly, Captain. But whoever is doing so has gone to great lengths to make it *look* natural. If there is a central source, I would theorize it being near one of the polar regions. That would be the best place to mask the signal.”

“Excellent work, Lieutenant. Continue your research and keep me posted on your progress.”

“Yes, sir,” she nodded, but kept working.

“And Lieutenant,” Augustok turned back for a moment as he headed for the turbolift. “You are free to work on the bridge as long as you see fit.”

“Thank you, Captain,” Fai smiled. “I’ll have a report for you by the end of the day.”

“Carry, on, Lieutenant.” The Captain nodded his approval as the turbolift doors closed. Lt. Fai told him during her interview that she was capable but her small size and voice might make some question that claim but she just dispelled any doubt. After a harrowing battle and forced landing, then the loss of an officer at her side, she was clearly back on her game. Augustok knew relying on her going forward would not be a problem.

Digging in the soil was what Dr. Lonetree lived for and this was glorious. Only a hundred meters from the ship, she had unearthed what looked like the beginning of a bone structure, hopefully an entire skeleton. The find of an indigenous lifeform could tell them volumes about this place. She dug and brushed until the find came free of the soil and her eyes lit up as if it were gold. This was definitely part of a bird’s foot, a large species to be sure, which would follow the account given by the recovered

crewmen. The talon was as large as her entire hand and a voice broke her spellbound moment.

“Damn, that’s big!”

Dr. Lonetree laughed as Dak Cheveyo knelt next to her.

“It’s magnificent, isn’t it?” She was giddy over the find.

“Magnificent for ripping something to shreds.” He grinned, loving how child-like she looked in moments like this. “I think I saw one of the birds this morning but it’s hard to tell exactly how large from so far away, but it was big.”

“A couple people have reported sightings,” she replied as she went back to digging.

“One of my team sighted a reptile a few hours ago, at extreme range, but nothing close to the ship.” Dak stood and slung his rifle. “I was gonna walk the perimeter, thought you might like to join me?”

“Now?” Lonetree giggled, pointing at the dirt.

Dak laughed. “Whatever is buried there isn’t going anywhere.”

Cat stood and looked around, recalling how the last science team met their fate, “Is it safe?”

“I’ve walked it twice today and all was quiet.” He touched her shoulder, recognizing that cautious look on her face. “Do you think I’d ask you to go if I thought otherwise?”

“I suppose not.” Cat put her tools away and pulled her bag over her shoulder, trusting Dak was right. Besides, who else could she be safer with? The two strolled along through the grass and enjoyed the breeze. They smiled at each other and joined hands, all while Dak kept a grip on his phaser. Cat noticed and stopped for a second. “Is something bothering you?”

“No, not at all. I just won’t let my guard down until we know more about this place. It’s beautiful, but it’s not home.”

“This looks how home used to be for our people,” she said as she gazed around, pulling her hair back from the wind. “Open, unspoiled...I always wished I could’ve seen life back then...with my own eyes, you know?”

“I get that,” he replied, thinking about the massive plains around Little Eagle back home at Standing Rock. “But modern technology isn’t all bad.”

“But there should be a place where they meet. Know what I mean?”

"I do." Dak squeezed her hand and kept walking. "Maybe we'll find that place someday."

"I can't imagine where it would exist in this galaxy. With everybody fighting over every rock in known space, it gets pretty discouraging."

"C'mon now, don't be that way." Dak put his arm around her and kissed her head. "There are plenty of places in the Federation that haven't seen a day of conflict in years."

"I guess you're right." Cat leaned against him and reached around him in kind. "After that battle and the crash landing, I just want peace and quiet for a while."

Cat thought it felt like one of those days back on the Badlands, just walking on the grassy plain or marveling at straited colors in the face of the canyons, no particular place to go, just being together and nothing was better than that.

Most of Dak's squad were well aware of their relationship by now, so when they passed one of the sentry guards, they just nodded, smiled and looked the other way. As they got closer to the lake, Cat started to feel a headache coming on and rubbed her forehead. A voice sounded like a whisper and she turned to Dak. "Did you say something?"

"No, why?"

Cat stopped and looked around, “I thought I heard a voice...”

The sound of a whistle made them both freeze and Dak whipped his rifle off his back. The whistle came again, and they looked in all directions trying to locate the source. Then Cat patted his shoulder and silently pointed toward a nearby tree. They both looked up and a large bird was staring back at them. It tilted its head and the whistle repeated.

“Is that a falcon?” Cat whispered.

Dak shook his head in disbelief. “I don’t know, but it’s the biggest damn falcon I’ve ever seen.”

“Falcon,” the bird chirped, sounding like a myna bird or cockatoo.

“Oh my God!” Cat gasped.

“No shit,” Dak added quickly.

“No shit,” the bird spoke again, twisting his head sideways. The wings fluttered and it leapt to the ground. Rising to a standing position, it was tall enough to look Dak in the eyes.

Cat was enthralled as it stood before them. The beak was brilliant yellow and the eyes were a haunting blue

surrounding huge pupils. The chest was white with a generous number of black spots. The plumage from its head all the way down the wings appeared black, but everywhere the light touched turned a deep sapphire blue. The creature looked positively regal but hearing it talk was astounding.

The rifle came to aiming position and Dak stepped in front of Cat, shielding her with his body. The bird swayed its head and seemed to look past him at Cat, peeking from behind. Her headache throbbed and the whisper came again. The bird stepped closer and stared at Dak.

“No harm,” it chirped again. “No falcon, Mochni.”

“What...the...hell?” Dak mumbled in awe, still holding the rifle, ready to shoot.

“Mock-nye,” Cat uttered in shock. “Oh my God...it’s him! He’s the whisper!”

“What whisper? What do you mean?” Dak was confused but held fast.

“The voice I’ve been hearing.” Cat stepped beside her protector, stunned by the discovery. “It’s him, somehow, he’s in my head. His name is Mochni.”

“Who cares what its name is?” Dak held out his arm to keep her behind him but she moved forward anyway.

“Pahana?” Mochni spoke again, leaning his head forward.

“No, I am human,” Cat replied. “Dak, put the phaser down. He could’ve killed us long ago if he wanted.”

“What the...? You understand that thing?” Dak was completely dumbfounded. “But how?”

“It’s kind of like telepathy, I guess,” she mumbled and took another step toward Mochni. “I just hear him in my head. But it hurts a little.”

The word *hurt* set off alarms in Dak’s head. “Are you okay, is it trying to...”

“Shhh, Dak! I’m fine, just let me focus!”

The bird’s eyes closed and he bowed his head. “Ghost walker.”

“Yes!” Cat gasped. “My tribal name, Lonetree, it means *ghost walker*. Oh, my Lord, he understands me!”

The bird stepped back and raised his head. “Kuhdari,” it bowed once more, then turned and flew away.

“What the hell just happened?” Dak grabbed his love by her shoulders. “Are you alright?”

“I’m fine Dak,” she giggled and then laughed almost as if she were drunk. “I just spoke to an alien lifeform! He’s a messenger, they saw us after we crashed. He’s gone to tell his King we’re here.”

Dak thought she might be delirious as he asked, “His king? The bird has a king?”

Cat grabbed her head. “Geez, I need some coffee, my head is spinning.”

Dak took her by the arm and started back to the ship, still trying to figure out what just happened. “So are they coming back after us?”

“No, Dak. They’ve been keeping the reptile things away from the ship. They’ve been protecting us.”

Now he wondered if she was dreaming. “Protecting us?”

“Oh gawd, I’m gonna be sick.” Cat dropped on her knees and threw up. Her brain was swimming with images and language, but it was a tangled mess. She sat down and coughed, trying to clear her throat. “Damn, he threw so much into my head it’s insane. I just can’t process it all.”

Dak knelt beside her, holding her hand, afraid for her condition and tapped his communicator. “I need a Med Tech and transport, my location. Double time.”

“Dak, I’ll be okay.”

“Don’t argue with me, girl. I’m getting you to Sick Bay on the double. The Doc needs to do a brain scan and make sure you’re unharmed.”

“I said I’m fine!”

“Cat, look at me.” He held her face gently. “You said it yourself. You just had contact with an alien lifeform. Neither of us knows what’s fine. Now shut up and let me get you back where it’s safe.”

Her voice trailed off as she passed out. “They won’t hurt us, Dak, they just...”

The shuttlepod was inbound and Dak flashed his locator beam as he held her close, “That sounds great, love, but I’m not a believer just yet.”

It was an overcast day on Glintara, and the gloom sank deep inside Commander N’veid as he walked. He’d been summoned to the office of the Tal Shiar Command and a sensation of dread loomed in the air. It had taken two days of careful plotting and hiding to get the *Retaenir* back to Romulan space safely. After the loss of the *S’ten* and the *Mrr’vaaht*, he’d be thrust into mission command. Now, to

be debriefed by Brigadier Vaebn was not a moment he looked forward to. He touched the door panel cautiously, a reflection of his mood and stepped inside. To his surprise, Vaebn wasn't behind the desk but had been replaced by a beautiful woman. N'veid's mood lightened as he gazed at her. The long, dark hair down past her shoulders was uncharacteristic for a female in uniform. He dared not stare at her for too long so he stood at attention and followed protocol. "Commander N'veid, reporting as ordered."

"At ease, Commander," the woman replied as she continued to focus on the desk screen, twirling her hair in her fingers.

N'veid was compelled to let his eyes stray once more. The light from the screen cast a glow on her face and she looked even more attractive. She was young compared to most officers in the Tal Shiar and the black uniform clung to her shape as she stood. A smile crept across his face but faded instantly as soon as she turned her attention to him.

"Do you see something you like, Commander?" she asked in a sultry tone.

"No, my Commander."

"And why not?" she countered quickly. "Do you not find me attractive?"

“Forgive me, yes, you are beautiful, but I am here to obey.”

“Very good answer, Commander,” she quickly turned serious. “I see part of the reason you returned and Sindari did not.”

“The loss of the *Mrr’vaaht* was regrettable. Commander Sindari was unable to pull free of the star in time.”

“Not so regrettable, Commander,” she shot back in a salty tone. Moving around the desk, she tossed her hair aside, revealing her Tal Shiar badge and rank insignia. N’veid clenched his jaw, surprised to see she was an Admiral.

“How is it you managed to survive? You also disposed of the Stormbird-Kre wreckage?”

“Yes, Admiral.” N’veid grew tense. “I ordered full available engine power as we approached Pi Hydrae, releasing the wreckage in a slingshot maneuver.”

“And Sindari did not?”

“I do not know, Admiral,” he dared look her in the eye. “I cannot comment about events or orders on the bridge of the *Mrr’vaaht* when I was not there.”

“Another excellent answer, Commander,” she smiled and crossed her arms, appearing extremely pleased with herself. “Brigadier Vaebn has been reassigned to a post on

Remus. I have been given command of Project Dravek and the Stormbird-Kre fleet. You will report to *me* from now on. I am Admiral Areinnye and I am making you and the *Retaenir* the lead vessel. You are now my Field Commander, do you understand?"

"I am honored, Admiral." N'veid stood tall and proud.

"Do not be, Commander." Areinnye stepped close and whispered. "I'm not concerned with your honor. I want your success. Sindari was a fool, bloodthirsty and vengeful. Those things have their place but not above success. Glory is hollow without victory, N'veid. Even as the raptor attacks the snake, if he does not crush the prey with a well-placed strike, he will perish from the venom. Success will please me and that has rewards, but victory will please me all the more and those rewards are far greater." Her hand quickly grabbed his face, pressing her nails deep. "Fail me...and my discontent will be painful." She pulled a small dagger from the back of her belt and N'Veid could feel the cold, sharp blade drag down his cheek across his chin. Obviously, a message of what she meant by pain.

"Victory or death," N'veid uttered and she released her grip. "I will return successful or not at all."

"I shall look forward to that day, N'veid. Dismissed." The Admiral laughed under her breath as she twirled the dagger

in her fingers before tucking it away. The look on N'Veid's face provided her great amusement but she knew she made her point.

The Commander strode out of the office and stopped in the hall to catch his breath. Dire words had been spoken and promises made. The thoughts sink quickly when you have vowed to put your ship and its crew in the balance. Those decisions would be made in time. If he spared his crew, he would surely face an ugly end at the hands of Areinnye. As he began to walk toward the transporter room, he recalled the schooling of his youth and the name 'Areinnye'...it literally meant "Hell." Maybe Commander Sindari knew the same thing. Your ship and crew or your head. The choice was yours.

A meeting of senior staff and members of the science team had been called by the Captain. Lt. Cheyton strode off the turbolift and down the hall toward the quarters of Dr. Theodore Alastair. Once again, he had failed to respond to communication and this personalized service was becoming a bit weary. She tapped the door panel multiple times but didn't wait before going straight in. At least this time he was in the living area...asleep...again. How could he not hear any of the calls? She got ready to shout but

looking at him slouched across the arm of the sofa, softly snoring, a pad device in his lap, reminded her of the family cat back home on Earth. Even his reddish hair, the fuzzy beard and freckles across the nose made her think of Freckles the cat. The urge to creep closer and stroke his hair was silly but strong. Besides, he was actually rather handsome in that lanky, forever casual kind of way, certainly not what you expect from an expert scientist. She unwittingly got closer than she realized when he finally stirred, “What? Oh, hello, did I ask for tea?”

“No, Doctor.” Maya couldn’t help but laugh. “I’ve been calling you. Where’s your communicator badge?”

“Oh, of course.” He rubbed his eyes. “You mean that annoying bit of jewelry that’s constantly buzzing about?”

“Yes, Doctor, that one.” She tried to keep a straight face but there was a child-like charm that was hard to ignore, much like her cat.

“It’s in the bunk someplace I suppose. Bloody awful thing! How does anyone get any sleep here about with such things going off? Did you say it was tea?”

“No, Doctor Alastair,” she said with a chuckle, completely amused by his scatterbrained responses. “But you can get

tea from the food slot if you like. The Captain has called a senior staff meeting in the bridge conference room.”

“Senior staff did you say?” Alastair sat up, looking more alert. “Why on earth would he want me there? Does the tea have cream?”

“You can have cream if you like.” Cheyton crossed her arms, not at all angry but in an effort to get him to focus. She leaned forward to make full eye contact. “Are we having two different conversations?”

“At the very least,” Alastair stood and began patting his clothing and looking around. “I’ll have a cup of Chamomile with a spot of cream, if you don’t mind.”

“Did you lose something, Doctor?”

“What? Why yes, two lumps of sugar. That would be divine.”

Cheyton tried not to laugh out loud. This man had the attention span of a puppy. “Did you lose your sugar dish?”

“Yes, quite.” He scratched his head. “I believe I said it was in the bunk, didn’t I?”

“The sugar or your communicator?”

Suddenly the Doctor paused, then looked at her as though he was surprised. “I beg your pardon. Did you say the Captain wished to see me?”

“I came to get you, Doctor! YES!” Cheyton threw her hands in the air as if she’d scored a goal.

“Then we best skip the tea for now, my dear,” Alastair pointed toward the door. “I suggest we hurry along, eh? Wouldn’t want to keep the chap waiting, would we?”

Lt. Cheyton followed Alastair’s brisk pace into the hall, undecided if she wanted to choke him...or hug him.

“Captain to Doctor November,” he called as he sat at conference room table, trying to gather as much information as possible. The last two days had been a whirlwind of events and he needed to try to maintain some measure of order.

“Sick Bay, go ahead, Captain,” the Doctor answered with her typical sarcasm.

“How is Dr. Lonetree? Is she well enough to attend the meeting? I would very much like her insights.”

“You mean you want to debrief her. Pump her for information?”

Augustok sighed heavily. “Doctor, I was given a very complete account of the incident by Lieutenant Cheveyo, so a *debrief*, as you say, will not be required. However, she is the only one who can relate the contact experience. So yes, in addition to your medical report regarding her brain function, I would like to speak to Doctor Lonetree herself. So, I ask again: is she well enough to attend?”

“Sure thing, Captain. We’ll be there. November out.”

The Captain rubbed his temples. “Surak, give me strength and the logic not to kill.”

“Riley to Captain!” The engineer’s voice was full of excitement.

“Go ahead, Mr. Riley.”

“Sir, it’s...well, you really need to see it to believe it, sir! Outside, on the hull behind the bridge.”

“I’m looking at it now, Mr. Riley, but I’m still not sure I believe it!”

Several crew members were already outside, looking skyward, cheering, clapping and pointing to what they saw.

Riley’s voice came again. “The shuttle crew spotted them on the way out and followed them back here.”

Augustok moved to the window and was spellbound. High above, four of the large birds soared toward the *Raven*, each one carrying a crewman in their talons. Both feet together, the talons created a tube-like harness in which the crewman lay prone, their head and arms reaching out in front, giddy in the wind like children on a carnival ride. They glided lower, the crewman waving and laughing while the Captain was utterly speechless. The largest bird looked like a Horned Owl, the second like a Golden Eagle and the other two like Red Hawks. They were a magnificent sight together, but even more amazing was the total lack of fear shown by the crew members, both in their talons and on the hull watching. Augustok ran out of the hatch onto the hull and around the bridge module just in time to see the creatures gently place each crewman down and stand on the other foot. The Hawks and the Eagle bowed their heads and allowed the passengers to touch their beaks, but the Owl stood tall, his eyes locked on Augustok as he moved past the others watching. "Lieutenant Morros, are you alright? Where did you..."

The Owl's wings spread and his feathers flared, the eyes narrowed and the head crouched low. The claws at the bend of the wings opened wide as the other birds quickly took flight. The Owl hissed, sounding like a strange language and raked his talons on the hull, as if drawing a

challenge line. Augustok froze and after a couple tense seconds, the Owl leapt for the sky.

Lt. Morros looked around, “It’s okay, everyone. Don’t be afraid. They mean us no harm. They rescued us from our escape pod, adrift on the ocean and brought us back here safely. They are called the Khozi.”

“Cohz-eye? That’s quite a bit of knowledge, Lieutenant. How did you learn all this?” the Captain asked with deep curiosity.

“I’m Betazoid, Captain,” Morros replied. “I’ve been telepathic since birth. The Owl is named Kotori. He’s a watchman or a recon patroller if you will. He was intensely angry and defensive when he saw you. I’m not sure why, but the sound he made was *Veshjate*...it means *Long Ear*. Whatever it’s referring to, it was said with great contempt. All of which goes completely against how they treated all of us. They could not have been more kind and helpful.”

“Lieutenant, I’d like all of you to get to Sick Bay right away for standard exam, just to make sure everyone is okay. Then I’d like you to join my staff in the bridge conference room. I’ll see you in an hour.” The Captain was amazed Morros was able to learn so much so quickly. This was the kind of valuable information they would need

going forward, especially not knowing how long they might be here.

“Aye, sir.” Morros turned to his crewmates. “Everyone to Sick Bay, on the double.”

Augustok turned to the rest of those still standing on the hull. “While that was quite a show I think it was sufficient excitement for one day. Let’s all get back to our duties, shall we?”

Riley walked over as everyone dispersed and began to chuckle slightly, covering his mouth to hide his amusement.

Augustok noticed the reaction and asked, “Would you care to share the joke, Mr. Riley?”

“For a second there, I thought that beastie was gonna snap you like a twig, sir!”

“You’ll forgive me if I’m less entertained, Mr. Riley. I had exactly the same thought!”

“*Long Ear*, did he say?”

“I have the distinct feeling I will not be welcome at the next family dinner,” Augustok joked as he rubbed one of his ears.

Riley struggled to keep from laughing. “You could always have the Doctor bob those down a bit for you.”

“The thought of Dr. November trimming my ears will be one saved for my worst nightmares, Mr. Riley.”

Both men headed for the escape hatch when harsh screeching sounds were heard from multiple sources. Overhead, the flight of birds that just rescued the crewmen sailed past in echelon formation. They were followed closely by a solid black eagle, all headed south toward the lake.

“Any ideas?” Riley asked.

“None at all.” Augustok watched as the flight continued away, screeching loudly as they went. “I think it best we get inside.”

“Agreed.” Riley nodded and led the way.

In the field north of the ship, Lt. Cheveyo saw the flight of birds as well and slapped his communicator. “Sentry Twelve or Thirteen, anyone near the lake, what’s going on down there? Report!”

“Sentry Twelve, reporting. We’ve got trouble, sir. A pack of those reptiles are approaching along the shoreline. I count six, but could be more in the woods.”

Cheveyo shouted. “All hands, Red Alert! Invasion at the lakefront! All hands, attack pattern Spearhead, execute!”

Dak whipped his rifle off his back and broke into a sprint. He could see the next two sentries doing the same when a screaming voice in his head shouted, *NO! NO!* He staggered and his head throbbed, like he’d been hit with a brick. He tried to shake it off when a brightly colored red and yellow eagle skidded to a stop in the grass in front of him. The voice came again but louder, *NO!*

Cheveyo looked into the black eyes of the bird. “Is that you in my head?”

“*YES!*” The bird nodded quickly. “Hold your ground! The lake attack is a diversion to get you away from the vessel. Hold your ground, we will defend you! GO! NOW!”

The mighty wings flapped and he was skyward once more. Dak was slightly dizzy and felt nauseous but the idea made sense. “Sentries One through Eight, hold your position. Protect the rear. I repeat, protect the rear!”

“Roger, Lieutenant, holding position,” the replies came quickly.

Cheveyo raised his rifle and looked through the scope, setting for 10x magnification. The shore was mayhem, phaser fire like a light show and the birds slashing with savage attacks on every swooping pass. The red eagle that just contacted him dove in like a berserker, smashing one reptile to the ground, then lifting the body and swinging it like a sack of rocks. As he slung the body away into the water, the inertia threw him off balance and he fluttered to the ground. Before he could regain his footing, a reptile stomped on his wing, then grabbed a nearby sentry and bit him in half. The red eagle screeched in loud agony and leapt from the ground, sinking his talons into the reptile. Holding with his clawed hand as his broken wing hung limp, he stabbed furiously with his beak, ripping away chunks of the creature's head until it fell to the ground.

“Sentry Two, contact, repeat contact! Three reptiles coming out of the woods!”

“Roger Sentry Two, on my way,” Cheveyo barked. “Damn it, he was right!”

Dak took off in the opposite direction, hoping the carnage at the shore would be contained. He crouched and opened fire at the tree line, striking the lead reptile but it seemed to have little effect. He fired a long burst as two others joined

in and the lead animal staggered, but the other two kept advancing.

“Sentries, concentrate fire on the head! Maybe that will have more effect.”

“Roger, Lieutenant!”

The team fired again on the lead animal with another rifle joining the attack, and the creature stumbled and fell to the ground.

“Hell, yes!” Dak shouted, but as he prepared to fire on the next reptile, a huge bird with black plumage and a grey head crashed into the second beast with such force it slammed both to the ground. In a maneuver similar to what he witnessed moments ago, the bird crushed the head of the reptile and swung the body, pounding the other senseless. To Cheveyo’s amazement, the creature they shot started to get up, but the huge eagle made short work of him as well. Just for good measure it seemed, the eagle stepped over to the reptile that was pummeled and with one foot, he squeezed the head of the beast until it burst like a melon. The giant then bolted skyward, rushing over their heads toward the lake.

“Fall back to the ship,” Dak ordered and he sprinted in that direction. Once he had a clear view of the shore, he raised

his rifle scope again and the scene he viewed was gruesome. Pieces of his men lay strewn across the beach but the bodies of the reptiles lay like great heaps of dead flesh. Not one was left standing.

The birds surrounded their wounded member and a shuttlepod was leaving the *Raven*. Cheveyo sprinted toward the lake and slapped his comm badge again. "Med Tech to the shore! One of the native birds is wounded. He warned me of the attack, we have to help him. I'm on my way."

Dak finally reached the circle of birds and the Med Techs were out of the shuttlepod, tending to the wounded. One tried to approach the downed bird but he appeared to be having no part of it. Cheveyo ran up close and tried to catch his breath. "You spoke to me. You warned us, can you understand me?"

The voice in his head came again. "Yes, there is no need to shout. I hear your thoughts."

"Your wing is injured. We can help you. Please, let us help," Cheveyo pleaded as he slowly came closer.

"You are brave, Spirit Warrior, but my battles from the sky are done. I will be taken to the city of Zaltana, there I will

spend my last days. Another will be War Chief, Nootau cannot be.”

“No,” Dak asked again. “Please, we have people that can heal your injuries. Please, let us try. You saved many of us, let me help you still be War Chief.”

The great bird laid on the ground as if trying to rest. “No voodoo for me, Spirit Warrior. This is our way. What you speak of died with the Pahana long ago.”

Cheveyo dared step closer when another voice rung inside his ears. “Why have we been fighting, Nootau? Are these not the ones the prophecy told us of long ago? They could be that prophecy. If you believe in Pahana, let them help you. As your King, I ask you, fly again if you can and remain my War Chief.”

Dak looked around, trying to decipher where the words came from when he heard the familiar voice of Cat Lonetree. She was on the shuttlepod but had been watching in amazement and joy as he tried to help the fallen war eagle.

“It’s the very large one, his name is Kuhdari, King of the Khozi.” Cat pointed to the large black eagle with the grey feathered head.

The trademark black eyes felt like they looked through him as Cheveyo stared back, speechless, but the voice spoke once more, this time softer and benevolent. "Help him, Spirit Warrior called Dak, Nootau will protest no more. I thank you as does my tribe."

The Med Tech came forward and began scanning the injured wing. Cat came to Dak's side and squeezed his arm, looking up at him in a way she never had before, her eyes full of wonder and a smile that lit her face like a full moon.

He was moved by her expression and asked, "What is it?"

Cat was almost giddy as she answered, "It's you, Dak. Now you know, just like I did. You understand and I know you do. We've never shared anything like this before and it's unbelievable."

Dak hugged her but still felt uneasy with the pure mental communication. "Yeah, this definitely rates as the craziest thing we've ever done." Then he whispered, "He looks like the biggest Harpy Eagle in the galaxy."

The couple kissed but were startled to look up at Kuhdari leaning over close to them. "The Ghost Walker and the Spirit Warrior called Cat and Dak. These two spirits walk together, belonging to each other, like Kaga foretold.

Nootau spoke truly, the time to visit the Temple of Zaltana has come. We shall prepare.”

“The Captain’s gonna love this,” Cat giggled.

“You got all that too?” Dak looked amazed.

“Every word.”

The Med Tech looked up. “Bone knitter worked great. There are a couple solid spots in the hollow bone now, but it shouldn’t affect his function. I’m sure there will be some soreness for a few days, but with their metabolism he should be good as new.”

Nootau got to his feet and spread his wings, then folded them slowly, repeating the movement several times. The Red Hawk standing next to him bowed her head and gently stroked the Med Tech with her beak.

“You’re welcome,” he laughed.

Dak could hear Nootau and he was lively. “This must be Pahana! Thank you, Spirit Warrior, I am in your debt.” Nootau draped his healed wing over the Red Hawk. “This is Dezba, my mated one, mother of our keiki. She is grateful also.”

Kuhdari added, “We will return when all is prepared, but the Chuaa are relentless. Be watchful as we will be also.”

The King turned to his kindred and raised his wings, sounding a repeating chirp like a trumpet, to which they all responded and took to the sky in a chorus of beating wings that sounded like drums. Those on the ground were awestruck and the questions began to buzz.

Dak stepped over to the shuttlepod and motioned to the pilot to put him on external speakers, “Everybody listen up! I will assume not all of you had telepathic contact with the indigenous lifeforms, but they saved our necks today. So, let’s get back to our duties and the Captain will be giving you all a full report very soon. Let’s tend to the wounded, take care of our fallen comrades and we’ll be pulling the perimeter back one hundred meters closer to the ship.”

“How many did we lose?” Cat asked quietly.

“I lost Zarbuna, Carter and Vollmer. Zarbo was a damn fine Chief and the other two...well, this was their first mission. I hate doing comms to family but hopefully we’ll be able to do that soon. The real kicker was losing Birch, one of the ship’s security team. She was the sister of the Ensign who died in the reptile attack. That one hurts the worst.”

“Oh, God! I’m so sorry,” she said, hugging him gently. “But we’ve got to get back to the ship. We learned a LOT

more today. Maybe that will keep anything this horrible from happening again.”

The clouds were heavy as King Kuhdari and his court soared high into the mountains. In a vee formation to his right was his mate, Queen Ecoute and on her wing, the Watchman, Kotori. To his left, the War Chief, Nootau and his mate Dezba. Following close behind were the Messenger, Mochni and by his side, the King's guard, Ohanze, who was a member of the Kal Ghari (The Black Watch).

Khozi chosen to serve in the Kal Ghari would be baptized in the waters near the Fire Mountains and within a few days, their plumage would turn solid black. The Kal Ghari were the Royal Guards to the King and the Temple of Zaltana. To join them was a vow for life and to guard the Temple was a high honor indeed. Those who served as Kal Ghari at the Temple were allowed to take a mate and their families lived within the walls of the city.

Any elderly or disabled Khozi who could no longer fulfill their duties was brought here and cared for, as well as teaching the young keiki. In this way the youth were taught by the elders and all of the Five Nations were represented.

While members of every tribe had multiple skills, each had a special duty to the Khozi kingdom.

The Ekara (Eagles) were the most skilled hunters and led the seasonal harvest flights. Rapna (Harpies) like Kuhdari were the largest and strongest of the Ekara. While other tribal elders had served as King, Kuhdari had been chosen by his peers and he tried diligently to be worthy of them. His mate, Ecouste, was Suna Ekara (Golden Eagle) and had been by his side for seventeen winters.

Nootau, the War Chief was the leader of the Gazole (Firebirds). They were trained from their youth to be fierce and fearless. To challenge a single Gazole was bold, but a flight of them was a force to be reckoned with. To become Gazole was a status to be earned and coloring of their plumage was a rite of passage. While any Khozi could enter the training, most were Ekara or, like Nootau's mate Dezba, a member of the Vanga (Hawks). Nootau wooed Dezba after she earned her plumage, knowing she would produce strong keiki to become Gazole one day.

The Vanga were easily the largest tribe of the Khozi and the most multi-talented. They were the caretakers, the builders, the artists and the teachers, always respecting the high skills the other tribes excelled in. The Vanga were also the most varied in size, speed and strength but they

were highly valued in the Khozi society for their multitude of talents.

Kotori was of the Pelda (Owls) and he came from a long heritage of Watchmen. The Pelda possessed keen eyesight, more so than other Khozi and their ability to fly nearly silent made them ideal for the duties of patrol and helping to keep the peace across the Five Nations. The Pelda kept close ties with the Falza (Falcons) as they were the swift messengers of all the tribes. The Falza exhibited the best vocal skill of all the Khozi and a keen sense of translation, a talent not often called for since the loss of the Pahana.

Kuhdari and his flight glided beneath the clouds and the white stone of the Zaltana Temple came into view. The walls of the city that surrounded the Temple encompassed almost the entire mountaintop plateau. The nearby peaks were filled with Khozi dwellings as stone doorways and platforms dotted the mountain sides.

In the valley below, encircled by groves of trees, sat the vacant city of Helaku. The largest, most beautiful place built by the Pahana and their last stronghold before the Chuaa wiped them out. The Khozi fought bitterly to protect the humanoids they shared a millennium of culture with, but trying to defend multiple locations spread their forces too thin. The Chuaa came in packs and the Pahana were

not a war-like culture, but they fought bravely to the last. The Gazole attacked with a near blood lust and huge numbers of the Chuaa were slaughtered, but even to this day they still infest the land across all the Five Nations.

The last of the Pahana was one named Kaga, the Chronicler and he was kept safe in the Zaltana Temple. He was aged and all his family had been killed, so no one remained to carry on his lineage or his work. When he passed to the Great Spirit, the Khozi wept, for the people they shared heart, mind and soul with were no more. Now, only their history remained and a promise by Kaga that his kind would one day return.

Any time he visited Zaltana, the flight over Helaku made Kuhdari's heart cry out in pain. The history was all he knew, all of what he was taught and what he must be watchful for as King. Now, he descended to the courtyard with news that this may have come to pass. This he must bring before Hiamovi, the High Chief of Zaltana, that he and his Council of Elders might impart their wisdom to the Khozi.

The King and his flight landed and the Kal Ghari on the towers and doorways opened one wing and bowed their head for a moment in honor, then returned to their vigilant duty. The group marched inside together and, as they

entered the Grand Hall, Hiamovi stood from his perch and spread his wings with joy. The chirping sound was one of great approval and thoughts were shared.

“It has been too long since our King graced these halls! Welcome Kuhdari and your honored court.”

“The honor is mine,” Kuhdari replied respectfully as he bowed. “My Queen bids you health and long life as well. I come bearing news of the Kaga prophecy, or what might be, for your consideration.”

“Your messenger brought me such news,” Hiamovi acknowledged.

“The veshjate are among them,” Nootau interrupted, filled with concern and stern resolve. “I marked him to be sure.”

“Nootau, be still,” Ecoute chastened the War Chief. “You will be asked join but until then, respect your King.”

“Please excuse my outburst,” Nootau apologized, bowing low. “The stain of combat is fresh upon me.”

Dezba nudged close and urged him to stand again.

“Your heart is well placed.” Kuhdari turned to his friend. “As is your voice. Nootau speaks true, Hiamovi. Kotori has seen the Long Ear as well.”

The High Chief looked to the Watchman and Kotori blinked his large eyes slowly. “Yes, one of the veshjate appears to be their leader. We must be cautious.”

Khudari was intrigued and curious. “Yet the Chuaa attack them just as they did the Pahana?”

“Yes, my King,” Kotori answered. “But none were near the water’s edge where we fought.”

“My King...”

“Yes, Nootau?”

“Of the ones I defended, the veshjate was ignored by the Chuaa as it pursued the other Pahana first. The Long Ear did fire a weapon at the beast but was never in danger.”

Mochni raised his head. “If I may, they are not Pahana, as spoken by the Ghost Walker, they are called *human*.”

“Mochni speaks truth,” Kuhdari agreed. “I touched the thoughts of the Ghost Walker and Spirit Warrior. They are from many tribes and came from above the sky, just as Kaga wrote it would be.”

Hiamovi raised a wing and his thoughts came with deep wisdom. “If they are the prophecy or no, they must not suffer the same fate as the Pahana. We already know the Chuaa seek to destroy them just as before and that must not

come to pass. Kuhdari, you will bring a group of envoys from the...*humans*, that we may know their hearts. If the veshjate among them carry the heart of Aljani¹ like those before them, then they shall bleed, but let their own thoughts speak for them. The Elders will know.”

“I shall bring them before you, Great Hiamovi.” Kuhdari stood tall then turned to his court. “Kotori, double the Pelda search for the Chuaa nesting grounds. We must strike them at their core. Ohanze, choose a number of the Kal Ghari from each nation and form a guard around the vessel the humans call *Raven*. Nootau, prepare your forces with two full coveys ready for attack. Mochni, you shall join me and Ecoute to welcome the newcomers to Zaltana.”

Each of the Elders raised one wing as Kuhdari prepared to depart and Hiamovi added: “Today, my King, your wings lift the Five Nations, for if this is indeed the Prophecy of Kaga, your name shall be immortal. May the Great Spirit fly with you.”

“My thanks, Great Hiamovi, but if it is the word of Kaga, the future of the Khozi is what shall become immortal, as it should be.”

¹ Aljani is the Khozi word for *demon*.

The King led his flight outside where a crowd gathered. News of his arrival spread quickly, and a proud nation chirped and screeched with joy at the sight of their sovereign taking to the skies. Kuhdari led his flight in a circle that swooped back over the crowd before they split for their destinations and the fervor of the Khozi rushed through him. Proud to be their King, he drew close to Ecoute and they circled back once more before departing. Once again, he looked down on Helaku and knew he must not fail.

What was to be a senior staff meeting had turned into a full-blown conference and Augustok had reservations about maintaining order. Dr. November or Dr. Struev on their own could be challenging enough, but amid everyone else the situation could degenerate into mayhem. On the upside, he mused, if things got too out of hand, he could always call on Mr. Br'tah to restore order and his tactics would be impossible to ignore. The smile lines next to his eyes crinkled as the thought gave him some unexpected cheer. He considered how Br'tah's bellowing tone could easily silence a room and the reaction never failed to give

him quiet satisfaction. Dr. Lonetree and Lt. Cheveyo would surely have interesting input along with Lt. Cheyton and Dr. Alastair, but Augustok chose to hear good news first so he planned to start with Mr. Riley.

The Captain stood from his chair at the head of the table and spoke boldly to be sure he had everyone's attention, "The last twenty-four hours have brought some extraordinary developments. I would like to remind everyone that despite our current situation – being out of contact with Starfleet – we are still on our original mission, so please try to stay focused. Mr. Riley, what is our current engineering status and outlook?"

"On the whole, Captain I'd say it's very positive," Riley replied in a very upbeat way. "The two shuttlecraft have been bringing a steady supply of seawater which we have been processing for deuterium fuel and drinking water for the food stations. The Captain's Yacht, *Phoenix*, is now fully operational and has superior phaser weapons to our hand-held rifles so, technically it could be used to repel another reptile attack. The *Phoenix* also has the ability to reach orbit so we could take a small crew and try to contact Starfleet via subspace."

"If there is not a Romulan presence in orbit or lurking near one of the magnetic poles as we encountered before,"

Br'tah added with contempt. "The *Phoenix* can call for help but if it is attacked it stands no chance of survival."

"True," Augustok agreed. "But it's a risk we may have to take. I think it would also be a good idea for us to use the *Phoenix* for deeper reconnaissance. We need to see farther around us and I'm sure the science team would benefit from that as well. Lt. Fai, do you have any further report on the augmented interference you mentioned?"

"Yes, Captain." Fai stood and activated the wall screen. "All of my data suggests the artificial interference is coming from somewhere in this mountain range close to the northern polar region. Once we get closer, I could localize the signal with sensors onboard the *Phoenix*. I'm sure there is a considerable power source nearby as well."

"Well done, Lieutenant," Augustok felt comfortable enough to take a seat. "Doctor November, what can you tell us about Doctor Lonetree's brain scan?"

"I thought sure you'd save my analysis for last," November replied with her signature dry humor. "To put it bluntly, the good doctor got clobbered. Normally, the hippocampus and the prefrontal cortex are affected in a mind probe – like a Vulcan mind meld for example. But even then, the effect is selective as the subject recalls certain events. In this case, Lonetree was probed in several areas of memory and

thought process simultaneously, which brought on the rapid discomfort and nausea. Basically, the alien was trying to collect as much information as quickly as possible. Not just memories, but language translation, emotional states, the works. It was too much to take and she shut down. But I'd say she has recovered fully and is undamaged by the experience. I wouldn't recommend it again. Repeated high intensity interactions like this will certainly result in neural damage."

Augustok turned and pointed to Lonetree, "How do you feel about that, Doctor?"

"I agree." Cat nodded and followed up. "But the contact was two-way. I got a jumble of information that took hours to understand. I can tell you this, something inside them is overjoyed to see us but I don't fully understand why. There was another race of beings here they called *Pahana*. I don't know if they were indigenous, but they meant a great deal to Mochni."

"*Mock-nye*?" Augustok repeated slowly.

"Yes, Captain, that was the falcon's name. They have names just as we do and a social structure of some kind. The one we saw earlier that looks like an enormous Harpy Eagle is called Kuhdari and they refer to him as King."

“He made the mental link with me as well, sir,” Lt. Cheveyo chimed in to corroborate. “The War Chief did also, the brightly colored one the Med Tech healed the broken wing for. We both heard them and understood them perfectly. The King said he was going to prepare for something called Zaltana?”

“*Zal-ta-na*? Do we have any idea what that means?” the Captain asked as his curiosity kept climbing.

Lt. Morros replied, “It means high or holy place, Captain.”

“Thank you, Lieutenant.” Augustok almost forgot the young man was in the room. “Did you learn anything else during your contact?”

“Not many specifics, sir,” Morros shrugged but continued. “Being telepathic isn’t necessarily an open door. It was more of a feeling of being safe and cared for. The one who rescued me was called Kotori and his job was to watch and patrol. As Doctor Lonetree said, they clearly have a well-defined social structure.”

“What about the defensive posture when I approached?” the Captain asked intently. “You mentioned a word, something about contempt and *long ear*?”

“Yes, Captain, I believe the word was *ves-jon-tay*? I may not be correct on the pronunciation but the intent behind it

was clear. The translation I am sure of and Kotori's reaction was like he recognized you as an enemy."

"An enemy? Very interesting. But you didn't get this reaction toward anyone else in your group?"

"No, sir, just you." Morros appeared sorry to admit the information. "But I'm positive I could understand more with extended contact."

"We will keep you close at hand, Lieutenant." Augustok turned to Dr. Struev. "It's my understanding you've had no direct interaction so far, Doctor. What do you have to add to what we've heard so far?"

Contrary to his previous behavior, Struev was completely professional and prepared in line with his scientific reputation. "I've been analyzing the artifacts we've already discovered and I can tell you this race of birds has existed on this planet for thousands of years. We found abundant remains and they are all consistent with the mineral/chemical ecosystem of Norkan IV. I've done some analysis on the flesh sample recovered by Lt. Sarant and I can say with great certainty that it IS NOT indigenous to this world."

"NOT indigenous?" The Captain was surprised. "Then from where?"

“Dr. Alastair would be the best for that question.” Struev pointed across the table where he was slumped in the chair, snoring lightly and asleep.

Augustok paused, then sent his pad device sliding down the table like a bartender, hitting Alastair’s hand. The Doctor woke and fumbled to pick the device up.

The Captain cleared his throat, trying not to laugh. “I’m sorry, are we boring you Doctor Alastair?”

He scratched his red hair and looked at the pad, “What? Oh, pardon me, I was just taking a short rest. Yes, yes, how can I help? The birds? Oh yes, the birds...”

“The reptiles,” Struev chuckled, not surprised that Alastair was caught napping at any given time.

“Ah, yes, the reptiles,” Alastair yawned. “What would you like to know?”

The Captain repeated: “NOT indigenous?”

“Oh, no indeed! Not a chance, none, naught, zero. Anything else?”

Lt. Cheyton leaned and whispered – loudly: “Where from?”

“Where from? Where you ask?” Alastair replied as though the answer were obvious. “Bloody hell, it could be hundreds of places. Too common to pinpoint just yet.”

Lt. Cheveyo let his jaw hang in amazement. “Are you saying two-to-three-meter-tall carnivorous reptiles are common? What galaxy are you from?”

“Let’s not overstate the matter, shall we?” Alastair waved his hand for Cheveyo to calm down as he reached for his tea. “Oh bugger, it’s gone cold. I say, could I warm this a bit?”

The table was silent and Alastair wondered if the cold stares he was receiving had chilled his cup of brew. “No, I suppose not,” he continued. “Jolly good, then. Three meter reptiles are not uncommon, just not ones that walk on hind legs, eat humanoids and are resistant to phaser fire. Crikey, nothing natural does that! What *is* common here is the cellular construction. This is not indigenous to anywhere because it is constructed, not natural.”

Dr. Lonetree was puzzled. “Constructed? Artificial life?”

“No, no, no, lass,” Alastair shook his head and tried to clarify. “Artificial life could be easily narrowed to just a few sources, but this ... this, is selective genetic engineering or gene splicing, if you will. Quite similar

technology used in medical applications to grow new organs or regenerate lost appendages. Yes ... yes, quite common on many worlds but here, applied on a massive and particularly selective scale. These creatures were grown, not unlike clones, but from carefully constructed DNA sequencing, not a singular natural source.”

Alastair clenched his fist on the table and his tone turned deadly serious. “This, mates, is a bloody monster, built to do a specific job. The phaser energy usually overloads the nervous system, but in this beast, that energy never reaches the control centers of the brain, you see. The outer skin layer is an insulator. This is why the bird strikes are so effective as they render massive internal damage. Even the flesh and blood itself, if consumed, would eventually become toxic in the digestive system. This would explain why the birds, or the Khozi, as you called them, do not eat the prey once killed. There you have it then.” He looked about him amiably. “Is there more tea?”

Dr. Lonetree looked outraged and asked, “So, someone put them here to destroy?”

“Oh, yes, quite, absolutely as a matter of fact.” Alastair went silent for a moment and looked away at the ceiling with a pensive stare. “I say, yes, yes indeed, but to destroy what exactly? Why would you wish to destroy indigenous

life? To make room for what? Yes, precisely what? I must say I cannot overstate the need for the brain to rest at every opportunity. If you will all please excuse me, this will most certainly require a nap, at the very least. Cheerio, chaps.”

Lt. Cheyton shook her head and tried to contain a laugh as Dr. Alastair strode with purpose out of the room, leaving the Captain speechless and his eyebrows raised higher than she ever noticed before.

“He makes a strong point,” Lt. Cheveyo spoke up, rubbing his chin. “During the entire conflict we witnessed by the lake, the only deaths were our people. Why? With all the close quarters fighting, that seems impossible. When the War Chief was injured, the reptile stepped on his wing, pinning him in a position where it could easily use its jaws to kill, but instead it focused on trying to reach another crew member, another humanoid, like its instinct is to ignore anything else, even to its own destruction?”

“If they are genetically constructed...” Dr. Lonetree paused, then turned to Dr. Struev, “couldn’t they be programmed or trained to carry out a simple, singular action? They could be trained to recognize humanoids as a primary food source?”

“That is possible,” Struev agreed. “But it could also be more nefarious than that.”

Lonetree looked surprised. “How?”

“To kill,” Br’tah replied with verve. “A creature that is cloned or grown with the intent to destroy is not trained to survive for food. Its sole purpose is to vanquish an enemy. Those responsible for creating the creature care nothing for its survival since it is a simple matter to make more. They are expendable, like the Jem’Hadar.”

The Captain was more concerned than ever. “If that is the case, then there must be a facility somewhere on this planet where they are produced.”

“Or they could be delivered here on a periodic basis,” Br’tah added. “With all the mercenary activity in this system, a cargo drop-off would be a simple matter.”

“An excellent point.” Augustok stood and straightened his uniform shirt, confident he’d heard enough to decide a course of action. “If no one has anything else to add, I will choose a crew to join me on the *Phoenix* for a recon flight tomorrow at 0800 hours.”

“I have something,” Dr. Lonetree stood behind her chair as well and looked around the room to be sure she had everyone’s attention. “It’s easy to look at these creatures and simply see them as oversized versions of the birds we all probably know so well. Please try to keep in mind they

are not. Ornithoids on Earth are creatures with keen senses much stronger than those of humans. Sight, hearing, coordination, reflexes are all superior to ours, but elevate the size of those birds to the size of the average humanoid and you have a being with enormous brain capacity. It's widely recognized that most humanoids are only able to utilize a fraction of their mental power, some more than others, but here, we've encountered a species that has made telepathic communication a common way of life. That takes focused concentration and mental skill. All of us may not be able to communicate with the Khozi, but keep in mind they most likely can read your thoughts or at the very least, sense your emotional states. We all need to be keenly aware of that."

"She's absolutely right," Struev agreed emphatically. "I also think it would be prudent to brief all Vulcan members of the crew that they may be seen as a provocative presence. Until we know more, it might be safer for everyone if they remained inside the ship."

"Points well taken," Augustok nodded. "I will see to informing the Vulcans of our current situation. Until tomorrow morning, that will be all. Mr. Br'tah, will you remain for a moment?"

Everyone filed out of the room, chattering as they went. The information shared was all very good, but it would no doubt create questions throughout the ship and crew. Augustok waited until the doors closed. “What do you make of all this?”

“I believe the intent of the Khozi must be an honorable one,” Br’tah proclaimed. “They were not required to come to our aid and our losses would be much higher had they not done so.”

“I agree,” Augustok sat again and motioned for his friend to do the same. “You recall we were told of something called *Project Dravek*? And the legend I told you about among Romulan children?”

“Yes, Captain,” Br’tah replied, wondering where this was going.

“Imagine for a moment,” Augustok leaned closer. “That you landed on an uncharted planet and the beings you encountered were all the Klingon legends you were told of as a child?”

Br’tah’s eyes grew wide at such a prospect and he answered with passion, “Then I would meet Kahless the Unforgettable and he would be guarding the Gates of Sto’Vo’Kor...and I would be dead.”

“I understand, but if what you came face-to-face with that scene while you were still breathing?”

“Impossible!”

“Exactly my point.” Augustok said as if it were a revelation.

Br’tah was puzzled. “What do you mean?”

“We encounter new things on strange planets and look at them scientifically, but if one of my Romulan ancestors set foot on this place, they would be overwhelmed. To encounter a raptor capable of looking you in the eye and speaking directly to your mind, would be the equivalent of you meeting Kahless. Then imagine it not being just a singular experience, but an entire race of those like him, all with the same abilities?”

“That would be...almost unimaginable,” Br’tah was nearly breathless. “So, you believe... *this is Project Dravek?*”

“I believe now, more than ever, there is a Romulan presence here.” Augustok tapped the table with his fist and his tone was one of fierce determination. “This race of raptors, this place, is the kind of thing that would drive fanatical Romulans to extreme measures. The atmospheric interference, the engineered lifeforms, the selective targeting of humanoids all point toward something well-

orchestrated. These are not events of coincidence. No, this is something being executed by design and no one is more adept at such operations than the Romulans.”

“Forgive me, sir,” Br’tah tried not to be insulting. “You should know.”

“Exactly.” Augustok laughed but his face turned serious. “And this *long ear* is about to smash the game board.”

Dak tapped the panel at Lonetree’s door and it slid open. She looked back from the sofa, happy to see him. “Why are you standing there? Aren’t you coming in?”

“Nope.” He gave a sly grin and motioned with his finger. “You’re coming with me.”

“Oh, am I now?”

“Yep, grab your jacket.” He pointed down the hall. “I’ve got a surprise. You’re gonna love this.”

She sounded giddy, “What kind of surprise?”

“Well, if I tell you, then it isn’t a surprise anymore, now is it?” Dak laughed and waved goodbye. “Silly girl!”

“Okay, okay, I’m coming.” Cat called out as she chased him down the hall.

They stepped into the turbolift and Dak purposely looked at the ceiling, pretending to ignore her. “Main Shuttle Bay.”

“What are you up to?”

He kept staring at the ceiling and joked, “A little over two meters...”

Cat slugged him in the arm and the both laughed. “Seriously, what’s in the shuttle bay?”

Dak rolled his eyes and looked down at her. “You don’t really want me to answer that, do you? Wait...let me think...shuttle craft?”

Folding her arms, Cat turned away, playing like she didn’t care. The lift doors opened and Dak walked out, leaving her behind.

“Hey! Wait!” she shouted, running to catch up.

Dak stopped and raised his hand like a presentation, bowing before her. “Your chariot, my lady.”

Cat froze in her tracks, eyes wide and shocked. “Are we going to war?”

“Sorry, the camo outer hull is standard for Spec Ops.” Dak cracked up laughing. “I honestly didn’t think about that!

No, we aren't flying into combat, or at least I'm not planning on it. The damage control team got one of the two Type-9 attack craft we brought along operational and I thought it would be a great way to see the sunset. Kinda like the speeder ride back home?"

"Okay, NOW I'm excited." She grinned, clapping her hands. "I'm driving!"

"OH NO," Dak shouted but Cat was already sprinting for the hatch. They jumped through the door and pushed elbows at each other, but the scrappy girl made it to the left seat first. Dak flopped into the right seat and started laughing again.

"What's with you?" She giggled as she fastened her harness.

"You can fly this thing from either seat." He shook his head but stopped to gaze at her. She was so beautiful and the look in her eyes made his heart race. "*Raven, Apache One* departing on patrol."

The shuttle sailed out of the bay into the evening sun and already Cat was feeling like a kid on a joy ride. "This thing has some punch!"

“Yes, it does.” Dak checked the nav charts. “Make a loop of the perimeter and then circle farther out until we reach the mountains.”

“Are you telling me how to fly?”

“You wanted the left seat. That made me navigator, so yes, you get to fly the search patrol.”

“Maybe we’ll see a big owl?” She asked, her face glowing at the thought.

“Anything is possible.” Dak turned down the cabin lights.

She looked across at him and tilted her head. “Romantic setting?”

“The sunset looks nicer this way,” he whispered and gently squeezed her elbow.

“Yes, yes it does.” She agreed softly and adjusted their course. Relaxing into the seat, she thought about the days they would drive the speeder out to the Badlands in South Dakota. The wind and the sun made them drunk with carefree pleasure, sitting next to each other with a campfire, eating crummy food and watching the day turn into a canopy of stars. They would lay next to each other, looking up at the sky, knowing they would both be heading there. That thought made the nights bittersweet but it

couldn't take away from how much she loved being there with him.

The time she spent at Crazy Horse University felt so calming. All the worlds she traveled with her parents was an amazing adventure, but there was a quality about being attached to a place, grounded, especially so close to the lands her ancestors called home. Her grandparents still lived in White River, a small town not far from the Badlands and had been there most of their lives. Sure, they had traveled around Earth and even to the Moon, but those were just vacations. White River was home, and they loved their life there.

Her parents always seemed happy and they certainly immersed themselves in their work, but her grandparents were in love. You could see it in the way they looked at each other, the way they still held hands and how content they seemed sitting together on their front porch swing, watching the breeze move the grasslands like waves. For all of her dreams of achievement as a scientist, in her heart, that was what she wanted the most. She wanted it with Dak, but she feared he would never be the one to let his roots dig into home soil and that broke her heart, no matter what he promised. She knew it from the first night they spent in the Badlands and every night they went back, but

every trip back to campus was like a reminder of a dream she always would wake up from.

“I brought dinner.” Dak grinned as he held up two foil pouches. “Do you want the spaghetti or the beef stew?”

“They both taste like straw.” Cat stuck out her tongue. “But I’ll have the spaghetti instead of the mystery meat.”

He ripped open the foil and handed her the spaghetti. “They should call it Italian energy-fake-food-stuff-so-you-won’t-die-bar.”

Cat chewed off a chunk and talked with her mouth full. “Still better than some of the stuff you cooked over a campfire.”

“Oh, c’mon, that’s hurtful.” He gave his best faux surprise. “How can you not like fresh rattlesnake or prairie dog over an open fire? That’s frontier cooking!”

“It was burnt animal flesh.” She almost choked while laughing. “We could’ve chewed on the burnt wood and it would have tasted the same.”

Dak hung his head. “Oh, man that’s low.”

“Don’t be hurt. You’ve never been a chef. You never sat still long enough for anything like that.”

“I sat for the same amount of time as you did...”

Cat paused as her tone turned sad, “We aren’t doing this again...”

“No, we aren’t.” Dak replied and got quiet as he put down his dinner. “Adjust our course out another hundred meters.”

“Roger that,” she sniffed, trying to act professional.

“I told you I love you and I meant it.” Dak broke the tension with soft sincerity. “I meant it then and I mean it now. I always knew Crazy Horse wasn’t going to be where you stayed, no matter how much I wanted it to be, so I found something I could wrap myself up in until you finished your...your...I don’t know what to call it. Education? Dream? Passion? But you were going to do that no matter what. It’s all you talked about, but I loved how you used to talk about all those things you learned and wanted to learn. It was like watching a kid get a new toy. It lit you up and I loved seeing that. Watching you go out and dig in the dirt was like a treasure hunt. I mean, yeah, I thought it was crazy at first, but it took one trip, Cat. Just one trip out there and I couldn’t wait until you asked me to go again. I’ve never seen anyone so full of joy about something. Then one night over the campfire, you looked

at me that way and that was it. I was yours from there on, but somehow I knew I could never hold onto you.”

The tears were streaming down her cheeks. “Will you fly this thing before I crash and kill us both?”

“You bet.” He nodded and turned the craft sharply over the mountain ridge, down the other side until he landed on an out-cropping plateau. “I found this spot the other day. Such a great view.”

Cat wiped her eyes and sighed as she looked at the ocean beyond. “What are you trying to do to me?”

“I’m not sure what you mean.” He took a deep breath and leaned toward her, looking into her eyes. “Trying to convince you I care? That I always have? Trying to make up for...I don’t know. I just want things to feel like that again. I still want to feel like that.”

“Never hold onto me?” She sniffed, but broke down again. “All I ever wanted you to do was hold onto me!”

He reached out for her hand and fought to keep his voice kind. “You know there was no way I could do that *and* you still go to Alpha Centauri ... but that’s all behind us now. Why keep beating each other up over it?”

“Why did you ever try to get close to me anyway?”

Dak fell back in his seat and chuckled. “Do you know what the other guys in class called you? Digger, they called you Digger because they thought you were strange for going off to the wilderness to dig in the dirt instead of going to parties or all the other things college kids do to act like fools. Plenty of them thought you were cute, but they also thought you were too weird to bother with. I wanted to know what made you tick. The curiosity was a big turn-on and I spent plenty of time out in the wilderness as a kid. My Dad took me hunting and fishing, taught me how to track and survive. He was always so hard-core about that stuff because it was the way of our people and I should know it. I honestly didn’t like it all that much and I figured if one trip out there with you was like that, my curiosity would be satisfied and I’d move on. But it wasn’t, not even close.”

Cat started to giggle at the comparison. “Well, it’s good to know I was more fun than your Dad.”

Dak was happy to see her laugh but was curious, “Why did you ever ask me to go out there with you?”

Cat sat up quick and burst out, “I didn’t, you asked me!”

“No, no, I asked ‘what were you doing for the weekend?’ and you said you were going to Badlands.”

“Yeah.” Cat pointed an accusing finger. “Then you asked if you could come along!”

“No.” He chuckled, knowing he was needling her. “I asked if you wanted company and you said ‘sure’.”

“That’s the same thing, you goof!” She playfully threw her dinner at him.

Dak caught the spaghetti and it mushed in his hand. He broke down laughing but then his voice struggled with full emotion. “Yes, it does mean the same thing, but I would’ve followed you even if you hadn’t offered. I knew when I looked at those eyes I had to try. I mean, I didn’t have to worry about you shooting me out there, you never carried a weapon!”

Cat threw off her harness and jumped out of the seat on top of Dak. “I could’ve beat you with a shovel!”

He couldn’t resist the joke, “Nah, you can’t swing that high.”

She pinned him to the seat and kissed him as she sat on his lap, squeezing him with all her might. “If you ever leave again...”

“Not gonna happen...”

“Apache One, Apache One, do you copy?” The comm crackled to life. “You’ve been stationary for a while now. Did you find something? Report?”

Cat put her hand over her mouth to keep from laughing as Dak replied, trying to sound as if he were in command. “Apache One copies. Just set down to let Dr. Lonetree examine a rock formation. We’re on the move. Cheveyo out.”

“Who’s flying back if I’m looking at rocks?” she said, still amused at his response.

“Autopilot?”

“That’s okay, I’m flying.” She hopped back to the left seat but looked back at him warmly. “Wanna come along?”

“Always.”

Chapter 7

“Br’tah to Captain.”

“Augustok here. Go ahead.”

“Can you come to the bridge, sir? We have company, so to speak.”

“On my way.” The Captain picked up his tactical belt and hurried out of his quarters. He was hoping this morning’s flight was going to be uneventful, but it sounded as though that notion was history. Once he reached the bridge, Mr. Br’tah was at his tactical station and he pointed toward the viewscreen. Changing the angle to various directions around the ship, image after image showed solid black members of the Khozi positioned in treetops.

“They arrived just before dawn, but have taken no provocative action,” Br’tah reported. “They have positioned themselves relative to each of our sentry posts and when we move, they move.”

“It looks as though the Khozi are either watching us or guarding us.” Augustok changed the viewer several more times. “What do you think?”

“I believe they are doing both,” Br’tah replied as he changed the screen to a tactical overview. “If I were them, I would observe my adversary closely, determine their strength and weakness before I took action.”

“From what we’ve seen, they are more than capable of action.” The Captain nodded to his Security Chief. “But I agree, let’s keep as close a watch on them as they are on us.”

“Aye, Sir.”

“Sentry Four to *Raven*, we have three birds inbound. Repeat, three inbound. Any orders?”

“Hold your post, Sentry Four,” Br’tah ordered. “Take no action unless attacked. Has your mirror Khozi moved?”

“No, Sir, the black eagle is still on post.”

“Let’s have a look, Mr. Br’tah.” Augustok turned his attention back to the viewer as Br’tah switched angles and magnified. “It seems we’re getting the royal treatment.”

“Sir?”

“The lead Khozi is the one Doctor Lonetree referred to as their king. If we’re being called on by royalty, I guess we should go out to meet them.” The Captain dropped his tactical belt on the command chair and tapped his

communicator. “Doctor Lonetree and Lieutenant Morros, this is the Captain. Please join Mr. Br’tah and myself on the hull in front of the bridge module. It appears we have Khozi visitors.”

Both the Doctor and Morros responded straight away and the Captain headed outside to greet their guests. Kuhdari and two of his Kal Ghari guards were circling above the *Raven*. They glided in to land when they saw the humans exit the ship. Once on the hull the two guards jumped to Kuhdari’s side and assumed an angry, defensive posture but Kuhdari spread his wings and chirped in a low, almost growling tone. The guards stood down immediately.

“Can all of you understand me?” Kuhdari thought with restraint, not wanting to overwhelm those before him.

Lonetree and Morros nodded in agreement while Br’tah and the Captain seemed taken aback by the experience. The Captain took a step forward and laced his fingers, breathing deeply trying to focus his mental abilities.

Augustok asked mentally. “Can you understand me?”

“I can indeed,” Kuhdari replied with surprise. “It has always been difficult for the Long Ear to speak with us. They lack calmness of the mind, but you, called Captain, possess much greater skill. I bid you welcome and, as we

say, *takoda*, which means *friend to all*. Are you king to these called human?”

“No, ‘Captain’ is my rank, my name is Galan. The name of my ancestors is Augustok. I only command this vessel but my crew hails from many worlds. I am only one of a different...breed...of what you call, Long Ear. I and my crew come in peace and we thank you for all you have done on our behalf since we arrived. I also bid you, *takoda*. I am honored to meet you. How can we repay your generosity?”

Kuhdari stepped closer and was impressed with this newcomer. “You speak the tongue of diplomacy well, Captain Galan. You are indeed unlike any Long Ear I have encountered. There is a High Chief and his council that desires your presence, as do I. I have come to invite you and your court to join us in Zaltana. There, we can share our thoughts and intentions. If there is anything you could do to repay our generosity, it is there we will discover what that could be. Will you come before us?”

Augustok was honored by the request but suddenly felt inadequate. He shared his concern, “We would gladly do so, but I must ask, who is *my court* that you refer to?”

Kuhdari reared his head in a mix a surprise and amusement. “As Captain you have no court?”

“Forgive any misunderstanding,” Augustok bowed slightly. “I have officers, but others among us have already had contact with those of your kind. I do not wish to contradict your customs.”

The great bird stepped beside the Captain, almost as if he were whispering, leaning his head close as his thoughts became jovial. “You have heart, Captain Galan. Your court is who *you choose* to escort you. If you feel they are the best to represent your tribe and intentions that rests upon you to decide. Zaltana is high in the mountains to the west. We will come with the next sun to guide you there. Can your vessels make that journey? If not, we will gladly carry you as we brought those who were stranded on the sea.”

“Yes, we can make the journey.” Augustok smiled as Dr. Lonetree came forward.

“It is good to see you again,” she said out loud, unable to contain her excitement.

“And you as well, Ghost Walker.” Kuhdari bowed before her, returning the pleasant feeling. “Captain Galan, I humbly ask that Catori and the Spirit Warrior be among those who accompany you to Zaltana?”

“Gladly.” Augustok agreed, then gestured behind him. “Are you able to speak to my friend, Br’tah?”

“Ahh, the fearless one.” Kuhdari stood tall and reached out to the Klingon with pride. “The spirit is strong in this one, like that of my War Chief, Nootau. Can you hear me, warrior?”

Br’tah struggled to speak, looking awestruck. “I...I...can! Only in the Temple of Molgar have I heard such voices.”

“We seek to commune with the voices of our ancestors as well.” Kuhdari nodded, staring into Br’tah’s eyes. “Perhaps together one day we may touch Vichura?”

Br’tah remained spellbound, “Perhaps...”

“King Kuhdari.” Augustok tried to make eye contact to get his attention. “I want you to know how much we appreciate you posting the Khozi guards, but I must ask: are we in danger?”

“The Chuua do not seem to rest and they will come again until your kind are no more,” Kuhdari answered with serious intent.

“We have a vessel.” The Captain pointed toward the *Phoenix* docked behind the bridge. “This ship can cover great distances very quickly and today we planned to take an exploration flight to the north. I wanted to inform you of our actions so it would not be perceived as any kind of threat or unknown intent.”

“I will tell the Kal Ghari to remain here.” Kuhdari looked back at his two guards and they immediately took flight. The King’s thoughts were filled with concern. “Be cautious to the north, Captain Galan. The lands are heavy with Chuaa beyond the forests and the lakes. Few Khozi call the north home. You will be beyond the reach of the Five Nations there.”

“Did the Chuaa attack your kind in the north as they did us?”

“No, Captain Galan,” Khudari could not hide his remorse. “We fought to protect the Pahana that lived there. We helped each other survive the hard winters but the Chuaa were too many.”

Augustok’s curiosity was piqued. “Why do the Chuaa hate our kind so much?”

“The High Chief and his council will tell you our history in the hall of Zaltana. Until then, Captain Galan, I wish you safe journeys. I shall return when the sun looks over the trees.”

“We will be ready, and thank you once again.” Augustok was impressed at how Khudari transitioned from remorse to regal leader with such ease. The mark of a truly disciplined mind.

Kuhdari turned and with two beats of his massive wingspan he was in flight. Appearing to climb skyward almost effortlessly, he joined the Kal Ghari guards, already circling above. They formed up on each wing, climbing over the trees and beyond. Augustok was more curious and concerned about what he would find to the north but that made him all the more eager to depart. With that, he turned to his crew. “We are already past 0800 hours so we’re overdue. Let’s get our gear and get aboard the *Phoenix*. Doctor Lonetree, if you would contact Lieutenant Cheveyo and any other members of the science team that would be helpful.”

“Yes, Captain.”

Lt. Morros approached wearing a concerned look. “Captain, there was a detail I caught in communication from King Kuhdari that could be of interest.”

“What would that be, Lieutenant?”

“Kuhdari said to Lieutenant Commander Br’tah that one day they might contact *Vichura*. Sir, most legends have their basis in fact and the ancient ancestors of both the Vulcans and Romulans might also have been forefathers of the Rigelians. In their language, *Vichura* means something quite similar to what Romulans call Vorta Vor or their gateway to paradise. I’m sure you know about Vorta Vor,

sir, but I thought the similarity was too much to ignore as coincidence. It may mean nothing, but I thought you should know.”

“Well done, Lieutenant.” Augustok was impressed with the diligence of the young officer. “Please continue to report any such information in the future. Even the smallest detail can matter in our current situation.”

“Aye, Sir.”

The crew filed through the exterior hatch into the *Phoenix*, that was named in honor of the *Raven*’s original designation before her refit into a dreadnought. The Captain was pleased to find his helmsman and navigator already warming the ship for take-off. Augustok took his center seat in the bridge area and looked around at the other crew stations spread out in a semi-circle. The other passengers stowed their gear and settled into the two rows of double seats along each side of the fuselage. Rows of viewports overlooked the pylon wings that held the warp nacelles, affording an expansive vista on each side. The deck below housed a galley, conference room and several cabins for extended missions. With a crew of eight and twenty-plus passengers, the *Phoenix* shamed any shuttle craft for luxury, speed and power. Designed to be used in diplomatic exchanges but still armed with powerful phasers

and a torpedo launcher, the Phoenix was a dove with sharp claws that served as a prelude to the ominous *Raven*.

Hopefully, today would be nothing more than a recon flight that would shed greater light on the atmospheric interference, but they had to be prepared. The Captain greeted his flight crew with: “Good morning, Lieutenant Gardner. I’m very glad Doctor November could spare you for today’s flight.”

“She didn’t complain, sir,” Gardner answered with a grin. “But I didn’t ask either.”

“That would explain why,” Augustok confirmed with twinge of satisfaction. “And who do we have at the helm today?”

Golos turned with a puzzled look. “Ensign Ula Golos, reporting as ordered, sir?”

“No.” Augustok held out his hand and dropped a rank pin in her palm. “That would be *Lieutenant* Ula Golos, Lead Helmsman. Welcome aboard the *Phoenix*, Lieutenant.”

Golos beamed as she added the pin to her collar. “Thank you, Captain,” she replied with immense pride. This was a moment she thought was long out of reach. After being grounded at the academy, Ula felt just getting a post on a starship was incredibly fortunate. When the Ex-Oh

informed her of the *Raven* helmsman position, she thought that was it, her luck was all used up. But today, this Captain continued to see something in her and this promotion cemented her resounding loyalty to him.

“You’ve earned it, Lieutenant,” Augustok replied as he returned to his command chair. He followed up with orders he felt sure she would excel in executing. “Today I’m going to ask you to do some low-level terrain flying so we can get a good look around. Can you do that?”

“Damn straight, sir...I mean, aye, sir...I can do that. At your command, Captain.” Golos sat down and covered her mouth in shock at her own babbling.

Gardner was suppressing his laughter as he looked ahead, “Docking latches are free. We are clear to launch.” Then he glanced at Golos and mumbled, “Damn straight, sir?”

“Hush.” Golos snickered as she lifted the *Phoenix* away into a climbing turn to the north.

The landscape changed rapidly as the *Phoenix* leveled off at about 400 meters. The skies were patchy with storm clouds so Golos would vary the altitude to keep a clear view of the ground below. Beyond the mountain range were huge expanses of rolling hills covered in dense forest

cut by a major river. Several lakes also spread out between the hills before giving way to wide open plains.

Lonetree nudged Dak, pointing out the viewport with excitement. "Look at those grass fields! They're huge!"

Dak was amazed as he looked closer. "Are those bison?"

"Much bigger horns, but they do look similar."

Across the aisle, Dr. Alastair grabbed Lt. Cheyton's hand as he took a deep breath and closed his eyes. Cheyton was surprised but she could tell he looked terrified. "Are you afraid of flying, Doctor?"

"Yes, yes, quite my dear," he replied in a shaky voice. "Not my cup of tea, so to speak."

"Not exactly the same as space travel?"

"Yes, love." He let out a deep breath. "Seeing worlds from orbit is quite different from seeing where you may have a crash, you see. But do speak up if you see anything of remarkable interest, yes?"

"Of course, Doctor," Maya replied gently as she clasped his hand in hers.

"I would say I would have a nap but all this swaying about is most unsettling."

“I’m sorry, Doctor.”

“Theo, if you please,” he added an unexpected smile. “I say, I hope you won’t mind if I just keep holding on to you as we go, yes? It’s...uhh, rather relaxing shall we say?”

“That would be fine, Theo.” Cheyton smiled and looked out the viewport, mostly to keep from letting him see the glow on her face. He was becoming more endearing to her for reasons she couldn’t really explain. He was crazily eccentric, but oddly, that was part of his charm.

“Captain!” Lt. Morros spoke up. “About half-kilometer to starboard, it looks like a pyramid structure.”

“Copy that,” Gardner reported. “Surrounded by multiple smaller structures, possibly a village or small city.”

“Let’s have a closer look,” Augustok agreed. “Lt. Golos, give us slow circle of the site.”

“Aye, Captain, descending to 200 meters.”

As the village came into closer view, all aboard were spellbound by the architecture. The central pyramid resembled a mix of Klingon and ancient Earth design with steps and corner towers. Two smaller pyramids flanked the larger structure and possibly a hundred or more various round and rectangular buildings spread out in front. The

entire complex was enclosed by a substantial wall with multiple watch towers, each built with both platforms and perches. It was easy to see this was a habitat designed for both humanoids and Khozi, but now it was deserted.

As the *Phoenix* continued its loop, Lt. Gardner reported, “Movement to the north, large animal life. Sir, I think it’s a pack of reptiles.”

“We won’t risk setting down to look if the Chuaa are in the area,” the Captain remarked. “But let’s take a closer look to confirm the sighting.”

Dr. Struev called out, sounding very put off. “But Captain, we should be safe inside the walls for a short time. This is a find of major significance!”

“I agree, Dr. Struev, but I will not risk our safety until we secure better defensive measures against the Chuaa.”

“Confirmed sighting, Captain,” Gardner scanned his console. “Eight reptiles moving southeast in close proximity.”

“Helm, resume our course north.” Augustok turned aside. “Lt. Fai, are you still tracking the augment signal?”

"I am still unable to pinpoint the source but I have been able to triangulate a smaller area. I'm sure I can isolate it when we get closer."

"Good work, Lieutenant." The Captain was glad to hear Fai was keeping up her efforts. "Transfer the coordinates for that area to navigation. Lt. Golos, point us in that direction."

"Coordinates locked," Gardner confirmed. "That area is reading some severe weather patterns, sir."

"Keep an eye on that, Mr. Gardner." Augustok turned to his passengers. "If everyone could watch for larger concentrations of the Chuaa that would be helpful. We are hoping to find their source."

Struev asked with disdain, "And if we do?"

"That will depend on exactly what we find, Doctor." Augustok leaned on the rail behind his command chair. "One step at a time, shall we?"

Struev shot back, "Since we know they're not indigenous, shouldn't they be destroyed?"

"That would be a logical assumption," Augustok answered, staring intensely. "But until we know what or who we are attacking, any rash action would be foolish."

Struev quietly nodded, then turned back to his viewport. Disappointed as he might be, he knew the Captain was right.

All the while, Dak and Cat were both awestruck with everything they saw. Each passing kilometer seem to reveal another portion of landscape one of them recognized as familiar. The sheer expanse of unspoiled nature pulled at their heartstrings until Cat finally let her thoughts flow out loud. “If it weren’t for those horrible beasts, I could spend the rest of my life here. This place is so beautiful.”

“What did you say?” Dak was taken off guard. “Spend your life here? Is that what you said?”

Cat looked embarrassed. “Did I say that out loud?”

“Uhhh, yeah, you sure did.” He touched her chin and asked softly, “Did you really mean that?”

“I’m not sure.” She hesitated, not knowing what the look on his face meant. “I mean, maybe? I’m just soaking it all in, you know?”

“I know.” Dak smiled as he looked back to the viewport. “I was just thinking the same thing. Maybe we *can* get rid of those things one day.”

The landscape changed to brush and wetlands as they continued north. Sections of rocky islands and plateaus seem to follow erratic patterns and they passed over several more groups of Chuua, all heading south. The clouds were getting dark and heavy ahead and the Captain considered turning back. “How much farther to the coordinates, Mister Gardner?”

“Fifty-seven minutes, present speed, but the weather could be a factor.”

“Lt. Fai, are you any closer to pinpointing the source?”

“Yes, Captain. I’ve narrowed the area to twenty square kilometers. I am also reading several subterranean power sources. Two near to our present position and two farther north.”

“Captain! To port!” Lt. Cheyton shouted. “There’s a lake and reptiles are walking out of it.”

“Walking out of a lake?” Augustok sounded confused. “Helm, hard to port! Let’s have a look. Cheyton, why should walking out of a lake provoke such a response?”

“I told her, Captain,” Alastair chimed in. “These beasts do not appear to possess any amphibious traits, you see. Therefore, why would they be walking out of water over their heads? Not a one is waiting at the shore, as if they

were hydrating themselves. The behavior is quite unusual, especially since not a single creature appears to be wading in? Yes, very odd.”

Lt. Fai followed up quickly. “Captain, I’m reading a large chamber under the rock formation on the north side of the lake. Given the proportions, it’s most likely constructed, not natural, and one of those power sources is very close by – to the west, about 200 meters.”

“Lieutenant Gardner, give me a visual,” Augustok ordered and the navigator activated the viewer that appeared in front of the large forward viewports. With magnification they could clearly see the Chuaa marching single file out of the lake and disappearing into the brush. Two more exited the water as they looked on and Augustok knew Dr. Alastair was right on all counts.

“Mr. Gardner, log coordinates of this location,” the Captain ordered with great concern. “Helm, resume our course north.”

“The weather, sir?” Golos asked calmly. “It could get rough, but I can easily climb above it.”

“Lieutenant, you have control.” Augustok nodded and turned to Fai once again. “Will you be able to track the source through the weather, Lieutenant?”

“I believe so, sir. Not as accurately, but close.”

The Captain leaned forward. “Golos, get us in and out of this area with haste. I think we’ve gathered a good deal of data for one mission.”

“With pleasure, sir,” Golos replied confidently and started to ascend over the storm clouds.

“All hands,” the Captain spoke loudly. “I recommend fastening your restraints.”

Lt. Cheyton took Theo’s hand. “Just close your eyes and breathe deep. We’ll be back to the ship in no time.”

“Jolly good.”

The morning was perfectly clear with hardly a cloud in sight as the *Phoenix* slowly followed King Kuhdari and his flight en route to Zaltana.

“Can’t remember the last time I flew anything this slow,” Golos whispered and Gardner grinned at the remark, nodding in agreement.

The Captain also heard his helmsman and was amused. Kuhdari had shared the location of Zaltana City when he arrived this morning and they easily could have gotten

there quicker, but it was required that they arrive together and be properly presented to the High Chief.

Augustok didn't mind the leisurely pace since his thoughts were preoccupied with the numerous findings from yesterday's recon flight. The natural atmospheric interference prevented most of their readings from being exact, however being in close proximity to each location improved their accuracy. The large power source and signal generation they discovered to the north was definitely not natural by any means. Cleverly hidden inside two mountains, the thick layers of rock made them difficult to detect while providing solid natural protection.

The mysterious underground chamber near the lake and watching the Chuua walk out of the water might not be directly related, but his suspicions were high to say the least. The scientists were enthusiastic about finding the deserted city and it was a discovery of great value, but he was determined not to have a repeat of the previous team's fate. The question that loomed now was how much of this information should he share with the Khozi? Then again, given their extensive telepathic abilities, would it even be possible to shield those findings mentally?

The concept of ordering a group of people not to think about everything they saw the day before was an

impossible task. If they all were Vulcans there might be a slim possibility for success but most humanoids were simply too inquisitive by nature for such mental discipline. The best course of action would be open communication. The Khozi could be able to shed new light on their findings and an opportunity for common ground might be struck.

Comments of surprise and awe whispered across the cabin as Zaltana City came into view. The towers with their Kal Ghari guards on post and the architectural design reminded everyone of the ruins from yesterday but far more elaborate. This was a city alive with activity and as they drew closer, the number of Khozi taking to the sky for a better view was astounding.

“Captain, another collection of buildings in the valley below,” Gardner reported. “Indeterminate life signs. It appears deserted, just like the one we saw yesterday but much larger.”

“Noted, Lieutenant.” The Captain was focused on the view ahead. “Hopefully a great deal of information will be forthcoming.”

The *Phoenix* descended slowly and came to rest in the large courtyard outside the Zaltana Temple. Kuhdari and his flight waited near the doors but the crowd that surrounded the area was unnerving. Hundreds of Khozi

were perched all around and the mental force of their curiosity could be felt by everyone aboard.

Br'tah remained with the *Raven* to oversee security and assume command. Augustok felt that, for today, the smaller the group the better. He stood from the command chair and looked around. "Golos, Gardner and Fai, you will remain aboard the *Phoenix* and do not exit the ship for any reason. If anything happens to go awry, you are ordered to take off and return to the *Raven* without delay. Understood?"

"Aye, Captain," they replied. While each of them was curious about the Temple and the city, they knew the importance of being able to escape quickly if the situation demanded. Golos especially took the order to heart. If the Captain asked to be ready at a moment's notice, that was exactly what she would do.

"Morros, Cheveyo and Doctor Lonetree, you will join me. It will probably be impossible to totally control your thoughts but try to stay focused. We need to follow their protocols, whatever they may be as long as they pose no physical harm to us. But, if you feel yourself being overwhelmed by telepathic intrusion, do not be afraid to speak out. This is a communication limitation I think they will understand."

"I agree, Captain," Lonetree concurred. "Even if you just think to yourself that it's becoming more than you can handle, I believe they will sense your discomfort and act accordingly."

"My head is tingling already." Lt. Morros rubbed his forehead.

"Mine too," Cheveyo added. "The crowd outside is very excited but I think we'll be okay once we're indoors."

"Excited?" Morros asked in disbelief. "Is that what this is?"

"You're Betazoid, correct?" Augustok was surprised and curious. "You've never encountered this emotion before?"

"Never on this scale, sir." Morros composed himself. "I'll be fine, it's a lot to take in."

"Lieutenant, you have a talent for understatement." The Captain joked and activated the exit hatch. They could all feel the intensity growing as they descended the steps, but as soon as the onlookers saw Augustok, the feeling instantly changed. The crowd fell silent and the wave of disdain rushed over them.

"They really don't like you, Captain," Morros whispered.

“There goes your talent again, Lieutenant.” Augustok marched onward toward Kuhdari, and when the King raised his wings, the flow of hostility suddenly dropped like a stage curtain.

Augustok bowed before Kuhdari and focused his thoughts. “Please forgive any unrest I may have caused. You have my deepest apology.”

“Rise, Captain Galan,” Kuhdari responded with understanding. “They all must learn as I did, not to judge you by appearance alone. You are welcome in these halls. Please, all of you, follow me inside to our most honored place.”

Lonetree took Dak’s hand and the group started inside. Kuhdari and Ecoute led the way and the Kal Ghari guards flanked them on both sides. The hallway vaulted above them like a cathedral with ornate statues of Khozi set into alcoves. As they reached the doors, all were stunned to see statues of humanoids on each side, dressed in robes as one held two books and the other a hammer and spike. Not sure which Khozi was speaking to them, they all heard, “The monuments represent the many Pahana that helped build this sacred place.”

The massive arched doors before them swung open and the King and Queen bowed their heads as they entered.

Augustok and his people followed suit and beheld a grand room, filled with rows of heavy wooden half-logs atop stone pedestals, obviously a comfortable place for the Khozi to perch. The front of the room was a half-circle with similar elevated perch logs but on much more ornate stands. The five Khozi sitting there displayed colorful plumage, each different from the other, but the one at center wore a headdress none of the others had.

Kuhdari's voice resounded in their minds with authority. "Hiamovi, High Chief of the Khozi, my Queen and I present a court of the newcomers to the Five Nations. They came from above the sky as was foretold by Kaga and they are led by this one called Captain Galan of the family Augustok. I bid you hear him without malice, for he is unlike any veshjate that has come before him."

"The council bids you takoda, Captain Galan," Hiamovi greeted generously. "Let all among us hear me, for we have nothing to hide. Our King thinks highly of you and it fills us with hope to see a Ghost Walker and a Spirit Warrior among you. We thought never to see their kind again. Tell us, Galan, how did you come to be among us?"

"If you will permit me," Augustok asked humbly. "I will speak aloud in our tongue so my crew will know my words. It is how we communicate and is vital to our kind."

“So it was with the Pahana before you,” Hiamovi nodded. “We shall enjoy hearing your tongue spoken to us.”

Augustok nodded to acknowledge the High Chief and began speaking, “We came to your world as explorers, wishing to learn more about this place, but not to interfere in your way of life. ‘Captain’ is only my title, but my crew come from many places they each call home. They come together of their free will to explore and learn from others like yourselves. However, we encountered an enemy of ours above the sky. An old adversary who shuns the way of peace, a people I used to call family, but I left their ways behind and sought a new life. This enemy damaged our ship and we fell from the sky, unable to return from whence we came. We come in peace and mean you no harm. In fact, to not harm or interfere is our most revered law. Your kind have come to our aid several times since our arrival and for this, we are deeply grateful. If it is possible to repay this debt, we will do what we can. Ask of me, if it is within my power, I will see that it is done.”

“There is no debt, Galan,” Hiamovi answered with great kindness. “Our King told us truly that you speak the language of the learned scholar. There were few among the Pahana with such skill. We fought the Chuaa to aid you just as we did the Pahana, but sadly, we could not prevail. If there is anything you might do for us, allow the Ghost

Walker to come forward. Her heart sings out to us and we yearn to hear her tongue. This, I ask of you.”

Augustok was surprised but bowed slightly. “We would be honored.” He then turned to Lonetree and smiled. “Doctor, your audience awaits.”

Cat squeezed Dak’s hand tightly and looked in his eyes. “I’m shaking in my boots...”

“Be not afraid,” came a new voice, soft and gentle. “I am Ecoute, the Queen. Please, Ghost Walker, come forward and bring the Spirit Warrior with you. He belongs at your side.”

Cat started toward the area between Kuhdari and Ecoute as the Queen tilted her head and blinked her eyes. “Is he your mate?”

“Not officially,” Dak blurted out with a sheepish grin.

“Such are the ways of the heart,” Ecoute blinked slowly. “The heart will lead, and ritual will follow. You belong to her?”

Dak’s heart raced as his emotion answered, “Yes, I belong to her, always.”

“Such joy,” Hiamovi reached out with compassion. “But your heart also carries pain, a deep pain, for your people. Tell us your story, Ghost Walker.”

Suddenly, her fear seemed to drain away, but she held fast to Dak’s hand. Hearing his thoughts through Ecoute was a powerful moment that touched her in a way she never felt before. That moment gave her a comfort that was unreachable before now and she spoke with all her passion. “Centuries ago, my ancestors were beaten, killed and driven from the lands they called home. We were forced onto small reservations no one else wanted but they tried to make a new life there. My people, our people,” she looked longingly at Dak. “They suffered many generations before they flowered once again, but our heritage still begs to be remembered. I have devoted my life to finding the lost voices of other people like mine, that I might make their history known and remembered. Since we came here, I have found the bones of your ancestors and of those you called Pahana. I have seen the ruins of the cities you shared and with all my heart, I want to know what happened. I can hear it in your thoughts, how badly you miss them, how you weep for them, how you see them in us and the pain you feel that you were not able to stop the Chuaa from killing them. Great Hiamovi, my name is Catori Lonetree. In my native tongue it means, Ghost Walker. I ask

sincerely, how do you know this? What happened to the Pahana and is there any way we can help? Please, High Chief, I ask of you, tell us their story that their memory might live on in us.”

The room fell silent as Cat looked down and Kuhdari and Ecoute both let tears drop on the floor. The heads of all the council were low and the deep cooing sounds floated across the room. Hiamovi raised his head and the sadness resonated in his thoughts. “The Pahana fell from the sky as you did, generations ago.”

Another new voice reached out and could be heard with great longing. “I am Dyami, once War Chief of the Khozi, Clan Chief of the Gazole and now First Counselor to the High Chief. The Pahana were also from many places among the stars but together, they freed themselves from the bondage of slavery. Only the hand of the Great Spirit brought them here to us. They cared not where their vessel took them as long as it was to freedom. Like you, they did not possess the ability to speak with their thoughts, but they learned. They taught us many skills and we found harmony together. Generations passed and we grew dependent on one another but did so happily. As their numbers grew, so did their cities and, as always happens, there was unrest. Wartime was rare because the elders taught the plight of those who came before them and peace

was restored. This was the path of growth and prosperity until the Long Ear came.”

Augustok and his crew could feel a sudden shift of emotion coming from all the Khozi. The same sense of disdain they felt outside when the Captain stepped off the ship. Here in the Temple, the pain and resentment went much deeper as Dyami continued.

“No Pahana ever admitted they were the key holders of their slavery but their hearts told us it was true. By that time, all of the first generation had passed beyond Vichura and many of the younger were beguiled by their words. But they could not hide their hearts from the Khozi. They claimed to revere us, to hold us in the eyes of royalty but in their dark souls, they believed they owned us, that we were their birthright, that the very land we called home should rightfully belong to them, as if endowed by the Great Spirit directly. We tried to deal with them peacefully, as we did the Pahana, but in secret they took our young and tortured them, robbed them of their minds and left them to die in the cold of winter. Such atrocities roused us to a level of rage and vengeance as we have never known.”

All of the Raven crew could feel the intense sorrow and pain over such acts and the anger that followed.

Dyami's thoughts became intense. "We unleashed the Gazole in all their might with the order to dispense justice as they saw fit. Any Long Ear that survived were driven away solely on the mercy of our warriors. Many winters did not pass before the Chuaa came. A beast like we had never encountered before – a relentless killer bent to feed on the Pahana. They attacked no other creatures, not even the ones we harvest for food. They became too many for the Gazole to fight alone, so every Khozi was trained to kill the Chuaa on sight and *still* they came, until only Kaga the Chronicler remained. In these halls he was kept safe until he too passed beyond Vichura. No Pahana has read the pages of Kaga for forty-two winters, but they are open to you, Catori Lonetree. We knew you were the Ghost Walker because your heart told us when you met Mochni. Such news could not be silenced and even if you leave us to return beyond the sky, the Prophecy of Kaga will become truth and the Pahana will be ghosts no more."

The entire group was deeply touched by the history Dyami spoke to their minds, but Cat was especially moved. "You would open this book for me?"

"Yes, Ghost Walker," Dyami answered with great emotion. "For only one with your heart and mind could keep their history alive. If there are others beyond the sky that were family to the Pahana, their spirits might live on."

“I would be so honored,” Lonetree responded, her voice full and almost in tears. “I ask all of you, there are many others like me, scholars and scientists that would be thrilled for the opportunity to come here and explore the history of the Khozi and the Pahana. We only wish to learn and better understand your world. If you would allow us to come and see the cities, read their words and record your history, it would mean a great deal to us. It would mean a great deal to *me*. Would you welcome us?”

Hiamovi felt joy at her words but spoke thoughts of caution. “We would be open to visits by more of your kind, as long as they are willing to treat the relics of the Pahana with respect. We must also meet these others you wish to bring, for if any possess the dark hearts of the veshjate, they must leave this place. We have witnessed the extinction of part of us and we will not risk that again. But before any more of your people are invited, this place must be made safe from the Chuaa. We will not suffer more to be slaughtered in this way.”

Hearing this, Lt. Cheveyo was moved to speak out. He knew Captain Augustok might not approve of his taking a lead position, but the compulsion was too strong. “You have called me Spirit Warrior, but in the flesh I am a warrior also. You said the Chuaa came after the Long Ear was driven away. We believe they are not natural and

never belonged on this world. We believe someone brought them here or they are being made here. We could assist you in finding the truth behind these things and help you eradicate the Chuaa.”

Before Augustok could even speak, Kuhdari turned to face him. “Captain Galan, I sense your discomfort with the words of the Spirit Warrior, but do not be troubled. The scholars among the Pahana came to the same conclusion but we were unable to solve the mystery before they were wiped out. We too, believed it to be odd that no nesting grounds have ever been discovered. If you can aid us in solving this, our most devastating plague, you could fulfill a quest the Pahana could never complete. You asked to repay a debt. I say again, there is no debt, but if you could join us in this task, you will have the collective gratitude of the Khozi.”

These thoughts had already been tumbling in Augustok’s head and he suspected this might come about, but he felt open communication was still the best course. If Starfleet disagreed in the end, he would answer those charges in due time. He stepped forward, standing beside Cheveyo. “The Spirit Warrior speaks the truth and while it is our greatest law to not interfere in the natural progress of any society, we do believe an outside force has already done so to you. To rid your world of the Chuaa may be beyond our reach,

but we will learn all we can to solve the mystery. All of the knowledge we gain will be shared with you and if we can bring others to help us, we will do so with your permission.”

“We will know,” came another voice and he blinked his large black eyes and ruffled his blue, gray and black coat of feathers. His thoughts were composed but came with authority. “I am Nohzir, Clan Chief of the Pelda and First Watchman to the High Chief. Many winters have passed as I have searched the lands to the north. The melting of the snow and the life-giving rains have revealed clues to the Chuaa. I have slain them by the lakes and rivers but still they come, always from the north, always after the snows melt and the lakes and rivers rise. If you wish to find their home you must act quickly. The days grow shorter and soon winter will come again. When the snows begin to the north, you will not find them.”

“We may have already found the location,” the Captain replied. “But we must investigate further.”

“We watched your flight north,” Nohzir added. “Muraco and Izta, of the White Moon tribe watch the north lands. They know the places you observed. I will tell you where to find them, they know the terrain better than any Khozi.”

“Then we will prepare.” Augustok bowed and added sincerely, “Thank you.”

Dr. Lonetree grabbed the Captain’s arm with urgency. “Sir, I have to see the book! It could answer so many questions.” Cat turned back to Dyami and pleaded, “Would I be allowed to take the book to our ship? There I could scan the pages and return it to you?”

“The words of Kaga must remain in Zaltana, GhostWalker.” Dyami shook his head.

“Yes,” Nohzir added to the denial. “Here it is watched and protected but you are free to see its pages for as long as you wish. I can transport you here and back at any time.”

“Captain.” Lonetree was clearly excited. “Let me stay here at least until tomorrow?”

“I’d like to stay too, sir,” Morros joined in. “I might be helpful with the language. If they’ll permit me.”

“If she stays, I stay,” Cheveyo added defiantly.

“That might be a problem, Lieutenant.” Augustok stated with concern. “The Spec Ops Unit needs its commanding officer, especially if we are planning a possible attack on the Chuua.”

“She will be safe here, Spirit Warrior.” Dyami raised himself to full height, offering his counsel, “The Kal Ghari and the Gazole will see to her safety. A War Chief must lead, and your Captain is calling you to duty.”

“Couldn’t have said it better,” Augustok agreed heartily. “Let’s get back to the *Raven*. We have a lot to do.” The Captain turned to the King and High Chief, bowing once again. “We thank you for welcoming us, but we must return to our vessel and prepare to take action on our findings. We thank you for allowing Doctor Lonetree and Lieutenant Morros to stay and learn more about your culture. If we might take our leave?”

“We look forward to our next meeting,” Hiamovi answered happily. “Go with the Great Spirit and help us rain death on the Chuaa.”

Pacing the floor of his Ready Room, Commander N’veid impatiently awaited a communication from the commander of ground operations on Dravek. The *Retaenir* had achieved synchronous polar orbit and a coded message was sent for immediate response. N’veid wrung his hands behind his back with the vision of choking someone. The loss of two Stormbirds may not have mattered to Admiral Areinnye, but it angered him no end. The Stormbird-Kre

was too valuable an asset to throw away over a show of authority. N'veid agreed, Sindari had chosen foolish tactics in the attempt to destroy the *Raven*, but to suffer such damage with a three-to-one advantage was inexcusable.

“Coded message from the surface, my Commander,” the bridge Centurion called.

“Put it thru to me here,” N'veid ordered with a sharp tone. “Gurrhim, report!”

“Yes, Commander,” Gurrhim appeared on the screen. “Your suspicions have been confirmed. The Federation vessel survived the crash landing and its crew have been progressively restoring its systems, using it as a base of operations.”

N'veid slammed his fist on the desk in anger. “Sindari was a whore for glory! Have they effected our operations?”

“Not as such, Commander,” Gurrhim replied confidently.

“Not as such?” N'veid growled at the screen, “Do not play cryptic games with me!”

“I am in command on the surface, N'veid,” Gurrhim hissed back. “I am not your chamber boy!”

“Spout your anger at me all you wish, Gurrhim.” N’veid became very smug. “I will be happy to report every word to Admiral Areinnye.”

Gurrhim appeared shocked. “Where is Brigadier Vaebn?”

“You are so isolated in your little rock mountain,” N’veid toyed with him, enjoying the expression on his face. “Vaebn has been...reassigned...to Remus, for the loss of two Stormbird-Kre warships and the failure to claim victory over the traitor, Augustok. Now, little rock Commander, report your *as such* findings.”

The sound of Areinnye’s name was enough to chill Gurrhim’s tone. Her brutality for failure was well-documented and he swallowed hard before continuing, “The Federation crew has at least two shuttlecraft and one scout ship operational. They have been gathering seawater, I assume for fuel conversion and the scout ship flew a reconnaissance mission to the north region yesterday. They tried to scan several areas, but I doubt they were able to discern any usable data.”

“What about the genetic beasts? Aren’t they conditioned to attack the crew?”

“Yes, N’veid, and they have done so on several occasions, but the Raptors have been coming to their aid.” Gurrhim

sounded frustrated as he pressed for new limits. “Do we still have standing orders not to harm them? We could use low level weapons to incapacitate them.”

“I will do you the favor of forgetting you said that, Gurrhim,” N’veid growled. “I’m sure the Admiral would not be sympathetic with the concept of harming the ancestral raptors of our founding fathers.”

“I only meant...”

“Silence! I know what you meant, varul,” N’veid snapped. “Take whatever measures are required to eliminate the Federation presence. They must not be allowed to contact Starfleet. One of our ships will remain in polar orbit under cloak. If they try to escape, you will notify us immediately so we may neutralize the threat.”

“Yes, Commander!”

His Romulan temper flared as N’veid clenched his fist in front of the screen, “Tell that brilliant little geneticist to increase production by twenty percent. The number of crew on that ship are much less than the offspring of those disloyal slaves. The beasts will overwhelm them soon, then we will have our new home, where we belong. Where we always should have been!”

“Right away, Commander,” Gurrhim put his fist to his chest. “Under the Raptor’s Wing!”

“For the Empire!” N’veid repeated the salute and signed off, knowing full well he would be held responsible for Gurrhim’s incompetency in the end. Yes, they would both suffer Areinnye’s wrath but she would expect him ensure success. N’Veid knew he must prepare to assault the surface. It was the only way to claim victory.

The distressed Commander sat at his station, overseeing the control room of the atmosphere jamming facility. Gurrhim had been at this post for a decade and the stress was wearing him thin. This was not the future he hoped for, and certainly not the command he had envisioned serving the Empire. When he was awarded the post, it seemed an important and grand gesture for the future of the Romulan people. But now, in his heart, he knew it was not the glorious achievement anyone would acknowledge. The Raptors were resistant to change and eliminating the descendants of the slaves who escaped would never make them welcome the Romulans with open arms. Just like every other world the Empire conquered, they would have to take this one by superior resolve and might. The Raptors must be subjugated, and only then would the following

generations understand the benefits the Empire could provide for them.

Unleashing the genetic beasts was a subtle yet effective way to eliminate the refugees from Talvath. That was accomplished long ago and to use the same tactic against the Federation survivors was futile in his view. Nevertheless, he must follow orders, but he knew the young scientist, Rivek, would be difficult to convince. He was often amazed how she advanced this far because loyalty to the Empire was never her strongest quality. Obviously, someone felt her genetic skills were worth the trouble and she had made great strides since her arrival. Again, making such improvements after the initial task was long complete seemed a waste.

Gurrhim breathed a heavy sigh of anticipated frustration and touched the comm. "Control to lab, Rivek, respond."

"Yes, my Commander," came the reply, filled with resentment.

"I have been given orders for you to increase production by twenty percent immediately," Gurrhim announced with authority, hoping to reduce the inevitable debate.

"Twenty percent?" Rivek huffed with disdain. "For what purpose?"

“To eliminate the Federation survivors, Lieutenant. You have your orders.”

“They are impossible orders with no attainable goal. I cannot comply.”

Gurrhim snapped with attempted authority. “Lieutenant, keep your place...”

“Come down here and kill me yourself, Gurrhim,” Rivek growled in rebuttal. “Then you can run this little animal circus yourself!”

“Rivek!” Gurrhim barked. “I will not say it again!”

“Then don’t,” she snapped back. “This isn’t a production line where you can punish slaves or turn up the output knob. This is a growth process and even if I did try to *increase output* as you call it, we wouldn’t see the results for weeks. Not to mention the winter season is coming and every time the landscape freezes, we lose a third of our numbers. So why, in the name of Hnaev, would I do that just to have them killed off in weeks? Isn’t an insane waste of resources frowned upon by our superiors? In the four years since I arrived, I have almost doubled the output of successful, functioning animals that follow programmed instincts and now you want another twenty percent? Go

back to your office and drink, you swine! Either come down here and kill me or close your pig jaws!”

Gurrhim slammed the comm panel with his fist, ending the transmission. As much as Rivek angered him, and she did so with regularity, it frustrated him more that she was exactly right. In truth, N’veid would never know the difference – or Admiral Areinnye – for that matter. As long as the survivors were neutralized, they would be content. The hard truth was that task was virtually impossible on his own. Without troops or aerial attack capability, eliminating the Federation crew without harming the Raptors was a fool’s errand.

But then an idea came to mind, a simple and obvious one, but worth the effort. He took another deep breath and touched the panel again, bracing for the backlash sure to follow. “Control to lab.”

“Rivek here, my Commander,” her was voice dripping in disdain.

“Lieutenant, stand down your revolt for a moment and listen...” Gurrhim tried to begin.

“Why of course, my Commander,” she huffed. “Standing down, as ordered.”

The elder officer held his temper. “Do you not have the ability to direct the animals in the field? Make them gather or choose a course of travel?”

“I cannot direct them,” Rivek sighed with disgust. “I can uplink to the control carrier wave and send a suggestion, a *very* basic suggestion. It is no more than an influence they may or may not act on.”

“I see.” Gurrhim took a calmer tone. “They we should suggest that every available animal we have in the field head toward the crash site of the Federation vessel. Can that be done?”

“I can point them in that direction,” Rivek said, nodding. “But they will not arrive together. Once they’re close, their instinct to destroy humanoid life should take over.”

“Arriving together is not important,” Gurrhim appeared to ponder for a moment. “In fact, it will be better. They will attack in waves and that increases our chances for success. Transmit the suggestion and continue to do so until every animal has reached the crash site.”

“Yes, my Commander.” Rivek signed off, and for once she did so without the snarl that was her trademark.

The main shuttle bay of the *Raven* was a hot spot of activity. With the two personnel shuttles converted to water tankers, the off-loading and prep for the next flight was ongoing. The Spec Ops team were working hand-in-hand with Damage Control to get the second Type-9 attack shuttle flight ready as other crew scavenged parts from the five damaged shuttles for other operations. Captain Augustok felt his engineering skills were best served by getting hands-on, keeping his ship up to her new support role. Lt. Cmdr. Riley found the Captain elbows-deep helping to remove a coolant loop from Shuttlecraft Six.

“Glad to see you’re not letting your skills go to waste, sir,” Riley said with a grin, looking over Augustok’s shoulder.

“My Ready Room gets smaller by the day, I think,” the Captain commented but quickly got to his feet. “I’m glad you found me, Mr. Riley. I’ve been thinking...”

“Any sentence that starts that way always spells trouble for me.” Riley shook his head but asked anyway. “What’s on your mind, sir?”

“I saw the report where we turned back another Chuaa attack while we were away?”

“Aye, Captain. The beasties are still on the warpath it would seem.”

“If we only had the power, we could get the *Raven*’s dorsal shield grid up and running. Then we could give everyone a solid perimeter to stay inside of. What do you think?”

“Actually, I’ve already been working on that one, sir.” Riley grinned with amused pride. “I figured it was only a matter of time before someone decided to shoot at us from orbit or wherever, so we salvaged two of the shuttle warp drive reactors and tied them in with the impulse fusion generators. I don’t know how long it will hold up under an attack, but it could sure give those creatures a good jolt.”

Surprised and well pleased, Augustok applauded his Chief Engineer. “Mr. Riley, I don’t know if there will come a day when you cease to amaze me, but I hope it’s no time soon.”

“Now, Captain, I’m afraid I can’t take all the credit.”

“How so?”

“Lieutenant Commander Br’tah can be a bit persuasive when he wants to be.”

“Persuasive?”

“Aye, Captain, he ordered me to do it,” Riley confessed.

“I wasn’t aware Mr. Br’tah had that kind of engineering knowledge?”

“No, sir, he doesn’t.” Riley admitted and offered his best Klingon impression. “He just said, *Riley, get those shields online.*”

“*That* kind of persuasive.” Augustok held back a laugh. “I can almost hear him now.”

“Aye, Captain, but I did alter the settings on one of the shuttle phasers for drilling. The secondary hull made a trench from the lake so we cut through some of the sand and rock to let the water fill it in. We can pull from it for auxiliary cooling for the generators.”

“Set to drilling?” Augustok’s face lit up as he snapped his fingers. “Mr. Riley you are indeed brilliant!”

“For cutting a trench, sir? That’s a bit too easy I might say...”

“No, no, phaser drilling! That’s what we need,” he clenched his fist. “Why didn’t I think of that before now?”

“Captain?” Riley was genuinely puzzled.

“If we set the phasers to drill, we can shoot holes through the Chuua!” The Captain smacked his fist into his palm with verve. “Dr. Alastair said the Khozi were more effective in their attacks because their talons caused internal damage. Their skin dissipates the high energy

phaser burst but a drilling phaser focuses the beam in a tight radius, working from the outside in. Let's set up the phasers on the Type-9 attack craft and get them out for some target practice. Brilliant, Mr. Riley, simply brilliant!"

"Aye, Captain. I'll get right on it."

"One other thing," Augustok added. "The *Phoenix* has a torpedo launcher, correct?"

"Aye, sir. It's a single shot tube. Why?"

"Can you configure a probe to transmit the automated Starfleet distress call? One that we can launch from the *Phoenix*?"

"Aye, I'm sure I can but it'll run out of fuel before it ever gets out of the system."

"I know, but it's one hundred percent more signal than we're sending now."

"Then I best make that my top priority." Riley nodded and started away.

"No, you better get those shields up," Augustok corrected with a grin. "We wouldn't want to disappoint a certain Klingon."

“Aye, sir. I’ll make a list.” Riley laughed and jogged away toward the Spec Ops team.

Chapter 8

Captain's Log,

Three days have passed since we visited the Khozi city of Zaltana and met with their council. Since that time, it feels like the Chuua are coming with greater frequency. Getting the dorsal shields of the Raven back online have been enormously helpful in holding off the attacks, thanks to Mr. Riley and his team. The animals throw themselves against the energy shield with wild abandon. I honestly believe they are programmed to feel no pain. The Kal Ghari guards have been an excellent asset in alerting us to the Chuua advance as well as being potent soldiers. However, their ferocity paled at the highly coordinated, and dare I say, savage attack displayed by the flight of Gazole warriors that appeared the following day. They reminded me of ancient groups of elite foot soldiers from my own history who fought as a single unit. It was a remarkable display of formidable skill. I might also add Mr. Br'tah was very impressed. Also, high commendation to the Spec Ops team, especially the attack shuttle pilots who used the drilling phasers to great effect, displaying outstanding marksmanship in coordination with the Khozi attack

forces. We experienced not a single loss of our crew or Khozi warriors.

Now, I impatiently await the return of Mr. Br'tah from the mission I dispatched him on this morning. Commanding the Phoenix and launching the distress signal probe from orbit, returning to Zaltana to collect Dr. Lonetree and Lt. Morros, then taking Kotori as a passenger and rendezvous with Muraco to the north for more detailed information regarding the sites we scanned on our previous recon mission. I cannot stress enough the enormous value of the aid brought by the Khozi in every aspect since we landed here. I intend to recognize them and their home world as a protected sanctuary to the Federation upon our return.

“Shuttle Bay control to Captain.”

“Augustok here.” He tapped his comm badge as he completed his log entry from the Ready Room.

“Sir, you asked to be notified when the *Phoenix* returned. The ship is inbound and will be docking in two minutes.”

“Thank you and well done.” He tapped the badge again. “Captain to *Phoenix*. Mr. Br'tah, do you copy?”

“Aye, Captain. We are on final approach to dock.”

“Very good, report to the bridge conference room for debriefing as soon as you’re docked and bring Doctor Lonetree as well.”

“Acknowledged. *Phoenix* out.”

The Captain then contacted the rest of the senior staff to join him. If the probe launch was successful, it was time to begin formulating plans for evacuation. But, before that could be implemented, a plan of action needed to be set in motion regarding the Chuaa and who was behind their presence here. He hoped this meeting would bring the information he needed to confirm his suspicions. Every instinct he had said the Romulans were involved and this was the mystical *Project Dravek*. No matter the name, it had to be stopped and the Khozi set free from this invasion of their way of life.

In the conference room, Augustok was surprised to find Dr. Alastair already comfortably seated and sipping on a cup of hot tea.

“Good evening, Doctor.” The Captain greeted casually. “Even though you aren’t on my staff, I do admire punctuality.”

“Oh, Heavens no, sir.” Alastair replied as he gazed out the windows. “Maya was good enough to show me this room

and the positively lovely view of the sunset that shines in. It's rather smashing, wouldn't you say? Oh, and by the way, jolly good chamomile from the food slot here. Good show, old man."

"Maya?" Augustok asked with a raised eyebrow, curious about the more personal attention to his officer.

"Why, yes. Charming thing, isn't she?" Alistair winked and raised his cup to his lips.

"I assume you two have been...working closely together?" Augustok took his seat, trying to contain his amusement.

"Yes, quite." Alastair enjoyed the aroma of the tea and sipped again. "Come to think of it, I suppose you might be the chap to speak to. You see, I do believe the charming girl might wish to, shall we say, be excused from duty, as it were?"

"If Lt. Cheyton wishes to resign her commission in Starfleet, that is a simple matter, but she must choose to do so herself." The Captain was a bit surprised. "Is this something the two of you have discussed?"

"Bloody hell, not at all, dear boy," Alastair said with his charming, British chuckle. "I'm just, how shall we put it? Exploring options ... yes, options. Chaps like myself need to weigh the variables, you understand."

“I’m not sure I do.” Augustok shook his head. “But I’ll be happy to discuss it with Lt. Cheyton if she desires such action.”

“I must say, Captain.” A smile came over the Doctor’s face as he sat up to the table. “You are indeed the most polite Romulan I have ever encountered. Good show, old man. Good show indeed.”

Not sure how to react, Augustok paused, but the senior staff came filing in so the Cheyton discussion would keep. Taking note of each person as they took a seat, the Captain was puzzled at the wide array of expressions. Dr. Lonetree, unsurprisingly, looked filled with excitement, as if about to burst. Lt. Cheveyo sat next to her, a very determined look on his face and of course, Mr. Br’tah. The Klingon officer rarely looked happy, but today he was positively gruff and that did not bode well.

“Let’s start from the top, shall we?” Augustok tried to be upbeat. “Did we launch the probe successfully?”

“The launch was perfect,” Br’tah grumbled. “But there is no probe. Fifteen seconds after launch, one of the Romulan warships we encountered de-cloaked and destroyed the probe. There *is* no distress signal. We were able to quickly dispatch a subspace message but were forced to retreat into

the atmosphere as the warship turned to target the *Phoenix*.”

“Well done, Mr. Br’tah.”

“They have no honor!” The Klingon barked with angry frustration, “They have committed acts of war and the Federation should respond as such!”

“They very well might,” Augustok replied calmly. “If we can ever contact them. Now, obviously you were able to retrieve Doctor Lonetree and Lieutenant Morros, but what about the locations to the north?”

Br’tah attempted to compose himself, “The Khozi called Kotori joined us aboard the *Phoenix*...”

“Which he was amazed at, by the way,” Lonetree interjected quickly. “Flying that high and fast was astounding for him.”

“Yes,” Br’tah agreed and continued. “He guided us to the one called Muraco, a bird covered in white and gray feathers, an excellent natural camouflage. We followed Muraco to the two sites. At each one, he directed us to hidden landing areas and showed us the access points to each location. We saw no activity, but he assured us the Long Ear come and go often at both. Captain, I am sure the Romulans are at work here and they must be stopped!”

"I share your suspicions, Mr. Br'tah," the Captain concurred. "But I'm afraid being attacked in orbit doesn't make for solid implication here on the planet surface. We will need more concrete evidence before we can take further action."

"I think I can help with that," Lonetree jumped in. "The Book of Kaga tells some very interesting stories, Captain. Thanks to Lieutenant Morros, who recognizes many written languages, we were able to translate a great deal."

"Oh, really?" Augustok nodded at Morros in acknowledgment and returned to Lonetree, "Please, go on..."

Cat was almost shaking trying to organize her thoughts, "Morros recognized the writing as a variation on the basic Vulcan-Romulan syllabic structure. The people who were the forefathers of the Pahana were not all one race. They were humanoids, but they all shared one thing in common, they were slaves of the Romulan Empire. We surmised they must also have been generational slaves for them to adopt the language and writing of their oppressors. The revolt took years to organize, but it seems the Romulans move slaves from one world to another as resources. The slaves hijacked one such transport with thousands aboard, but without a skilled navigator they ran until they were

almost out of fuel and landed here. The location seemed good because they said it was hidden. We assume they were referring to the atmospheric interference. Once here, they dismantled the ship and either utilized its parts or scattered the remains to make it difficult to find. The ship departed from Talvath, a world we know to be inside Romulan borders.”

“So, the Romulans must have eventually have been able to track the lost ship here.” The Captain was intrigued and pieces were falling into place.

“I say, that’s a cracking good tale,” Alastair added, looking more awake than ever. “But where do the Khozi fit in?”

“I’m getting to that,” Lonetree said cheerfully. “The Khozi found the slaves and were able to read their thoughts. They observed and determined if they were civilized or not before acting. Granted, there were a few incidents of the humanoids trying to hunt and kill Khozi for food, since there are many cultures where birds are a food source, this wasn’t a surprise. The Khozi were able to learn a great deal from the slaves as they slept, probing their minds and even attempting communication on a dream-state level. Once the humanoids realized they were intelligent beings, their perceptions changed. The Khozi hunted *for* them, helped them gather materials to build shelters, and then homes.

The relationship became dependent, almost symbiotic and it grew from there. Many of the Khozi names and customs have a strange corollary with my Native heritage from Earth. The name *Pahana* in my ancestral language means, *lost brother*, and I think the same intent applies here. That name was given to the slaves by the Khozi and they happily adopted its use. This gave them a sense of common belonging and family they lacked all their lives.”

“I say, that is quite amazing!” Alastair was enthralled and Augustok looked on quietly, letting the two scientists lay out the information.

“Then the Romulans arrived.” Lonetree’s tone turned dark. “Given the language, the reference to Talvath and the description, it *must* be them, Captain. They found some of the ship parts and tried to capture the Pahana, but the Khozi stopped them. The sight of the Khozi left the Romulans awestruck, some even collapsed to their knees and bowed before them as if they were gods. When they discovered their telepathic abilities, it only reinforced that status and the Romulans tried to make the planet their own. They offered the Khozi all manner of tributes, wealth, ritual rights or royalty status, but those things meant nothing to the King and High Chief. The Romulans were seen for the devious beings they are, but that didn’t stop them from trying to take over the Khozi by manipulation.

Just like Dyami told us at the Zaltana Temple, many of the Khozi young went missing, only to be found later, tortured, broken and left for dead. The book speaks of the young being haunted by ghosts until they died. The Khozi were outraged and attacked the Romulans. Catching them in the act of kidnapping, they killed the Long Ear on sight until they were driven away. The Long Ear vowed to return, proclaiming that one day the Khozi would welcome their offer.”

“Haunted by ghosts? What the bloody hell?” Alastair looked puzzled. “Mental probes?”

“That’s my guess,” Lonetree concurred. “The Romulans are well known for their efforts in trying to *condition* the mental pathways of enemies or even their own people. I’m sure the Khozi telepathic ability was something they intended to exploit. They probably have done the same to slaves to make them more responsive to orders and less likely to revolt.”

“That didn’t seem to work here, did it?” Augustok added as he pondered the implications. “They most likely can’t impose it on a large-scale basis. Probably targeting the most rebellious captives in hopes the rest will follow the example. If that isn’t successful, they would simply be

wiped out. The Romulans are well known for their acts of genocide.”

“I say, *any* manner of brain pathway alteration comes at a tremendous cost.” Alastair appeared irritated. “Surely these foolish dolts understand that by now? Every historical experiment, and I do mean every single bloody one of them, have left living, breathing vegetables in their wake for mere fractions of knowledge gained. It’s wasteful futility, I tell you, bloody damned wasteful!”

“And the Chuaa?” Cheveyo asked, already knowing the answer, but Cat needed to say it out loud.

“The Book of Kaga called it many things. The plague of death, the slaughter of the moon but most often it was *Olem Rukaa*, which translated means, ‘*we are the food.*’ It was years after the Long Ear were driven away and it began slowly, with villages to the north were attacked first. The situation grew worse each year until there were so many the Khozi could no longer protect them. When Kaga was hidden away in the Temple, he wrote of the pain and anguish of listening to his people cry out in horror from the valley below. The vacant city we saw was called Helaku, the last and largest Pahana community. It was wiped out in a siege that lasted a week. After that, the Khozi would find

emaciated Chuaa all over the lands, starved to death from lack of food.”

Augustok was stunned. “They wouldn’t eat anything else?”

“Further proof of their rubbish genetics,” Alastair huffed. “Or bloody brilliant, depends on your perspective, I suppose. Downright diabolical, I say!”

“The tactic of a coward,” Br’tah grunted.

“One last thing, Captain,” Lonetree was clearly rattled. “This is a bit spooky, but here goes. Dyami said no one had read the pages for forty-two winters. We also were able to decipher that Kaga stopped writing entries long before his death, but the book ends with a prophecy, *From above the sky, the Gaagii will come and bring the distant family of the Pahana. The Gaagii will bring great power and the ghosts will be no more.* Captain, the distant family of the Pahana could be a huge number of those who were subjugated into slavery by the Romulans, so it doesn’t refer to a singular people. In many cultures, including my own, a *Raven* is considered a messenger, a seer of all things and a harbinger of good news.”

“That’s odd,” Augustok said, taken aback. “In my culture, the black bird is the bringer of death.”

“In the Native Navajo tongue of Earth,” Cheveyo spoke up. “Gaagii means *Raven* and they also view it as the bringer of good fortune.”

“Captain, I think that’s exactly what it means to the Khozi, and exactly what Kaga implied when he wrote the words.” Lonetree was clearly both excited and chilled by the meaning.

“I agree, Captain,” Lt. Morros added. “In the context of the writing and the other translations, it all points to the same thing.”

“Let me get this straight.” Augustok leaned back in his chair and looked around the table. “Are you trying to tell me that this ship crashing and bringing us here is the answer to this prophecy? Are you actually trying to convince me that we are the race of people foretold to come here? With what great power exactly? We can’t get ourselves out of here, or even send a distress signal. How powerful is that?”

“The science does not matter,” Br’tah said proudly.

Again, the Captain was stunned. “I beg your pardon, Mr. Br’tah?”

“What we believe does not matter,” Br’tah stood and spoke with verve. “The prophecy belongs to them, they believe it,

and that is why they have so willingly come to our aid. They have fought at our side with honor, helped us at every turn and we have shown them power and weaponry beyond what they have or know. You told me you stood in their great hall and vowed to do all in your power to fight the Chuaa. We are honor and duty bound to fulfill that oath! If we discover the Romulans are indeed behind the invasion of the Chuaa, then that duty demands an even greater price. The blood of these people cry out from the ground we stand on and their voices demand vengeance!”

“He’s not wrong,” Cheveyo agreed. “We may not have hard evidence...yet. But with the information supplied by the Khozi Watchmen, we won’t have to dig far to find out. I request permission to take the Spec Ops Unit north, enter the two sites in question and neutralize any possible threat.”

“Gentlemen.” Augustok stood also and motioned for everyone to sit. “I admire your zeal, and yes, there is a possible threat. We do need to know what that threat is, but we need to focus on our mission and not a local prophecy written before any of us even joined Starfleet or set foot on this ship. Yes, we agreed to help the Khozi but I will not start an unjustified war without proper cause and evidence. THAT is our duty to Starfleet and it will remain our first priority.”

The room fell silent and the Captain paused for a breath. All eyes were on him and he knew it was time, and his duty as Captain to bring order to chaos. He straightened his uniform, "Lieutenant Cheveyo, you will dispatch half of your unit to the site near the lake where the Chuaa were seen. If you have access, control the power facility first if possible. Make sure one of the T-9 attack craft can give you cover. Mr. Br'tah, you will command the second team to the northernmost site to disable the atmosphere interference signal generator. You will have the other T-9 accompany your team. I will follow both units in the *Phoenix*, taking a relative location to provide support if either team requires assistance. Mr. Riley, you will assume command of the *Raven*. Keep the shields up and all security personnel inside the hull until we return. We will launch at first light. Any questions?"

Riley swiveled his chair. "Shall I try out the new phasers, sir?"

"New phasers? Mr. Riley, you have me at a loss."

"We restored power to the dorsal phaser array, Captain," Riley said with a sly grin. "But that couldn't shoot at anything on the ground, so we salvaged the phasers from the damaged shuttles and mounted them in several

viewport locations above the sensor ring. Should be able to tag some of the beasties from there.”

“Mr. Riley, I do believe I am speechless.” Augustok leaned on the table, but then stared at Br’tah. “Did you *order* him to do this too?”

“No, sir.” Br’tah smirked. “I asked him if it was possible.”

The Captain laughed, “I have never been more relieved to know I am not fighting *against* either of you. Dismissed, and I will see you at 0600 hours.”

The following day, the weather on Norkan IV reminded everyone why its natural atmosphere interfered with operations. Heavy clouds dumped rain and lightning danced as the shuttles launched. As they headed north, the storms persisted and, as Team Two split away toward the signal generator, it wasn’t long before the rain turned to snow.

About 50 kilometers away from the target, Team Two was joined by Muraco and his mate, Izta. The Snowy Pelda appeared unaffected by the weather as they led the crew shuttle to a safe landing area. Attack Two continued to circle the site to provide cover as the team disembarked and headed for the entry tunnel Muraco had shown them.

The snow was not the only unwelcome problem as the Romulans were obviously prepared to repel the attempt. Heavy disruptor fire forced Team Two to take cover anywhere they could. Attack Two tried to hammer the entry tunnel with phaser fire but had to be careful not to collapse the rock face.

Disruptor fire hailed down from behind as a Romulan shuttle de-cloaked and landed, unloading a squad of troopers. As the enemy vessel lifted off, it fired on the crew shuttle but before it could cloak, Attack Two locked on, fired and sent the Romulan craft to the ground in flames.

The enemy squad started to fan out when Muraco and Izta descended, slashing with their talons, sending Romulan body parts flying in a spray of green blood. Muraco slammed the squad leader to the ground, crushing him with a mighty squeeze of his claws. Izta had done the same when a nearby trooper turned quickly and fired, incinerating her in a flashing green blaze. Several troopers froze at the sight while the same one turned and aimed at Muraco. The Khozi Watchman raised to his full height and spread his wings in a defiant display, almost inviting the trooper to fire. But before he could pull the trigger, Muraco hunched, his black eyes rolled back to pure white and he bellowed a screech that echoed off the mountain slopes. The piercing sound continued as Br'tah and the Spec Ops

team covered their ears, but they noticed something horribly different happening to the Romulan troops surrounding Muraco. They screamed and shook, grabbing their head and ears, several pulled their own hair out in chunks while another jammed his disruptor to his temple and shot himself dead. The ones left on the ground twitched and quivered while another managed to produce a blade and slit his own throat.

Br'tah was stunned at the scene as a ringing persisted in his ears but a rush of sorrow hit him like a tidal wave as Muraco collapsed to the ground, the deadly screech reduced to a whimpering series of chirps. The power of Klingon tradition took over and he knelt, howling at the sky, the war cry to tell Sto'Vo'Kor the soul of a warrior was rising. The blood rage surged through him and he stormed into the tunnel with a phaser rifle in one hand and a Klingon blade in the other. The Spec Ops team followed close behind as Br'tah fired and slashed like a Viking Berzeker.

After seeing the Khozi killed, several Romulan guards shot themselves rather than fight. Br'tah didn't understand why, nor did he care. The Team reached the entry door and blasted the security control, bypassed the switch and moved inside. Two sentries were quickly neutralized and Br'tah noticed a single Romulan sealing the door to a

chamber overlooking the rest of the facility. The sound of generators ramping up to high speed told him what was afoot and he barked orders for the Team to evacuate. He slapped his comm badge as he ran. "Attack Two, commence fire on the signal source! Neutralize that transmitter now!"

The sound of explosions rumbled through the tunnel as they ran and the walls shook. The Team wasn't certain if it was from Attack Two hitting the transmitter or the facility behind them starting to self-destruct. The choice didn't matter as they sprinted for daylight and the crew shuttle. Once they reached the landing site, Br'tah looked around but Muraco was nowhere to be seen. Attack Two had finished the job and both the transmitter and generator facility were smoldering piles of rock and rubble.

"Br'tah to Captain," he sat to catch his breath as the shuttle lifted off.

"Go ahead."

"Transmitter and signal generator have been neutralized. Confirmed Romulan facility. We met heavy resistance and a shuttle dropped a squad of troopers so a warbird must be close by. One Khozi casualty, several minor injuries to Team Two." Br'tah paused for a moment. "One other thing: the Khozi Watchmen killed the bulk of the landing

squad with what appeared to be a mental assault. I could feel his rage at the loss of his mate, but evidently the impact at close range was lethal.”

“Roger that.” Augustok sounded distracted. “Proceed south and assist Team One. The *Phoenix* had to return to the *Raven* to help turn back a Chuaa assault. Evidently the weather here was too severe for the Khozi to fly in. We’re on our own.”

“Our shuttle was damaged in the attack and cannot reach top speed,” Br’tah reported. “Should I send Attack Two to assist?”

“Negative, assist Team One. If that is the Chuaa production facility I want it blown off the face of this planet.”

“Aye, Captain.” Br’tah inhaled the deep breath of war and readied himself. “Br’tah to Cheveyo, report.”

“Team One, go ahead.”

“Transmitter and generator targets eliminated. Attacked by Romulan troops. Captain wants that facility destroyed also. We are en route to assist.”

“Then get your ass down here,” Cheveyo shouted at him through the speaker. “We’ve been split and are pinned

down by Romulan fire. Attack One is engaged eliminating airborne enemy.”

Br'tah growled, “Attack Two, get down there! Flank speed!”

Attack Two shot away from the shuttle with a sonic boom and Br'tah hoped they weren't too late.

The skies above the lake were filled with disruptor bolts and pulsing phaser fire. Dak and his squad kept returning fire from the Romulans near the entry cove, but they couldn't risk moving without available cover.

Overhead, two more Romulan ships, another Scorpion attack craft and a small shuttle joined the fray. Attack Two arrived and engaged the Scorpion but the shuttle was descending and Dak knew that meant trouble. His squad retreated toward their own crew shuttle when one of the Scorpions came screaming by, trailing smoke and plunged into the lake. The two Attack craft double-teamed the remaining Scorpion, however he circled around and began to strafe the ground troops. This gave the enemy shuttle cover to land and get their troops off-loaded before getting back into the air. Attack Two broke off and fired on the climbing shuttle but then took a shot from the looping

Scorpion. Attack One got off a direct hit on the Scorpion and it exploded mid-air, but that couldn't save Attack Two as he skidded across the grass then rolled several times near the lake shore.

The Romulan troops were advancing and Dak's squad was sandwiched between them and the entry guards. They needed air support and fast. "Attack One, where are you?"

"Hang on, Lieutenant, I'm coming around," the pilot replied.

"Delay that order, Attack One." Captain Augustok's voice cut in. "Proceed to the power source upstream. *Phoenix* has the ground cover."

The Captain's Yacht roared over the enemy landing site, pummeling the ground with phaser fire. Lt. Golos executed a steep barrel roll turn and opened fire again. The pair of phaser volleys gave Dak and his squad time to advance to the entry cove and neutralize the guards.

Dak sized up the remaining forces. If any were left, they must have retreated inside.

"Attack One reporting, power source is neutralized."

"Well done," Augustok acknowledged. "Cheveyo, proceed inside and we'll continue aerial support."

“Roger that, Captain.” Cheveyo motioned for his squad to move forward. “Squad Two, report.”

“Team Two just arrived and picked us up. Headed to your position.”

“Copy. Get your butts down here on the double. We’re going in.” Dak led his team forward. He noted the cove descended three or four meters below ground level so the squad activated their shoulder floodlights. Once they reached the door it was like a vault and the structure clearly a heavy wall bunker. Something in here was important enough to protect like a bomb shelter.

Dak gave the hand signal to set phaser rifles to kill and gave his tech the go-ahead to bypass the door controls. The tech shook his head that the bypass wasn’t working so the demolition tech set charges and they ran back to the surface to blow the door. Everyone got on the ground and the explosion shook their teeth when it went off. Dak looked at the demo tech in disbelief, but he only shrugged.

“It was a thick door,” he explained as if it were obvious. “I thought I should use the heavy stuff.”

Dak laughed as he brushed himself off, but the humor was short-lived as a Chuaa reptile came storming out of the entry cove closely followed by a second.

Above, in the *Phoenix*, the Captain watched in horror as two of the squad were killed almost immediately. Unable to fire from the *Phoenix* due to the close proximity of the team, Golos maneuvered close to the ground, trying for clean shot. Br'tah and the incoming crew shuttle, along with Attack One, opened fire anyway, aiming high, trying to scare the monsters back, but to no avail.

Team Two poured out of the crew shuttle and laid down a barrage of phaser rifle fire aimed at the Chuaa head and neck. Finally, one fell and the other staggered before a second volley put it on the ground. Med Techs rushed in to help but another beast emerged from the entry cove. This time, Attack One and the *Phoenix* let go a full-bore blast, ripping the creature to pieces, but also collapsing the entry cove in a shower of dirt and rock.

“Attack One, open fire again,” Augustok shouted. “Directly above the previous target. I want that place blown wide open!”

The ground troops dove for cover as the *Phoenix* and Attack One delivered another high intensity barrage of fire until chunks of the stone bunker walls went flying. As the dust settled, the Captain ordered everyone to get clear. The troops fell back to the crew shuttle and Attack One went to high cover as the *Phoenix* launched a torpedo, blasting the

top of the bunker open. Huge slabs of rock splashed into the lake along with pieces of Chuaa bodies. All their suspicions had been confirmed – except where the Chuaa were made. Was that here or delivered to the planet? Augustok intended to find out.

As the *Phoenix* set down, Augustok sounded off on the comm. “Mr. Br’tah and Lt. Cheveyo, bring one squad each and meet me at the blast point. I’m going in.” The Captain turned to his crew. “Golos, keep this ship in the air. I don’t want any surprises while I’m down there. At least not any more than I may already get inside.”

“Aye, sir,” Golos acknowledged and prepared to dust off.

“Phasers hot,” added Gardner.

Augustok watched the *Phoenix* soar away, then turned to see the look on Br’tah’s face was one of war. Exactly what he wanted to see, he thought, as he lifted the phaser rifle and trotted down the gully dug by the phaser blast. The group followed closely behind, eyes wide and ready for another Chuaa beast or Romulan soldier to appear. At the base of the gully, two Chuaa lay slain on top of each other. The one on top ripped open by shrapnel from the blast, the other motionless underneath. They cautiously walked around, poking and prodding as they went, looking for any sign of movement.

Br'tah stayed close to Augustok, breathing heavily like a lion ready to pounce, however the Captain was more fascinated with the array of equipment inside the huge underground space. He'd seen cloning chambers before, but never this large or complex. Another wall was lined with robotic fabricating arrays, looking as though they were reproducing various bone structures by stretching and compacting strands of woven tritanium, but with other materials added. This was the kind of equipment you found in heavy weapons manufacture, not a medical cloning lab.

Each step deeper inside revealed something more bizarre and it was plainly evident the Chuaa had been manufactured for a specific purpose. There was nothing indigenous or environmental about this facility and it certainly wasn't here to help sustain anything they knew of on this planet. The Romulan facility was proof of blatant interference of the Federation Prime Directive and a resounding act of war. Doing this to one of their own worlds would be wrong on any moral or humane level, but to carry this out on a planet in Federation territory was far worse than any incursion. In that instant, Augustok knew he was justified in taking any action against his enemy he saw fit.

The sound of a heavy groan was quickly followed by a roar as the Chuaa lying under the dead body at the entrance was

very much alive. The beast threw off the carcass, pinning two of the troops under the heavy legs. Lt. Cheveyo spun around to open fire but the Chuua used its tail like a whip, smacking him against the wall. Br'tah howled as he and two others opened fire, but not before the reptile sunk its teeth into Cheveyo's leg, ripping it loose at the knee. The troopers fired again as Br'tah took two jumping steps off the beast's tail and landed to straddle its back at the base of the neck. With a raging slash, he sliced through the spine and a second sweep severed the creature's head.

The Med Tech rushed to Cheveyo as the Captain slapped his comm badge. "*Phoenix*, beam Cheveyo and the Med Tech out of here! Get him back to the *Raven*, maximum speed!"

The transporter locked on and the two disappeared as Augustok and Br'tah helped free the two troopers under the reptile's legs. Br'tah got them to their feet and scowled at the Captain. "There is nothing to gain here. We should retreat and reduce this place to dust!"

"I think you may be right, my friend." Augustok looked around before another voice rang out.

"Are you content with yourselves, now? Now that you have destroyed the doorway to Vorta Vor? How odd that a

traitor to the Empire should be the one to destroy his own future!”

The two friends looked to see a young Romulan woman, holding a disruptor at them, a bruise and trickle of green blood on her forehead. “Now that you have wiped out a lifetime’s worth of work, years of planning and the execution of some of the most brilliant genetic work of all time!”

“Who are you?” Augustok demanded, holding his own phaser rifle at the ready. “And who are you to proclaim this as the doorway to Vorta Vor?”

“I am Lieutenant Cha Rivek!” she shouted bitterly. “But my rank couldn’t matter less. I am one of the top genetic scientists in the Empire, in the quadrant, in the known galaxy! What I proved here would change the face of medicine and genetics across every civilized system in our reach! But, NO! YOU had to come destroy it all for your precious Federation! And for what? What do the Mighty Raptors mean to you? How long has this planet sat under your pitiful watching eye while you did NOTHING?”

“And what have you done?” the Captain shot back. “Destroyed a way of life? Tried to make them your slaves? Your figureheads? What gave you the right? What gave you the unrestricted power to cross the Neutral Zone?”

SPEAK NOW FOR YOUR NEXT WORDS MAY BE YOUR LAST!"

"The slaves infected this planet! Soiled the pure with their impotent way of life! Who are the Raptors to be hunting to feed those lazy excuses for flesh? **THIS** is the world our ancestors told us about! **THIS** is the world where **WE** belong! The Romulans are the **ONLY** ones who should be here, communing with the Gods who were beside us before this low existence. We cleansed the filth who came here like a plague. To make this world what it was, to make it what it **MUST** become. How can you deny what you know in your heart to be true? **THIS WORLD** is worth all the wars we have ever fought. Now, even as we speak, the star that lights Romulus prepares to end all life there. **THIS** is the world we were born to inherit, the place that **MUST** be the **NEW Romulus!**"

Augustok clenched his fist. "If all that you say is true, why did the Khozi drive you away? Why did you torture and kill their young? Did **THEY** tell you **THIS** was the doorway to Vorta Vor? Did they recognize you as the Pahana? Did you come to fulfill the Prophecy of Kaga?"

"**FILTH! LIES!**" Rivek raged in tears and gnashing teeth. "There is **NO** Pahana! There is **NO** prophecy! **LIES!** Written by the scourge who came to infect this world, who

left their scars that we will wipe from the face of the land! Dravek will have the glory it deserves! The glory it demands! The glory of its TRUE NAME!”

“Enough!” The Klingon growl came only a micro-second before he fired his phaser rifle and vaporized the Romulan where she stood. The Captain’s head spun around and glared at his First Officer. Br’tah returned the gaze with equal intensity as he shouldered his weapon, “Take whatever action you wish, sir, but I will hear no more Romulan excuses.”

“Take the troops back to the shuttle and return to the *Raven*, Mr. Br’tah,” the Captain said sternly.

“Aye, sir.” The Klingon bared his teeth, then picked up the rifle of the wounded trooper and helped him out of the bunker.

Augustok slapped his comm badge. “Attack One, this is the Captain. We are coming out. As soon as everyone is clear, open fire on this facility. I don’t want anything left but a burnt scar on the landscape. Is that clear?”

“Aye, Captain. Attack One copies.”

As the Captain helped another trooper to the surface, he was filled with mixed emotions. Partly, he was angry with Br’tah for killing the Romulan scientist. But why? Maybe

he saw some of himself in her, a feeling he once had of fervent belief before the Empire soured it away with their devious actions. Maybe he wanted the satisfaction of killing her himself, possibly a retribution against an Empire that he felt wronged him and his family. An Empire that tried to assassinate the woman he loved and even now, sought vengeance upon his very life.

The point was Br'tah was right, there was nothing to be gained and no détente to be reached. Rivek made it clear the goal was the transformation of Norkan IV into Dravek, the fabled world that led to Vorta Vor. The place where the Mighty Raptors dwelled. All that remained was preparing for the inevitable Romulan response. What he did today will most certainly demand a price. A price made even higher by the fact it was he, the infamous traitor, that brought Project Dravek crashing down.

Almost a day had elapsed as the *Retaenir* made its way back to the Neutral Zone undetected and Cmdr. N'veid did not relish his next task. The coded message had been sent to Admiral Areinnye regarding the status of Project Dravek and he knew she would not be pleased. When she appeared on his Ready Room screen, she looked calm but that meant

nothing. N'veid was sure she was capable of killing without even elevating her heart rate.

“Report, Commander,” Areinnye said softly.

“The ground facilities on Norkan IV have been neutralized.”

“You will not refer to that planet by its Federation name. Is that understood?”

“Yes, Admiral.”

“Define neutralized, Commander.”

“I sent reinforcements to both the signal generator and the production lab, but both have been destroyed by the Federation survivors aided by the Khozi.”

Areinnye edged closer to anger. “Do NOT use that vile term either! They are The Raptors, the Valkyries of Vorta Vor! But you, Commander, should become more familiar with the legend of my namesake, Areinnye. The chances of you seeing the center of the element of fire may be closer than you imagine.”

“I beg your mercy, Admiral,” N'veid bowed his head. “However, the Raptors used their telepathic powers to make the majority of my ground troops commit suicide.

Reports said they appeared to go mad and take their own lives. How do we combat such a weapon?"

"Do not beg in any way," Areinnye sneered in disgust. "We will have to eliminate the Federation survivors by aerial attack and orbital bombardment. I see from one of your reports that a Centurion shot and killed a Raptor?"

"Yes, Admiral."

"That soldier shall be put to death."

"He is already dead. He did not survive the ground assault."

Areinnye scowled and her rage was on full display. "Then let his record show he died in disgrace! His family shall be informed of his sin and disobedience!"

"My Admiral," N'veid began cautiously. "Even with the signal generator destroyed, Dravek's atmosphere prevents weapons lock from functioning. As such, orbital bombardment will be incredibly inaccurate."

"Ahh, he has gone from begging to thinking," Areinnye smiled but only appeared slightly more calm. "You will return at once to Dravek, Commander. I will follow soon with reinforcements. You will dispatch your Scorpion fighters for low-level attack, and they can provide you with

more accurate coordinates. I am amazed at the pitiful brain power so many of you so-called Commanders possess. Are there any other elementary questions I can answer for you, Little N'veid?"

"The *Retaenir* only has three Scorpions remaining on board." N'veid wanted to be terse after her comment but held his tongue. "May I replace my missing fighters at T'Met III before returning?"

"Denied, Commander," she snapped immediately. "You will redeem yourself by finishing the mission you were assigned. You will return to Dravek without delay. Your success is required. Is that clear?"

"Understood, Admiral." N'veid saluted. "Success or death."

"Good boy," the Admiral stroked her dagger with her tongue. "I will arrive soon to *reward* you."

Trying to come up with ways to contact Starfleet had filled the Captain's morning and he finally decided he should brainstorm options with Lt. Cmdr. Riley. The Chief Engineer never seemed short on possibilities, so he headed out of the Ready Room only to find Br'tah waiting.

Augustok tilted his head. "Can I help you?"

The Klingon officer stood to attention. "I was about to turn myself in for disciplinary action, sir."

The Captain paused, then asked calmly, "Mr. Br'tah, if I was going to discipline you, wouldn't I have done so in the full day since we got back from our mission?"

"I assumed you were waiting for me to take responsibility, sir."

"Stand at ease." Augustok slapped his friend on the shoulder. "Br'tah, it was an intense moment and I'm fairly certain I would've shot her myself, but I was hoping for more information."

Br'tah looked puzzled. "What more did we need?"

"How about the most effective way to neutralize the remaining Chuaa?"

The Klingon rubbed his forehead back to his blonde hair. "Yes, that would have been helpful, wouldn't it?"

"Yes, it would have." The Captain laughed. "But she was hard to take with her raging hubris, despite what she told us."

“Yes.” Br’tah grinned. “She was, and I must confess part of me enjoyed pulling that trigger. I know that is not becoming of a Starfleet officer.”

“The face of war never brings out our best. Although I’m sure Klingon tradition would argue that point.”

“Yes, it would.” Br’tah laughed. “But this is not a Klingon war.”

“No, but for us, it’s still a war situation.” Augustok headed toward the tactical console. “The Romulans are not going to take what we’ve done lying down. We must be prepared for another attack and making the *Raven* our fortress is our best chance for survival. That task I will place on your ample shoulders, Mr. Br’tah.”

“Aye, sir!”

“If you need me, I’ll be in Sick Bay...” Augustok headed for the turbolift and turned around at the door. “...Being assaulted by the Doctor.”

“As you said,” Br’tah nodded. “It is a war situation.”

Chapter 9

The scene out of the viewport was less than appealing as Dak Cheveyo lounged on the sofa, resting his wounded leg, or what was left of it. Dr. November had assigned him new quarters so he could convalesce after his surgery. The rooms were nice but they were below the sensor ring on the *Raven's* hull. In other words, below ground level where the ship slid to a stop. One viewport reminded him of an ant farm, filled with dirt, roots and the base of sod near the top. He never thought looking at a high school science project could be relaxing but oddly, it made him think of Cat. She had been staunchly by his side as he was taken off the *Phoenix* and brought to Sick Bay. There wasn't much to be done now but rest as Dr. November said it would be several days before his prosthetic was ready. In the meantime, he looked at the dirt and thought how being able to see beneath the ground would be an ability Cat would adore. So much time spent digging, but in truth, those weekends in the Badlands were great fun. He had to admit, it was easy to see how someone could become obsessed with uncovering relics from years gone by. He recalled finding pieces of ancient weapons and the glyphs drawn on walls told stories of war and the hunt. His father always

told stories about their native ancestors, how they lived, how they fought to survive and their passion for the land. Those stories were always much more interesting than the actual skills his father was trying to teach. Sitting around a campfire, learning to apply war paint and dancing the ritual hunt were all fond memories of his childhood. All the times out there with Cat made him feel closer to those things than ever before.

While having a prosthetic leg didn't mean his days with Spec Ops were over, he knew he'd never return to a hundred percent ability. Not like he was before, and that just wasn't good enough to lead troops into harm's way. He wasn't lying when he said he didn't enjoy his job, that he was just good at it. Maybe that wasn't true anymore. Maybe now, it would be easier than ever to stay with Cat, no matter where she went. Almost any archeological site would need protection, security or both? Surely, he could find a place to contribute to her expeditions. Who knows, maybe digging in the dirt might be a welcome pastime.

Cat walked in with a tray of pizza and beer, a broad smile on her face as she set them on the table near the sofa.

Dak laughed. "I do have a food slot in here, you know?"

"I know you do," Cat said with a warm smile. "But this is homemade."

“The beer or the pizza?”

“The pizza, silly boy.”

“Should I be afraid?”

“Yes!” she laughed. “As a matter of fact, you should!”

“Homemade?” Dak had to ask, “Whose home?”

“Here, dumbass.” Cat threw a napkin at him. “I replicated the ingredients and cooked it myself!” She leaned over the table like she was sharing a secret. “I didn’t know this thing had a galley!”

“It’s a starship, not a cargo hauler,” he whispered back, cracking up at her excitement. They both grabbed a slice and relaxed.

“Good?” she asked with her mouth full.

“I’ve had better,” he replied, still chewing.

“Oh, shut up,” she took a heavy swig of beer. “How’s the leg?”

“Which one?”

“You know which one.” Cat shook her fist.

“It’s not there.” Dak pointed at the sofa. “So, yeah, it’s great.”

Cat rolled her eyes and moved past his twisted humor. “I love the view.”

“Yeah, it’s epic. Makes me think of you.”

Cat thumped her beer on the table. “Damn, thanks a lot!”

“I thought you’d like the reference.” Dak looked surprised.

“How’s that exactly?”

“You can see under the ground without digging.” He grinned, pointing at the glass and the edge melted off her face in seconds. She stared at the viewport in a whole new way and immediately went over and hugged him.

“You really do get me, don’t you?”

“More than you know, Cat.”

“So, what’s next for you after this? I mean, does the leg change your mind?”

“Nothing will change my mind about you, Cat. Pretty sure I’ll be leaving Spec Ops. You think there’s an opening for a gimpy security guard with your digging crew?”

"I guarantee it." Cat smiled and kissed him. "Can they make you a drill attachment for that thing? We could put you to work!"

Dak shoved his pizza crust in her mouth as they laughed. "I love you, too!"

As had become the norm, the main shuttle bay was a beehive of activity and that was the place Augustok expected to find Lt. Cmdr. Riley. True to form, he didn't have to look far. He was hard at work on the *Phoenix*.

"Might I trouble you for a moment?" Augustok asked from a distance.

"Why certainly, sir." Riley got to his feet. "As long as you don't mind keeping up."

The Captain tried to keep stride. "I've been exploring options to contact Starfleet. I thought you might have some input?"

"Only one option." Riley answered frankly. "Gotta be from orbit. Nothing makin' it out of this soup."

"I thought after we destroyed the signal generator a boosted message might work?"

“Not a chance, Captain,” Riley disagreed but explained. “Conditions are better for sure, like transporters and scanners within a certain range, but a subspace signal will never make it out of the atmosphere before it’s a garbled mess.” Riley glided his hand along the hull of the *Phoenix*, “Somebody’s gonna have to take this baby to orbit and send a signal from there. That’s the only way its gonna work.”

The Captain shook his head with a discouraged look. “How long after we reach orbit before we’re attacked is the big question?”

Riley opened a panel on the *Phoenix’s* belly and looked inside. “Aye, that’ll be a factor for sure. So, I’ve made some modifications to the engines.”

Now Augustok was bewildered. “Modifications? How will engine modifications help subspace signals?”

“Captain, the problem is time. You need at least thirty seconds of continuous hailing signal to reach any of the nearest Starbases. Impulse power alone won’t cut it if you have to run, so I’ve modified the *Phoenix’s* warp engine to be able to make repeated warp jumps. I don’t know how many it will take before the phase coil overloads but if it only buys us a few minutes, that could make the difference.”

“So, if a warbird appears, we warp jump to the other side of the planet?”

“Or behind a moon, sir. They can’t get a weapons lock with a planetary body in the way.”

“Unless we jump right into the path of a second ship,” the Captain retorted, still not happy with the prospect.

“Then you fire your one torpedo and jump again,” Riley countered. “That’s the best I’ve got, Captain. We recovered the downed Type-9 Attack craft, but it may be another two days before its operational, if at all.”

“I understand,” Augustok nodded. “Well done, Commander Riley. I’m not waiting for the end of this mission for your promotion. You keep giving us fighting chances and that must be recognized.”

“I appreciate that, sir, but we aren’t out of here just yet.”

“No, not yet.” The Captain smiled. “But we’re one step closer.”

The following morning, the skies remained overcast, rain was light and the thunderstorms had passed. Security aboard the *Raven* detected an incoming flight of Khozi and

Augustok asked Dr. Lonetree to join him on the forward hull.

As the flight of three Khozi approached, two were immediately recognized as King Kuhdari and War Chief Nootau of the Gazole. The third was slightly smaller in size, wearing a coat of browns and dark reds with a spotted breast. Once they landed, all three bowed slightly and the words of Kuhdari spoke to their minds.

“We owe you a great debt, Captain Galan.” His rising happiness was undeniable. “Your valiant attack to the north has dealt a great defeat to the Long Ear. With your aircraft and weapons, you were able to accomplish what we never could alone.”

“I share in our King’s joy,” Nootau added. “The Pahana told us of such machines, but they never felt the need to construct ones of their own. They explained how complex they were and now that I have seen them, I understand their amazement and fear at what they can do. In this case, you provided a great show of force and strength. For that, we are grateful. Now that the nest is destroyed, we have launched daily hunts to kill as many Chuaa as we can before the winter comes. If any survive the snow, we will hunt them as well. You have given us the path to victory, and we thank you.”

“I wish I could offer you assurance they will never return,” Augustok spoke with solemn regret. “The Romulans will not react to what I have done by simply going back to their world. I fear they will try to return. As you already know, they believe this place, and you, belong to them as a birthright. As we speak, we are making preparations to contact those who sent us here. If we are successful, I will do all in my power to make sure this place is protected. We will use our resources above the sky to prevent the Romulans from returning. We will fight to protect your way of life.”

“You speak noble words, Captain.” The new member to the Khozi flight stepped forward and she conveyed her happiness as well. “I am Akule, Clan Chief of the Vanga (*Hawks*) We are the largest of the Khozi tribes, what you would call *domestic*? We are the caretakers, the builders, the artisans and they are roles we fill proudly. The Vanga have been led by females for ten generations and I am happy to see females fulfilling roles with your kind as well. I am honored to meet you, Ghost Walker.”

“Thank you.” Lonetree smiled and drew closer to Akule. “I was told Muraco’s mate, Izta, was killed in the fighting. I am so very sorry.”

“We have taken Muraco into our care.” Akule blinked her eyes slowly and her deep sense of caring was evident. “He is in great pain over the loss of Izta, but he will heal among friends. His eldest, Luyu, has taken his place as Chief of the White Moon Tribe. She comes to visit him almost every day. Would you like to visit him as well? I believe some time spent with the Ghost Walker would lift him up. Muraco has always shown the greatest respect and honor to the vacant Pahana villages in the north lands. Meeting the newcomers and helping them meant so much to him. We felt it best that he now resides in Helaku. We keep a health shelter there.”

“Yes, Captain Galan.” Kuhdari bowed again. “In addition to our gratitude, I came to ask if you would entrust the Ghost Walker to our care for a few days. The Kal Ghari will protect her as they do me. Inside the walls of Helaku is a place we guard with our lives. She will be safely returned to you. This, I swear on my oath as King.”

Lonetree was overjoyed at the invitation and child-like as she asked, “Can I please bring some of my friends? There are others like me, scientists, that would be thrilled at the chance to visit Helaku! It’s the reason we came here to begin with. We’ll be happy to observe whatever rules you have there. We only wish to see and learn about you and

the Pahana. Captain, I beg you, please! This is our whole mission!”

Despite circumstances, the Captain couldn't deny the importance of the invitation. This was an overture of immense scale by the Khozi. Even if they were able to contact Starfleet from orbit, rescue operations would still take time. He happily nodded. “I'm sure we can spare a shuttle craft for a day or two.”

“There will be no need, Captain,” Akule replied with a feeling of amusement. “Long ago we fabricated gondolas that we used to transport the Pahana between their cities. The powerful wings of the Rapna Ekara, like those of our King, served us well. The Vanga have prepared the Grand Gondola, only used for celebrations, to bring the Ghost Walker. It will be carried by four of the Rapna Ekara. But wait, where is the Spirit Warrior? We ask that he join us also.”

“Lieutenant Cheveyo was wounded in combat.” Augustok could still see the incident clearly in his mind. “But he is recovering from his injuries.”

Nootau could sense the Captain's thoughts. “He was maimed by the Chuaa. He cannot be healed as they did for me?”

“Doctor November is preparing a new leg for him,” Lonetree answered. “But it’s not ready to be used just yet.”

“Bring him,” Nootau announced proudly. “I will carry him myself!”

“We will provide for him, War Chief.” Akule was clearly amused at the proud display by Nootau but she admired his passion. “Yes, bring the Spirit Warrior. I’m sure Muraco would be lifted by him as well. We thank you deeply, Captain. The Ekara Gondola will come later today.”

Augustok smiled at Lonetree. “I suppose you better give Cheveyo the news.”

“I bid you safe journey, Captain Galan,” Kuhdari said kindly. “I hope your attempt to reach your people is successful. If it is not, you are welcome here.”

The Khozi launched into the sky with their effortless majesty and as he watched them soar away, a new thought occurred. Until that moment, Augustok hadn’t entertained the idea their attempts might fail. If the *Phoenix* was destroyed in orbit by a Romulan ship there would be no way to know if they ever reached Starfleet. Since their mission was classified, it could be weeks or even months before the *Raven* was declared missing. He could only hope the Federation and Starfleet Intelligence would

investigate before then. At least it was a small comfort to know that if he failed, his crew would be in friendly company until someone finally came looking...or the Romulans returned.

The Gondola flight to Helaku was an incredible sight-seeing journey. High above the treetops, the spotted colors of autumn foliage painted the landscape. The majority of vegetation remained green, red and gold with teal blues in some locations. Past the foothills and into the mountains, the view remained lush until they turned into the valley below Zaltana where the last Pahana city of Helaku sprawled out in marbled white and gray stone. The sunlight brushed the colors of the afternoon sky across the white walls and taller buildings, especially the central pyramid-style structure that rose above all else. It was similar in design to the one they saw before, but larger and more ornate. As they descended, Lonetree noticed a Kal Ghari guard on top of the spires at each corner of the base, as well as the watch towers along the city walls. The gondola came to rest in a massive park space that stretched out in front of the pyramid, lined with trees on each side.

King Kuhdari, Ecoute and Akule landed and welcomed their visitors as the King bowed, extending his wing in a

grand sweeping gesture. “We bid you all takoda and invite you to explore the City of the Full Sun, called Helaku. The Pahana would be honored as are we.”

“Greatly,” Akule added. “But come, let me bring you all to the health center. All Khozi will be lifted in spirit to see you, reach out to you and know that you are indeed here as they have heard.”

“That sounds wonderful.” Lonetree happily agreed and asked the group, “Does that sound good for everyone?”

Cat stood next to Dak, who was still a bit wobbly on his temporary leg. Lt. Cheyton and Dr. Alastair happily nodded together. Dr. Struev looked on with Lt. Morros, who both heartily agreed and the group set off across the park toward the north side of the pyramid.

Cat squeezed Dak’s hand. “How’s the leg working?”

“I’m getting’ the hang of it,” he said, still feeling a little gimpy. “I don’t see anyone around this place, but it doesn’t look abandoned. Everything is so well kept.”

“I’m reading a high content of kelbonite in the stonework,” Lt. Cheyton added as she waved her tricorder in a sweep. “That would certainly affect detecting life signs unless we were very close.”

In several areas of the park, the group noticed art sculptures and statues, most notably one at the center of an elaborate fountain. The waters were silent but the stone sculpture depicted a humanoid with one knee on a partially carved stone base, one arm outstretched, the other hand joined with the Khozi claw of the wing. The Khozi stood beside the man, the opposite wing spread wide as they both looked to the sky.

The entire group stopped in their tracks, entranced by the fountain and its beautiful centerpiece as Queen Ecouste stepped onto the fountain rim and pointed toward Zaltana on the mountain top. “This monument is not to any single Khozi or Pahana, it stands as a reminder of all we accomplished together. Helaku, and Zaltana high above, were our two greatest achievements of architecture, building, art and most of all, community and cooperation. These two look to Zaltana not in fear or subjugation, but in the glory and goodness of what we did together. The waters of the fountain have not flowed since Kaga passed to Vichura, nor will they flow again until another Pahana calls this place home. We all hope that day is soon at hand.”

Dr. Struev asked with deep emotion, uncharacteristic of his usual demeanor, “What is the inscription on the base?”

Akule stood next to her Queen who seemed overcome by the question. “It says, *On the strength of wings and arms did we rise together, for there is no darkness or enemy that can defeat the light of sunrise or the power of hope.*”

Cheyton felt a lump in her throat as a moment of silence fell, then Alastair leaned over and whispered, “One of these blokes must have been a Scot. Bloody brilliant, I must say.”

Cheyton elbowed him playfully in the ribs, but Kuhdari began chirping as his wings and chest shook. The rush of emotion over everyone made it clear he was laughing, and the mood lifted.

“I have been told stories of those like you,” Kuhdari looked at Alastair. “That is the joy we miss the most. Your humor is a quality the Khozi lack too often. Come, let us share these gifts.”

Kuhdari proudly led the way into a building adjacent to the pyramid where several Vanga appeared thrilled to see him, even more so when the rest of the group came in. For the members of the science team, the flood of emotion was almost overwhelming, but with being such a high energy mix of surprise and happiness, no one seemed to mind.

Inside was a commons area where the residents gathered for social time and games, but all activity stopped when the King and his group came through the doors. Lonetree and Struev were amazed at how similar things were to health and senior care centers on their own worlds, but here, the furniture was a strange mix of items intended for either humanoid or Khozi use.

The lead Vanga caretaker approached the King and addressed the group. “Welcome! Welcome all!” She chirped with excitement. “Only a few of our elders ever had the chance to meet Kaga. Most have never met a Pahana, so this is an occasion for us all. Please understand, this is the stuff of dreams and legends come to life so some of us may be unable to communicate at first. Some may be overcome, and others may be convinced they are passing to the Great Spirit. Do not be afraid to reach out and initiate the comfort of touch. This is trait we shared happily with your forebears, so please, do so again.”

Akule added, “Down each hall is a wing of residence rooms. Please, feel free to visit those not in the central hall. They may be the ones who need you the most. Muraco resides in the south wing.”

“That’s for me,” Dak replied aloud. “I owe him a debt. He saved my troopers and he should be told how important that is.”

“Show the Spirit Warrior to his nest,” Kuhdari urged kindly and one of the Vanga led the way.

The elder Khozi in the center hall had already gathered, in awe of the people in their midst but the crowd parted like a wave for Cheveyo. He could feel the power of their emotion, as though they were in the presence of a mythical figure. Although he couldn’t understand what it was about him, what they saw that made him this Spirit Warrior, but to them, he was something special. The more he felt it, the more he wished to be worthy of such lofty respect.

Finally, one aged Khozi stood near the hall and looked Dak in the eye. “You are the one Nootau told us about. The one who fought the Chuaa and brought the healer to make his broken wing whole once more?”

“Yes.” Dak bowed slightly. “I was happy to help him.”

The elder hobbled forward, his thoughts filled with longing. “I was once Gazole, as Nootau. I remember when he faced the trials and won his colors. Mine have long faded and my wings cannot lift me far into the skies, but in my heart, I am Gazole! Muraco is a great leader of the White Moon,

an honored Pelda and one I recall being bold and daring in his youth. I ask you, Spirit Warrior, reach out to him as you did Nootau. Bid him come back to us and fly once more. I too, lost a mate to the Long Ear. I was very young as she was, and our time together was barely a season. She was taken before we could be joined.”

The feeling of pain and loss was so heavy, only exceeded by the burning of his heart as he went on. “I raged as he did, but he is too young to reside here with the likes of me. From one old warrior to he who carries the fire, raise him up, boy! Raise him up!”

Dak reached out, took the elder’s wing claw and shared his compassion. “What is your name, warrior?”

“Names matter little these days.” The elder shook his head. “When I was Gazole, I was called Hakan, the Vanga of Fire, First Wing to the Clan Chief and father of five. But that time has passed.”

“Time will never erase those things.” Dak clasped the elder’s claw in both hands and held it tight. “In your heart you are Gazole and always will be. Your colors may have faded, but you are still Hakan. That fire will not burn out. I will reach out to Muraco as you ask. I promise, from one warrior to another.”

The elder stepped close and wrapped his wings around Dak as silence painted the room with full hearts and muted voices.

The exchange between them was too strong not to reach the minds of many others and Ecoute leaned against her mate with great affection. “He IS the Spirit Warrior. It’s all coming true, my love, and we are watching it happen.”

Kuhdari draped his wing over his mate. “Yes, Ecoute, it is happening and we must make sure Captain Galan does not fail. The Long Ear will come again, I know it. We must protect them at any cost. I will not be the King who let the Prophecy of Kaga slip through our grasp.”

“You will not fail, my King,” she cooed. “I won’t let you.”

Across the room, Dr. Lonetree suddenly felt a powerful urge to be at Dak’s side. This was far more than her emotional attachment to him, this was compelling, like a great force calling to her and she moved without another thought. It only took seconds for her to reach him.

“I’m coming with you,” she announced with great caring. “We’ll see Muraco together.”

“Yes, Ghost Walker,” the elder agreed. “You are needed, dare I say, required.”

“Then I guess you better come along,” Dak could feel the urgency of Hakan’s thought and started down the hall with Cat close behind.

Trying to maintain an air of authority in a situation he knew to be desperate, Cmdr. N’veid stood tall behind the desk in his Ready Room. Standing at attention were five pilots he’d called for a briefing. According to his centurion, these were the best pilots on board and he would need all their skill.

N’Veid began to pace as he cast a steely gaze at the pilots and spoke with intense authority, “In the days to come, you all have an opportunity for glory in the service of the Empire and the Tal Shiar. As you know, we downed the Federation vessel, *Raven* in orbit around Dravek but many of its crew obviously survived and have managed to destroy our facilities on the surface. Despite the deactivation of our atmosphere interference generator, natural elements prevent us from scanning for these survivors from orbit. Therefore, the five of you will conduct a grid-by-grid search of the possible crash area until evidence is found. The three Scorpions will then attack while the two scout shuttles return to low orbit to transmit coordinates for the *Retaenir* to bombard the site.

To clarify, you will discard any personal beliefs you may have and remember Dravek is home to the Raptors of Vorta Vor and the Federation presence is an infection to be purged at any cost. Under NO circumstances will you bring harm to a single Raptor during your mission. To do so will warrant immediate execution. Is that clear?" N'Veid paused to make sure his message hit home. Each one nodded silently in agreement.. "That order comes directly from Admiral Areinnye and she speaks with the voice of the Praetor. In fact, she is on her way here to witness your victory herself. To disappoint her could result in the same disciplinary action as harming a Raptor. Fly today as if your lives depend on it, because they do. Yours and mine, now carry out your orders... Under The Raptor's Wing!"

"Yes, my Commander," they answered in unison, placing their fist over their heart in salutation.

"I will give you the hour to attack. Dismissed." N'veid returned the salute. After they left the room, he sunk into his chair, knowing his odds for success were not favorable. The possible crash area was huge and ground forces never got accurate reconnaissance before they were destroyed. If they had gathered better intel it perished with them as both ground commanders activated self-destruct protocols to prevent any technology from falling into enemy hands. If they found the remains of the *Raven* sooner rather than

later, there was still the complication of the Raptors. They had obviously sided with the survivors, so effectively destroying the crew without injuring the indigenous lifeforms would be difficult at best.

N'veid had waited years to become a warbird commander and he felt it a high honor when he was chosen to command the new Stormbird-Kre under the Tal Shiar. Now, facing steep odds and an admiral with a taste for blood, he found himself thinking that flying into the Pi Hydrae star might have been just as effective. Personally, he was of the mind that the Raptors would never welcome them unless they demonstrated superior power. If that meant the sacrifice of a few, so be it. If it was an honor to die for the benefit of the Empire, why didn't that apply to the Raptors? How could they be gods if they bleed and die just like the soldiers? Surely a Raptor god could not be vanquished by mere flesh and blood? All questions that would never be asked with Areinnye's blade at his throat. He considered his position and despite his personal opinions, his portion was duty and the prize of a dead traitor.

The door to Muraco's room was partially open but the shutters on the windows kept the light very low. This

wasn't unusual for the Pelda with their superior night vision. Dak gently pushed the door open to see shelves filled with books on the walls, a table with a wide perch and a generous round bed shaped like a bowl. Soft, furry pelts lay over the edges and rolled on one side was Muraco, silent and motionless. Dak moved around to the place nearest his head as Cat cracked open one shutter for a bit of indirect light. Dak whispered as he stroked the Pelda's crown feathers.

"I can...I can feel...he's dreaming." Dak was spellbound as Cat came closer. "He's dreaming about Izta."

He was about to speak again when he noticed Cat's eyes. In the dim light her pupils should be big, but now they filled the iris, as if she were blind. "Cat, are you okay?"

"Do not fear, Spirit Warrior," Cat replied in a strange tone. "I am with the Ghost Walker and her power is strong. Her love for you is as mine for Muraco. Only she can make this possible. Join hands and touch my mate that I might reach his mind once more before I pass to Vichura."

They did as the voice asked and Muraco rose immediately, his eyes wide as he grasped the hands of both his visitors. The waterfall of emotion crashed in but calmed quickly as they realized they were a connection from Izta to Muraco. It was as though there was a transmission of pure love,

kindness and affection unbound by words. All that made their life together flashed by in mental imagery and the realization that they are only parted for a time. She would come to meet him when that time came and cross Vichura together. But until that day, this pulse of her heart would remain with him, always together and for their children. The presence left as quickly as it came and Cat burst into tears, falling to the floor, her face in her hands. Dak knelt to comfort her and, as she wiped her eyes, she saw a large set of talons on the floor beside her. The odd touch of claws went through her hair like a parent combing a child's locks and a gentle voice reached out.

Muraco was rich in emotion, "You have given me what no one else could, Ghost Walker, or shall I call you Lonetree?"

"Lonetree is fine." Cat smiled through her tears. "That was the most beautiful thing I have ever felt."

"You have a great gift." Muraco leaned closer. "A gift most of us have never known. Now I understand my ancestors and my Izta is forever with me. Thank you." The Pelda stood tall and stretched his wings. "And you, Spirit Warrior, or may I say, Dakota?"

"Anything you like, my friend." Dak replied kindly, lifting Cat to her feet.

"I felt your words to Hakan, even in my sleep." Muraco's large eyes blinked slowly. "They were filled with both comfort and pride. That is not an easy task. Hakan is precious to me, he knew my father and was a role model even though I never wanted to be Gazole. But that makes my crime one of intent and not accident."

Cat was stunned, confused. "I just learned so much about you. What crime?"

"What I did to the Long Ear." Muraco hung his head in shame. "It is forbidden by all Khozi. The death of another mind, another soul, driven by rage, is murder."

"But they killed Izta." Dak could only feel the sorrow of his Khozi friend. "It was war."

"It had never happened before the Long Ear came," Muraco explained with remorse. "When our young were taken and tortured, we felt a pain unknown to the Khozi way. One of the Gazole found his firstborn, barely alive and flew with three others to the closest known camp of the Long Ear. He killed two with his talons but then, flowing with rage, he lashed out in all his fury and anguish. Such rage cannot be controlled. All of the Long Ear perished in seconds but the warriors in his flight died shortly after. We came to call it *Khroda*, the rage of death. If any of your warriors had been closer, they would have perished.

Khroda knows no friend or foe. I have broken my honor as a leader of others by doing so, and for that I cannot return to the White Moon.”

“All warriors have done things they regret.” Dak took his claw once again, recalling all the things he’d done in the name of war. You tell yourself it’s required and wish there were better choices but at the end of the day it’s usually kill or be killed. That never erased the hollow eyes of dead bodies staring back at you or the gasping last breath as an enemy called out to a loved-one they would never see again. Those are memories you don’t want but like it or not, they come with your duty. The only way to survive was to hold fast to each other. He made those thoughts of bonding become foremost in his mind so Muraco would feel it too. Dak gently squeezed his claw and spoke with honor as he looked into those large eyes, “But together we get through them and we heal.”

“You have already healed me, Dakota.” Muraco closed his eyes for a second. “I can look at my children once more without guilt, but my crime prevents me from leading the White Moon anymore. That has now passed to Luyu and she will rise as I did. I will finish my time here or Zaltana if the High Chief allows. I will teach the young and, oh, the things I can share with them now! I have touched Lonetree

and Dakota, the Ghost Walker and Spirit Warrior foretold by Kaga. What more could I ask?"

The great snowy Pelda opened his wings and held Dak and Cat as if they were his own. While in his embrace, he whispered to their hearts. "Here are two that met long ago, yet they searched the stars to find their purpose. Now they have discovered far more than they dared dream and know that they belong. Wherever you travel, however distant, you will always have a home with the Khozi. You are part of us, and we of you. This I know well, for the heart of Izta speaks true."

"I think this should be shared in the center hall." Cat smiled and caressed the beak of the face looking back at her.

"It already has." Muraco nodded. "But let us gather with them. There are so many great stories to be shared and other spirits to be lifted. Luyu will be here soon and she will be thrilled."

"She's not the only one." Cat giggled and as she walked, she couldn't stop staring into Dak's eyes. She knew now, more than ever before that they belonged together and she would do whatever it took to make that happen.

As they entered the center hall, the sight of everyone interacting was incredible. Dr. Struev sat on a perch across from two Khozi, waving his hands and chattering on in a very unscientific fashion. Cat could never recall seeing him so happy. Across the room, Dr. Alastair and Lt. Cheyton sat next to one another, holding hands as two residents and one of the Vanga caretakers appeared quite entertained by the human laughter. Lt. Morros, on the other hand, seemed to be deep in an intellectual exchange over an old book with an Ekara resident. The meeting of minds never looked so complex, even on Vulcan.

Ecoute greeted Muraco and the joyful chatter between them was something Cat and Dak decided to stroll away from, but Ecoute reached out. "Thank you so much, for all of this. Just look around, this place has never known such joy in my lifetime. Please stay and be comfortable, I promise I will tour the entire city with you tomorrow."

"That will be lovely," Cat replied and happily stepped away with Dak, whispering to him as they went. "This place is incredible! I could spend years in this city alone."

"Why are you whispering?" Dak laughed. "They know everything you're saying."

"After what I felt in that room." Cat stopped and stood in front of the man she loved. "I know you felt it too. Then

what Muraco told us...it was like a father's blessing. I want to stay here, Dak. I don't know for how long, but I know I want to stay. Not just for the science, even though that is, well, it's just...wow! But it's more than that and I want you with me. Every day I want you with me. What do you think?"

Dak took her face gently in his hands. "You are amazing, but you don't listen so good sometimes. I told you, but I'll tell you again. I'm with you, Cat, always. I do mean always, here or wherever else. I'm never letting you go. So, I guess that means, yes, I'll stay with you."

He sealed his promise with a kiss...and the entire center hall erupted in applause, chirps of joy and a great flapping of wings.

"Captain, I must protest!" Br'tah barked loud enough to be heard all over the main shuttle bay. "I should command the mission!"

"A little louder, Commander. I don't think they heard you up north." Augustok motioned to keep the volume down, trying to calm his First Officer. "I admire your loyalty but if the *Phoenix* is attacked by a warbird we may not make it back."

“Exactly why I should go!” The Klingon grumbled in a lower baritone. “At the very least, I should be the tactical officer on board. My battle skills could be critical!”

“My friend.” The Captain stepped closer and put a placating hand on the shoulder of his comrade. “This mission is my responsibility. It was my choice of action that put us down here. I have to be the one to get us out. Reaching Starfleet is the highest priority, even if we don’t make it back. Do that, and we save the rest of the crew. In the event we don’t return, I want the peace of mind knowing they will be under the command of a worthy officer, not a Lieutenant thrust into circumstance. Mr. Riley is a superior engineer and a tremendous asset, but he should be your resource. Having you onboard at tactical would be an advantage but we can’t afford to risk us both. Besides, you told me Lieutenant Akedis was the best you had.”

“He is very, very good,” Br’tah unhappily agreed. “But I do not wish to be the one who is debriefed by Starfleet on the loss of a ship.”

Augustok knew that was Br’tah’s way of saying good luck and come home safe. Watching his First Officer walk away, the blonde, braided ponytail down his back, the Captain briefly thought it could be the last time they spoke.

From the time he first set foot onboard the *Raven*, the half-human, half Klingon had been one of the few whose respect he valued.

Reflecting on his short time with Starfleet, Augustok knew many still held him in contempt for being a Romulan defector. That was a rare thing, so suspicion always surrounded him. On the holodeck, in the heat of combat training, was where he and Br'tah found common ground. Those sessions never failed to be intense, but it was a relationship that changed from a test, to respected officers, to crewmates, and eventually, to trusted friends. Both found parallels in their lives of half-cultures, always torn between the loyalties to different parents. Loving them both and wishing to honor their ancestry but always hitting obstacles because of their past. Always being viewed as not pure-blood, not worthy or simply not good enough. Augustok looked at his uniform and realized, this was the only place he'd ever been where his mixed heritage didn't matter. Being a Romulan had caused issues at first, and possibly still did for some, but he'd risen to command a starship and that made his mission all the more vital. For those like himself and Br'tah, for the Khozi and this world, he must not fail, even if it cost his life.

He strode up the ramp into the *Phoenix* to see his crew making preparations. It was an immediate shot of

confidence to see Lt. Golos at the helm. He considered replacing Lt. Gardner for this mission, given his many other skills, but he had clearly volunteered. It seemed to the Captain that Gardner and Golos had become a team, and that was never a bad thing. Lt. Fai manned the science station and if anyone could detect an enemy ship it was her. She also controlled communications; a job she assured her Captain she was more than capable of doing. Augustok had already learned not to doubt those skills and agreed to her suggestion.

Finally, at tactical was Br'tah's recommended choice, Lt. Fadil Akedis. A regal black man from Egypt on Earth who must have taken hairstyle lessons from his Klingon commanding officer. The long braids were gathered neatly at the neck and his goatee beard gave him the look of kings. Looks aside, Akedis was one of the few to graduate from the Zakdorn War College, a school of unmatched achievement in mathematical and tactical skills. No small feat for a human to be sure.

Standing beside his command chair, the Captain addressed his crew. "I'd like to personally thank each of you for volunteering for this mission. We all know what's at stake so there's no need to belabor that point. Suffice it to say, I have the utmost confidence in each of you. Even though I haven't had the privilege of having you on the bridge,

Lieutenant Akedis, you come with the highest recommendation.”

“I am honored,” Akedis said confidently with a nod. “I will provide you with the best options, sir.”

Augustok flashed a wry smile. “Do I detect a bit of Zakdorn modesty, Lieutenant?”

“Possibly, sir,” Akedis let a corner of his mouth curl upward. “The Zakdorn *do* teach confidence.”

“I would imagine.” The Captain nodded in agreement. “Let’s all be clear. Our first priority is to contact Starfleet. Defending ourselves or our crewmates below must come second, no matter how difficult that may be. But, for us to have any chance at rescue, we must succeed.”

Everyone exchanged glances of determination as Augustok took his seat. “For the *Raven*.”

“Aye, Captain,” they replied. “For the *Raven*.”

“Lieutenant Golos.” The Captain fastened his restraint. “Put us in orbit.”

“Hell yeah!” She mumbled as she released the docking clamps and lifted off before making a steep climbing turn away from the mothership. “Making for polar orbit, sir.”

Augustok was pinned in his seat as the *Phoenix* shot above the clouds. "Lieutenant Fai, let's keep a sharp eye for any possible company."

"Aye, sir," Fai replied. "I have a reading, possibly a small craft at extreme range entering the upper atmosphere."

The Captain grumbled, "Already?"

"Three others," Fai added. "The appear to be spreading into a search pattern."

"Romulans, looking for the *Raven*," Akedis commented. "Who else would it be?"

Hoping for a rescue team, Gardner asked, "Could they be Starfleet shuttles?"

"Confirmed," Fai reported. "Two Romulan scout shuttles and three Scorpion attack craft."

"If we can see them, they can see us," Akedis noted.

"Exactly," Augustok agreed. "Gardner, put the planet between us and them."

"Roger that," the navigator pointed and Golos hit the controls for warp jump. If the enemy craft got a reading at all, it was gone now.

“Low orbit, sir,” Golos nodded to her navigator for the next jump coordinates.

“Commencing Starfleet distress call,” Fai knew this was the critical moment. The probe they launched before was quickly destroyed and the subspace transmission would lead an enemy directly to them.

“Make sure to include confirmed Romulan presence, Lieutenant,” Augustok knew the same thing, he only hoped the time window would’ve been more generous.

“Commander,” the Romulan navigator shouted. “A scout ship from the Federation vessel is transmitting a distress call!”

N’Veid snapped to attention in his chair and barked his orders, “Intercept that craft, Now! Recall one of the scout shuttles from the search and give them coordinates. I want that ship captured immediately!”

The Commander clenched his fist and knew this was his time to seize the prize. If Augustok was on board it would be the chance for victory. The kind of victory that would please Areinnye and raise him up in her eyes. There was also the taste of glory for being the Commander that

brought the traitor to justice. It was time for the Stormbird to sink its talons into a treasonous rodent.

On the surface, one of the posts called in. “Sentry Four to *Raven*, something has spooked the Khozi guards. They’re all screeching and flying in a circle around the perimeter.”

Br’tah didn’t hesitate to respond. “All hands, inside the ship at once! Battle stations! Repeat, battle stations! Shields to maximum!”

Heading immediately to the bridge, Br’tah activated the viewscreen and tactical displays. The officer on watch reported they had just been overflowed by a Romulan scout shuttle. The Klingon knew that meant trouble for his Captain but for now, the defense of the *Raven* must come first.

“Any reply from Starfleet?” Augustok gripped the arm of his chair in concern.

“None yet, sir,” Fai answered. “But I believe a cloaked vessel is moving out of the north polar region.”

“Golos, for now I leave direction in your hands,” the Captain ordered. The helmsman got the thumbs up from her navigator and seconds later they were under the Norkan IV south pole.

Rubbing his fingers with frustration, Augustok asked, “Mr. Gardner, how many more jumps do you estimate we can use?”

“Unknown, sir,” the navigator scanned his console. “All readings still show normal...for now.”

“Romulan scout is firing,” the tactical officer shouted. “And a Scorpion fighter is inbound.”

“All phasers, fire on those ships at will,” Br’tah commanded. “Mr. Riley, can we get additional power for defense systems?”

“Sorry, Commander,” Riley answered. “Without the main warp core this is the best we’ve got.”

The Klingon warrior knew that without full power, the ship’s phasers would need several direct hits to down a Scorpion. The shields and ablative armor would buy them time but, in the end, the fighters could wear them down. Then they would be helpless targets.

“Two more Scorpions,” the tactical officer added.

Unable to recoil away or move to change the angle of impact, the *Raven* shook like an earthquake with each blast. Despite the shields still holding, it was only a matter of time. Br'tah clenched his fists in anger and frustration. Today might be a good day to die, but not like this, not sitting still for Romulan target practice. But what were the options? The shuttles couldn't evacuate the crew and if they tried they'd be picked off in flight. The single Type-9 left wouldn't stand a chance alone and if they attempted to escape the ship on foot, they would be endangered by the remaining Chuaa and still vulnerable to the Romulan air attack.

The only choice seemed clear. There were still functioning escape pods all around the saucer section. The Romulans couldn't possibly shoot them all down at once, especially from so many directions. Once on the ground, they could defend themselves against the Chuaa and the Khozi would help.

Br'tah slapped the comm panel. “Riley! Will self-destruct still work without the warp core?”

“Maybe not as effective, but yes, sir,” Riley sounded distressed, knowing what came next.

“Lieutenant Fai, give me some good news,” Augustok asked under tension. “Have you raised Starfleet?”

“No reply yet, sir,” Fai answered, then hesitated. “Romulan warship has decloaked and headed toward us.”

“I said good news, Lieutenant,” Augustok tried the small joke to relieve the angst. “Golos, you know what to do.”

The helmsman nodded and the *Phoenix* jumped again, this time behind the second moon of Norkan IV. “It’ll take a bit to find us here, sir...I think.”

“Captain, I have a plan,” Akedis spoke up. “But it does involve preemptive action.”

Augustok spun around in his chair. “Explain.”

“We’re carrying one high-yield quantum torpedo,” Akedis began. “Before the phase coil overloads, we should use the warp jump capability for tactical advantage.”

“I’m listening.” The Captain sounded anxious but attentive. Time was running out.

“Romulan shields cannot stop a quantum torpedo at close range,” Akedis continued. “Especially near the main impulse exhaust ports.”

“At that close range, we’ll be destroyed as well,” Augustok noted.

“Not if we aren’t there after we fire,” Akedis raised an eyebrow with an almost Vulcan smirk.

“Lieutenant Fai,” Augustok grinned. “Find that warbird.”

“Forward phaser room to bridge,” the comm rang out. “Cease fire on all weapons, repeat, cease fire on all weapons!”

“WHAT? WHY?” Br’tah shouted. “These are Romulans!”

“No, sir,” the phaser room answered. “It’s the Khozi!”

Switching to the main screen, Br’tah was speechless at what he saw. Yes, it was the Khozi, but was it all of them? With each wave they followed the pattern of the Kal Ghari guards. First it was more Kal Ghari, then wave after wave of the Pelda Watchmen, then the Ekara and with the precision of a flight demonstration team, the Gazole brought systematic design to everything. They formed layer upon layer of counter-rotating circles, each interlocking until the entire hull of the *Raven* was covered by a living, moving Khozi umbrella.

Completely blocked from above, the Scorpions tried to hover low over the lake, aiming for a low-angle shot under the blanket of Khozi. But as soon as they hovered, the Vanga and Falza swarmed over them like raging hornets, furiously pounding away with their claws and beaks until the disoriented pilots either mistakenly dove into the lake or veered off into the trees. The scout shuttles ran and the host of Khozi slowly settled by groups on the hull and surrounding grass. Risking that the Long Ear would not willfully harm them, they made themselves a living shield and now they stood proudly, vigilant against anything that might bring harm to the Gaagii and the souls she brought to their home.

Br'tah exited the hatch onto the hull where Nootau stood waiting. The Klingon looked into the Khozi warriors' eyes. "I thought today, I would see Sto'Vo'Kor but instead I have witnessed the true heart of a warrior!"

"Our numbers are great, and you are but one," Nootau said, leaning close. "But this heart I see before me is mighty indeed. It has been proclaimed by the King and the High Chief, this vessel on which we stand is the Gaagii as foretold in the Prophecy of Kaga. You and those with you are the family of Pahana. You are forever welcome here. If you stay or if you go is yours to choose, but while you are here, we will defend and protect you and this place with

our last drop of blood. So it has been written in the book of Kaga, so shall it be done.”

Not since his rite of passage as a Klingon warrior had Br'tah been so moved by such honor, devotion and courage. It was as he told Augustok once before, it mattered not if they believed in the Khozi prophecy. Now, it was written and proclaimed that they were the fulfilment of that prophecy. Surely this would be reason enough for the Federation to proclaim this world as a protected sanctuary. While he had no desire to live here, it was a place where he wished to return. This was an experience like few others he had ever known.

As other crew members came out of the ship to see the miracle that saved them, Br'tah looked to the sky, wondering what awaited his Captain, and his friend.

“Where did they go? Find them! N'Veid growled at his bridge crew.

“They went to warp, sir,” the navigator replied. “I have them again. They are behind the Dravek moon.”

“Send the shuttle to chase them out, then we will finish this,” N'Veid ordered as he edged forward in his seat. The anticipation was growing intense and he could hardly wait

to call for the conquering blow. No scout vessel would stand a chance against the Stormbird-Kre but taking them alive might be more of a challenge. But no matter, Augustok's burned body would still suffice.

The crew of the *Phoenix* waited impatiently as the plan proposed by Akedis was about to take place. With no response from Starfleet Command, the decision was made to execute the double warp jump and torpedo shot. With the Norkan moon approaching its perigee and the Romulan ship moving past them, the time was ripe to carry out the maneuver. The calculation for the jump behind the warbird would be critical. Too close and they might impact the shields, too far away and the closing speed might give the Romulans time to shoot before the torpedo launch. Where they jumped after didn't matter as long as it was far enough away not to be taken out by the blast.

"They are moving past the moon, sir," Lt. Fai reported. "I'm certain this is one of the same warships the *Raven* fought."

"Let's get ready to move," Augustok ordered. "Golos..."

"NO, wait," Fai shouted. "A scout shuttle is approaching the ship."

“We’ll have to wait until its aboard,” Akedis advised. “We can’t risk having it right in our path.”

“The shuttle is changing course.” Fai paused. “It’s coming after us. We’ve been detected.”

“Get us out of here!” Augustok pointed at Golos and the *Phoenix* jumped away, back to the northern pole region.

Lt. Gardner looked back to report. “The phase coil readout has moved to yellow. Maybe we should go after the shuttle and then try the jump maneuver?”

The Captain grunted. “Still no response from Starfleet?”

“No, Captain,” Fai explained reluctantly. “Every time we warp jump, the signal is interrupted. That might be why we haven’t got a response?”

“The *Phoenix* does have superior firepower and maneuverability,” Akedis added his opinion. “I agree with Lieutenant Gardner. Pursue and destroy the shuttle while it’s headed away from the mothership. We will eliminate that variable.”

“And light the war fire.” Augustok hated the idea but knew it was the best option. There was no guarantee their torpedo shot would disable the Stormbird and one less ship shooting at them was certainly better. “Lieutenant Akedis,

let's see how much of a sharpshooter you are. Link your tactical coordinates with the helm and take out that shuttle."

Golos acknowledged Akedis and nodded to her navigator before pulling sharply out of the polar orbit. Diving in the opposite direction from the Stormbird, she used the planet as a shield before arcing away toward the moon. Closing the distance at full impulse, she took a clockwise course around the natural satellite, chasing the path the scout shuttle took. If she gambled right, they should catch the shuttle exiting moon orbit. On visual contact, the shuttle was already climbing over the moon polar area and Golos turned hard to circumvent their position. The scout pilot was aware he was being chased and altered course again, turning sharply away from the orbital path. For Lt. Golos, this was an elementary ploy and she barrel-rolled the *Phoenix*, bringing their weapons to bear from an inverted position. Akedis fired without hesitation, scoring a direct hit and the scout pinwheeled toward the moon surface. But the Romulan regained control and tried to escape. Golos wasn't having it as Gardner chuckled, knowing what was coming next. Continuing in the inverted attitude, the bold helmsman plunged toward the surface, letting the moon's gravity dramatically increase their speed.

“Kill them, not us,” the Captain asked calmly, knowing Golos was in her element.

The *Phoenix* closed the distance rapidly as the viewport looked oddly like the moon was about to land on their heads. As the scout turned once more the Orion helmsman whispered with dark satisfaction, “Now I’ve got you.”

Rolling in the same direction as the scout turn, Golos gave Akedis a broadside target, which he hammered with multiple shots. The Romulan craft broke into pieces as its engines exploded.

“Commander, the shuttle has been destroyed,” the navigator reported. Knowing the reaction that was coming, he quickly plotted an intercept course for the moon.

N’Veid slammed his fist on the command chair, “Get that ship...NOW!” His rage was boiling, especially since they had just been signaled that Admiral Areinnye’s Stormbird was inbound to the system. This was a moment of truth for his future and maybe his life. Glory has its price and it was time for the traitor to pay.

The Captain drew a deep breath. "Outstanding! Heart stopping, but outstanding. Do we need to bother with the warp jump with you two here?"

"Yes, we do," Akedis replied without delay. "The Stormbird weapons range is much greater and far more powerful."

"I was paying you a compliment, Lieutenant," Augustok returned the look Akedis gave him earlier. "A bit of humor now and again can be tactical as well? Lieutenant Fai, report?"

"I had a possible signal for a moment, but we lost it when we jumped to the polar area. Trying again, Captain."

"Very well, Lieutenant." The Captain paused, hoping to avoid the dangerous jump maneuver but he realized there was little choice. If it didn't work, the outcome would be the same, so better to try. "Mr. Gardner, pick a spot to give us the best aft angle on the Stormbird."

"Plotting course, Captain," Gardner replied as he scanned his console, then glanced at Golos, who nodded in agreement. "Tactical, you will have six seconds to fire before we execute the escape jump. Any longer and we're dead."

"Acknowledged." Akedis armed the quantum torpedo.

“Ready on full impulse as soon as we drop out of warp.” Golos prepared and gave the count. “Warp jump in five... four...three...two...and engage!”

The forward viewport filled with the bright flash of the jump halo and when the light faded, the *Phoenix* was behind the Stormbird but high above.

“Dammit,” Gardner cursed, but it didn’t matter because Golos was already diving hard. Once again, she inverted the *Phoenix* in attitude relative to the Stormbird and gave Akedis his shot.

The helmsman gritted her teeth. “We’re gonna pass pretty close before we jump so make it count!”

The aft fins of the Stormbird grew large in the viewport and Akedis waited to the last possible moment. The flash of the torpedo launch streaked out in front, headed directly for the impulse exhaust. The bright flash lit up again, then faded to the image of the Norkan moon.

“Hard about,” Augustok ordered. “Did we hit the target?”

“Affirmative,” Akedis replied. “The Romulan is badly damaged but not destroyed.”

“Where the hell is Starfleet?” Augustok pounded his fist on the chair.

“Captain...” Fai’s voice was shaking. “Another Romulan decloaking to port. It’s another Stormbird, sir.”

“Evasive action,” the Captain barked, but the *Phoenix* shook hard and Golos was unable to execute any maneuver.

“They have us in a tractor beam.” Gardner’s voice was grim.

“The Romulan commander is hailing,” Fai added in a tone of failure.

“On screen.” The Captain stood from his chair and, as he walked toward his helm crew the image of Admiral Areinnye appeared. She seemed quite pleased with herself.

“This is more than I hoped for.” Areinnye wrung her hands in devious excitement. “I came to Dravek to witness victory but it has fallen into my hands. Today, the gods are smiling on the Tal Shiar. Not only do I win a world, I bring home a long-awaited prize. The traitor of Nokturak.”

“I’m surprised someone within the Tal Shiar hasn’t assassinated you before now, Areinnye.” Augustok shook his head, almost amused at her over-confidence.

The Admiral responded with smug confidence, “Anyone who tried is already dead, as you soon will be.”

The Captain knew their resources had been destroyed on the planet below and she still thinks she has the upper hand. “There is no world to be won. The Khozi rejected you long ago and your presence here is an act of war.”

“Such bold words from such a helpless little man,” Areinnye sneered in the cold, ruthless way that let her crew know she was volatile and ready to act, no matter the outcome.. “One who will watch his captured crew die before his own execution.”

“Bold words?” Augustok motioned behind him. “Lieutenant Akedis, arm the self-destruct and detonate on my command.”

Areinnye burst into diabolical laughter,. “Oh, you raving men! As if I won’t beam you off that little boat and destroy it myself before it ever has the chance to explode...”

“Captain...” Fai interrupted. “Something has appeared to starboard.”

Augustok made the motion across his throat to silence the comm. “Something? Define something?”

“I’m not sure, Captain,” Fai looked stunned. “I think it’s a...it’s a bird?”

“A bird?” Augustok was speechless, but whatever it was, it had the attention of the Romulan commander as well. The comm went blank and Akedis switched the viewer to see the glowing image of a bird of prey, as big as a starship, swooping toward the wounded *Retaenir*.

The Admiral’s ship, *Arkhiann*, released the tractor beam and moved to intercept. Closing at high speed, the bird opened its beak and a rapid-fire stream of energy pulses shot out, ripping the *Retaenir* in two. The wing and nacelle exploded as the remaining hulk listed out of control. The bird made a sweeping turn and the *Arkhiann* fired their anti-proton cannon, striking a direct hit. The image of the bird crackled and arced with energy surges before dissipating to reveal a starship. A ship that could easily be a cousin to the *Raven*. Covered in dark ablative armor, an overhead weapons module and wing pylons holding two nacelles at their tip and two more slung underneath. The weapons module let fly a barrage of torpedoes from her twin tubes, rocking the *Arkhiann* and severely damaging her shields. The pulsing cannon under the saucer blazed again, destroying the forward shields as the Romulan turned in an evasive maneuver. The escape was denied as two more starships of the same design dropped out of warp with their weapon ports glowing, ready to fire.

"I guess someone heard us," Fai breathed a sigh of relief. "The lead vessel registry is the *U.S.S. Ghosthawk*, NCC-80107. She is joined by the *U.S.S. Geronimo* and the *U.S.S. Greyhound*."

Aboard the *Arkhiann*, the viewscreen showed the captain of the Federation vessel sitting calmly in his chair as he spoke.

"I'm not going to waste time with pleasantries, Admiral, nor will I bother asking what you are doing this deep in Federation space. I will simply say you have this one chance to power down your weapons and get your ass back home across the Neutral Zone. You may have some belief that Norkan IV belongs to you but show yourself here again and the only thing going back to Romulus will be a message detailing your destruction."

Areinnye was incensed. "And what of your treaty violation? Arming your ship with an illegal cloaking device?"

The Starfleet captain never flinched. "I believe your presence and actions here far outweigh any other factor, but to be correct, my ship has no cloaking device. It is a holographic generator. One that will become a familiar sight along your border. One you should learn to fear. Now, go home!"

The crew of the *Phoenix* watched in awe as the Romulan backed away and began to turn as it cloaked. But only a second later, it re-appeared long enough to fire its anti-proton cannon, completely incinerating the wounded *Retaenir*. The *Arkhiann* almost instantly jumped to warp, leaving behind a shocked audience of Areinnye's seething anger.

Augustok was about to order a hailing frequency when the screen popped on to show Admiral Pocuva sitting on the bridge of the Federation starship.

"I thought it was Captain?" Augustok asked suspiciously.

"All things are not what they seem," Pocuva replied, unaffected by the question. "You may bring your yacht to the docking port if you wish."

"I'm afraid I must decline your offer, Admiral," Augustok replied tersely. "I have my crew on the surface to attend to, but you are welcome to join me in my Ready Room aboard the *Raven*."

"So I've heard." Pocuva nodded. "Still functioning, is she? Well done, Captain. I'll see you at 1600 hours. Pocuva out." The screen went blank.

"Excuse me, Captain." Golos turned in her seat. "But does he know the meaning of the word: apology?"

“Why didn’t they answer us, sir?” Fai blurted out, clearly distressed. “Would that have been out of line?”

“All very good questions, people.” Augustok returned to his chair. “Questions I assure you I will be asking.”

“I’d like to be in that meeting.” Gardner mumbled as he turned back to his console. “Back to the *Raven*, sir?”

“Absolutely.” The Captain nodded. “Helm, take us home.”

Chapter 10

Captain's Log,

Captain Galan Augustok, Commanding the U.S.S. Raven

Today will mark my last day in command of this vessel. I'm finding this to be a more difficult step than I imagined. After defecting from the Romulan Empire, convincing Captain Picard of my loyalty while bearing the technology that helped make this such a formidable dreadnought and watching it come to life was surreal at best. Earning my place under Captain Riker and then Captain Thomas, forging friendships and crewmates, then finally rising to her command, the Raven will forever hold a special place in my heart. My time as her captain was short but I cannot deny the importance of the mission that took her from me.

For this ship, there is a bright future. Thanks to the outstanding skill of helmsman Lt. Ula Golos, the forced landing resulted in a durable design that served us well for our survival. So much so, Starfleet has decided to assign a dedicated engineering team for the Raven to provide a base of operations for the Norkan IV science team. With the blessing and cooperation of the Khozi, science and

research personnel will be able to spend extensive time here learning about this unique culture and the history of the escaped Romulan slaves that made this place their home. In addition, I have been informed the Khozi now recognize the Raven as both a historical and sacred artifact. In compliance with our Prime Directive, Starfleet cannot scrap or dismantle the ship for any reason. In accordance with Khozi law, the ship is now being used by us with their permission. For the generations to come, the Raven will have a remarkable story to tell. To be part of that story, the Long Ear who led the family of Pahana, is a legacy I am proud to be a part of.

Rescue operations are in full swing as the three starships in orbit have been shuttling crew and supplies as we prepare for debriefing at Starbase 219. Equipment is also being brought down to make sure the Raven has ample resources for those remaining here. I reviewed volunteers for the Starfleet command posts to oversee what will now be called Gaagii Base.

Lt. Fadil Akedis will assume the post of Chief Security Officer, not only for Gaagii Base but to work in conjunction with a Spec Ops Unit and the Khozi to provide security for all sites where the science teams may be until the Chuua threat is completely neutralized.

Lt. Maya Cheyton will assume the post of First Officer, overseeing operations, science team rotations and personnel assignments. It seems the Lieutenant and Dr. Alastair have a few things in common as he will remain on the planet as well.

Finally, it is with confidence and honor that I turn over my command to newly promoted Commander Sean Gardner. Skipping a step in rank is an unusual procedure but I cannot think of another officer from the list of volunteers better suited, and with more varied skills than my former navigator. I trust Gaagii Base will be in good hands.

Rising from his Ready Room chair, the Captain signed off the monitor and took a step back, gazing at the desk. He looked around the room, then removed two rank pins from his collar and held them out to Gardner, “You’ll need these, and congratulations...Commander.”

“I feel like this is circumstance based rather than performance,” Gardner commented solemnly, staring at the pins in his hand.

“You won’t feel that way for very long.” Augustok laughed. “Soon you’ll be asking yourself why you ever volunteered.”

“Thank you, Captain,” Gardner added the pins to his collar, proud of the advancement but daunted by the job ahead. “I’ll keep that in mind. By the way, how did your meeting with Admiral Pocuva go?”

“He was his usual cagey self.” The Captain shook his head, letting an air of frustration show. “I was told all my questions would be answered once we reached Starbase 219, which is code for *don’t bother asking anything else*. Welcome to the world of command.”

“In that case, I’m glad to be staying here.” Gardner said with a smile of relief. “And tell Golos good luck finding another navigator on my level.”

“You almost sound Romulan, Commander.” The pair shared a laugh before they started out of the room together. “Let me show you one of my favorite things about being Captain. I call it ‘walking the decks.’”

Dr. Lonetree had been filled with excitement ever since the gondola ride back to the *Raven*. Their time in Helaku and Zaltana was beyond her wildest dreams and the knowledge gained was simply amazing. She left Dak in Sick Bay where he was being fitted for his new leg and the past few hours had been spent recording all of the new-found

information. This was a tremendous breakthrough for this planet and she knew it would generate enormous interest in the science community. Getting the cooperation of the Khozi required assurances of not damaging the city remains in any location, however they welcomed the curious visitors and the exchange of knowledge.

The turbolift reached the bridge and the normal faces were there except the Captain. “Has anyone seen Captain Augustok?”

Cmdr. Gardner came out of the Ready Room with a smile. “Hello, Doctor Lonetree, can I help you?”

“I need to see the Captain.”

“Command of the *Raven*, now called Gaagii Base, has been turned over to me, Doctor. How can I help?”

“Has Captain Augustok left?”

“You can try the main shuttle bay.” Gardner tapped his comm badge. “Gardner to Augustok, are you still aboard, sir?”

“Augustok here,” he replied while laughing. “Yes, Commander, very much aboard.”

“Doctor Lonetree is looking for you.” Gardner was curious what was so funny. “Are you alright, sir?”

“Splendid, Commander,” the Captain replied with joviality. “Tell the good Doctor to join us on the hull above the shuttle bay.”

Dr. Lonetree looked puzzled but took the exit hatch outside and walked aft until she came upon an amazing sight. The sun was reaching low, reflecting the orange beam across the lake as the silhouette of the trees framed the image on each side. Seated on the edge of the hull above the shuttle bay door was Capt. Augustok and King Kuhdari with an open bottle of Romulan Ale between them. The Romulan was laughing and Kuhdari was as well, in the way they had learned what a Khozi laughing looked like. This was an image to be captured for the ages, two great leaders, celebrating together before they went their separate ways. Lonetree smiled, she didn’t even know the Khozi drank anything other than water, or was he just being introduced? The writings she studied spoke of celebration and wine but so often that meant fruit juice rather than fermented drink. As she drew closer, she could hear Kuhdari in her mind and just as quickly, he turned his head to greet her.

“Lonetree! Come, join me in bidding farewell to our cherished Halona.”

“Halona?” She couldn’t help but be amused at the King’s happy mood. “Who is Halona?”

“Didn’t you hear?” Augustok raised the bottle of ale in celebration. “I’ve been recorded in Khozi history! As the first Long Ear to come in peace as the leader of the Gaagii, I am now, Halona, the bringer of good fortune!”

“It sounds like you’ve been celebrating for a while.” Lonetree laughed as she took the bottle. “I’ve never tried this stuff.”

“It is bad ju-ju.” Kuhdari added with an inebriated chuckle.

“Oh my god,” Lonetree coughed after taking a quick drink. “You’re right, that’s bad!”

“Come, sit with us.” Kuhdari pointed beside the Captain.

“Yes,” Augustok added. “Sit, it’s less distance to fall.”

“Unless you fall off the shuttle bay door.” Cat looked down to the deck below.

Kuhdari began chirping and swinging his head, “I keep forgetting you cannot fly! But then, I might not be able to myself...” He looked at his two friends and began laughing again. “I should call for the gondola.”

Augustok took another drink and smiled at Lonetree. “So, what’s next for you, Doctor?”

"I could spend a lifetime doing research here, Captain. In fact, I think that's exactly what I'm going to do. Dak and I are going to make a home here, maybe raise a family. It will be an amazing way of life unlike anywhere else."

"That sounds wonderful, Doctor." Augustok looked out over the lake. "To have a place to call home. It's unlikely I will ever see my home world again. I envy you."

"This can be your home as well, Halona," Kuhdari leaned toward his friend. "Just as the Pahana before you, they made this place their own. You are forever welcome here, not just for what you have done, but for what you wish to be."

"My time in Starfleet is not done, Kuhdari." Augustok grasped his claw in friendship. "But I will bring T'Lier to see this place and if she wishes to stay, so will I."

Lonetree took the bottle and tried another sip but still coughed as it went down. "So what's next for you, Captain?"

"Starbase 219." He breathed a heavy sigh. "Standard debriefing on the loss of a starship, wait for the decision for possible disciplinary action and then hope for re-assignment. I think chances are slim I will be given another command, but I may take shore leave for a few weeks. I

miss T'Lier and seeing her again will make the outcome better, no matter what they choose.”

“She is your mate.” Kuhdari closed his eyes and pointed his beak toward the sky. “It is the same with Ecoute for me. She brings the inner peace.”

“Well, she isn’t yet.” Augustok glanced at the King. “But I hope she will be.”

Kuhdari turned his large eyes toward his Halona. “She already is, you only lack the ritual. Your heart has decided.”

“I am going to miss our talks, my friend.” Augustok struggled to get to his feet.

“There is one thing you must see before you depart,” Kuhdari replied as he too, struggled to his feet.

Augustok wondered, “And what would that be?”

Without a word, Kuhdari flapped his mighty wings and began to lift into the air, but suddenly took hold of Augustok, carrying him away as he laughed. “Tonight, Halona, you will fly as a Khozi!”

Lonetree couldn’t make out the shouting noises the Captain was making but, in her mind, she could hear Kuhdari laughing with joy. Augustok’s legs finally stopped kicking

the higher they went despite Kuhdari's erratic flight path but soon they soared above the treetops, a perfect image against the setting sun. It was a picture Cat would never forget.

Then she noticed she could hear actual audible laughing and not all of it was humanoid. She made her way down to the edge of the hull and on the ground below, a large group of the crew surrounded Mochni and two of his Falza tribe. They were speaking audibly to the crew, trading stories, drinking and obviously celebrating. Cat was both impressed and overjoyed to see the exchange of culture going both ways. After the initial amazement of hearing such a large bird species talk in *your* language, things had moved quickly to sharing experiences not constrained by mental communication alone. She sat, folded her legs and watched. This was something unique she might never see again and she relished every moment. The mission here was one of scientific discovery but she'd found so much more. In her mind, Norkan IV might just be the most amazing planet in the Federation.

The view from Seven Forward aboard the *U.S.S. Ghosthawk* was similar to any other starship. Starlight streaking by at warp speed along with the mild thrumming

sensation of the warp engines. The difference here was the image of the *U.S.S. Geronimo* cruising off the starboard bow. A sister ship to the *Ghosthawk*, seeing the *Geronimo* gave Augustok the chance to examine the Luna Class Dreadnought in more detail. The overhead weapons module looked nearly identical to the one on the *Raven*, not surprising since it was a proven design. However, this had to be smaller since the Luna Class was only seventy-five percent in scale to the Nebula Class the *Raven* was based on. It seemed plain Starfleet had utilized the technology used on the *Raven* and applied it to a more dedicated design.

Besides her main impulse engines at the rear of the saucer, another large impulse thrust vent was below the main shuttle bay entrance at the rear of the secondary hull. Her wingtip nacelles, mounted on flat pylons parallel to the secondary hull, reached out behind for clear warp field generation as did the secondary nacelles, hung beneath the pylon wings.

The ablative armor gave it the same dark exterior the *Raven* wore and the hull was bristling with phaser arrays. The pulsing blast they saw delivered against the Stormbird-Kre came from a similar looking cannon mounted under the saucer. In fact, it might be the same unit since it looked larger in scale against the smaller Luna Class saucer

section. No doubt these ships were intended to replace the *Raven* all along, for border patrol at the very least.

Cmdr. Riley interrupted Augustok's silent examination as he sat across the table and clunked a glass of scotch down hard. Riley cast a strange look at the Captain's glass. "What in the world are you drinking, man?"

"The bartender called it a miracle cure for a Vulcan hangover." Augustok groaned, swirled the glass and took another gulp. "I'm waiting for the miracle. What about you? Isn't a bit early for scotch?"

"It's synth-ale," Riley laughed as he examined his own glass. "This stuff couldn't get my sweet ole Mum drunk. Did you have a rough last day on Norkan IV?"

"I admit to a bit too much celebrating with my Khozi friends." The Captain shook his head, still throbbing from too much ale. "They are the most unique race of beings I've ever met."

"They are a one-off for sure." Riley downed his drink and leaned in as if sharing a secret. "But have you looked around on this baby?"

"I went from my quarters to this table." Augustok replied as though that took all his effort, then motioned to the bartender for another glass. "Along that route I saw

nothing unusual, but I have been looking over the *Geronimo* since I sat down.”

“We’ve been on board almost a whole day.” Riley looked surprised and amused. “Where have you been all that time?”

“Sleeping?” Augustok replied as he rubbed his forehead. “And mentally going over all the questions I’m sure to be asked about the loss of the *Raven*. I understand you were offered the post to maintain the new Gaagii Base?”

“Aye,” Riley nodded but seemed unimpressed. “But there was no way Starfleet was going to grill you about her going down without getting my side of the story.”

“Thank you, Mr. Riley,” the Captain said gratefully. “But I did make the call.”

“Aye, you did, and it was the best one for all of us.” Riley pointed at his Captain as he drove his opinion home. “Any other choice and we’d been blown to bits up there for target practice.”

“I hope Starfleet sees it that way.”

Riley asked the server for another drink and a bowl of potato soup, then decided to add to the subject. “While you’ve been doing that, I went on a little tour of this new

toy and found some very interesting things. Things you might want to know before you meet with Admiral Hayden. You may have a few questions of your own.”

“Such as?” Augustok knew Riley didn’t take things of this nature lightly so his interest was piqued.

“Like not an automated system in sight?” Riley took a spoon of his soup, but frowned. “Not like Mum’s, that’s for sure.”

“The systems or the soup?”

Riley laughed at his Captain’s humor. “Well, the food slots could use better programming. But, if the automated systems they retrofitted to the *Raven* were supposed to be improvements, why weren’t they standard fare on these ships? I mean they ran the *Raven* playbook almost to the letter everywhere else. Dual warp cores, redundant systems, heavy firepower, High capacity impulse drive for maneuverability and the very same armor plating. The only thing they traded off was transwarp drive for sustained high warp speed and direct energy feed to the defensive systems.”

Now Augustok was curious what point he was trying to make. “Mr. Riley, are you trying to say the *Raven* was sabotaged?”

“You can’t call it that, sir.” Riley said as he added salt to the soup, but his tone was one of disappointment. “Even without the automated systems, that direct double torpedo shot to the secondary hull would’ve crippled any ship. We were on borrowed time when the battle started, but the automated system failure didn’t help our chances of making it out alive. Sabotage? That’s a tad strong for my taste. But hung out as bait sounds more like it. That’s a mighty big gamble to play with five hundred lives.”

“That *is* a question worth asking,” Augustok agreed then glanced toward the bowl. “Is the soup any good?”

“Aye, it’s not too bad.” Riley took another spoonful before he joked, “Feeling a bit adventurous, are we?”

“This isn’t providing the miracle” Augustok raised the glass. “I thought I’d try a time-honored choice from a known drinker.”

“I doubt potato soup will cure the hangover, sir,” Riley slid the bowl across the table. “But it might keep you out of the head.”

The voyage to Starbase 219 passed without incident and it was a chance for Augustok to rest and collect his thoughts. After they docked, he was transferred to quarters aboard

the base along with the rest of his rescued crew. They would stay here until debriefing was complete before being reassigned.

Reassignment, there was a word that hung in Augustok's mind with great concern. After losing a starship, he might find himself back where he started, under scrutiny regarding his status. With Pocuva and his covert operations standing in the shadows – that probably wasn't a tool to be used to clear himself of any wrong doing.

As he marched down the corridor to Admiral Hayden's office, an effort was made to calm his thoughts, much like when he communicated with the Khozi – focus on silencing all the background distractions and concentrate on the moment.

The ensign at the desk told him the Admiral was waiting and he stepped through the door with a mood of command and confidence. The door closed behind him and all those thoughts were immediately shaken as the person behind the desk wasn't Hayden, but Admiral Pocuva.

“Do come in, Captain.” Pocuva welcomed in a pleasant tone and motioned to the chair across from him. “Please, have a seat.”

The Captain approached the desk slowly, casting a stare of contempt at the superior officer. He stopped short of the chair. "I'm afraid I feel compelled to stand, sir."

"At this point, I'm sure you feel compelled to take more action than just to stand." Pocuva seemed altogether calm. "That's not an unusual reaction after what you've been through, but you more than exceeded our expectations. So please, have a seat and I'll answer all those questions swirling in your head."

"Where should I begin, sir?" Augustok replied sternly. "Possibly with all those lost on this mission? Sent into known dangers, were they not?"

"Surely you have a query on a higher level than that." Pocuva continued his relaxed attitude. "Tell me, Captain, when was the last time you were sent on a dangerous mission where no casualties occurred? I'm sure we both knew that risk when you accepted this command. Let's move on to more pressing factors, shall we?"

Augustok shot back quickly, "Like the loss of a ship, Admiral?"

"That was also a known factor." Pocuva leaned forward and now appeared engaged. "Our hope was for your

survival and you managed that quite well in addition to other goals.”

Augustok was still intense, suppressing his anger at Pocuva being here instead of Hayden. “Would you please clarify, sir?”

“I’m surprised, Captain,” Pocuva continued. “On Norkan IV you seemed poised with very specific items to ask. But now, you’re so much broader in scope. Being non-descript has its advantages in covert operations. I applaud your approach.”

“Enough!” Augustok slammed his fist on the desk and rose from the chair, looming over the Admiral.

“The Romulan temper will need to be honed.” Pocuva responded calmly, unphased by the reaction. “Questions, Captain. Not rage. Proceed.”

Augustok took a breath and said, “You sent us into a trap!”

“We sent you to confirm suspicions and provide Starfleet with proof, Captain. Which you delivered and more.”

Augustok returned to his seat. “Why did you handicap my ship?”

“The modifications to the *Raven* were not a handicap.” Pocuva confessed and tapped his finger on the desk, enforcing his point. “They were made to reduce the number of crew we sent into harm’s way. The science team and Spec Ops were necessary for the mission to succeed on the surface, so we opted to reduce the crew by that amount.”

“And by doing so, Admiral, you put us all at risk!”

Pocuva answered with a face like stone. “It was a necessary gamble, Captain.”

“I don’t see how.” Augustok scowled.

The Admiral continued in his all-business tone, “We had no idea how much the Romulans might be willing to risk so deep in Federation territory. Any light opposition you would have easily handled. We knew their distaste for you personally and for the *Raven*, but even we didn’t expect such a massive show of force. Yes, sending you in command of the *Raven* was baiting the Romulans in a sense of speaking. To borrow a page from their own rules, we provided an opportunity to provoke them at their worst, and they took it. Keep in mind, Captain, no other ship in the fleet was better equipped to defend itself, despite the shortcomings. You not only provided the provocation, but

you also dealt the Romulans a blow in the process. Most impressive.”

“You already knew they had operations ongoing on the surface, didn’t you Admiral?”

“Again, we had suspicions, but no proof.” Pocuva returned to his relaxed posture. “The team we sent before weren’t able to stay long enough to gather sufficient intelligence.”

“That’s why the records were sealed.” Augustok’s disgust went up another notch.

“If we had released those records, Romulan sources would inevitably have found out and taken action to conceal their plans. We needed to expose them, not send them deeper underground.” The Admiral laced his fingers casually and his mood was one of satisfaction. “But by force landing the ship, you provided the ability to carry out a large operation without it looking like an intended invasion. That was a perfect result for both us and the planet’s inhabitants.”

“Yes, Admiral, let’s talk about the Khozi,” the Captain said sharply. “What are your intentions?”

“My intentions?” Pocuva laughed at the question. “I’m not asking for your daughter’s hand.”

“I am not amused!” Augustok snapped. “Just like the Romulans, the intelligence groups never have the ability to see anything except what they can exploit.”

“Your passion is commendable.” Pocuva was impressed by the Captain’s strong sense of justice.. “But displaced, if anyone plans to exploit the Khozi, it its beyond my knowledge.”

“That carries little weight from a man who is a professional liar...sir.”

“Conviction, Captain, is another reason we chose you.” Pocuva turned the monitor on his desk around to face Augustok. “As you can see, there is already preliminary approval of your request to the Federation to have Norkan IV declared a sanctuary.”

Augustok brushed off the information. “Laws never stop those like you.”

“Believe what you will, Captain, but information provided so far suggests the Khozi are more than capable of defending themselves against any such action.”

“But they should never have to,” Augustok snapped. “At least not from the Federation.”

“Starfleet will have a presence alongside the research personnel.” The Admiral leaned forward on the desk, clearly being more inquisitive. “Wouldn’t you agree that’s a good idea? We both know it’s doubtful the Romulans have given up on a place that means so much to them on a religious level.”

“Weren’t you afraid sending me there might result in my being converted by Romulan legend?”

“We knew that was a risk.” Pocuva acknowledged the question but carried on without a hitch. “But we also knew you would understand its impact and implications better than anyone else available to us.”

Augustok felt both surprise and distaste at this conversation. It felt far too much like the mentality he had defected from. “So you knew what Project Dravek was all along?”

“Actually, no,” the Admiral folded his arms in a defensive posture but also felt comfortable revealing more sensitive information. Augustok was showing all the points of a desirable recruit. “We’ve had a deep cover operative on Glintara for some time. Based on the information provided, we knew something on Norkan IV was a high priority, enough to involve the Tal Shiar and a great deal of their top-level resources. We knew Dravek was a legend of

some kind but didn't know if it might be a code name for something else. As it turns out, thanks to you, it was actually both. Well done."

"I must be frank, Admiral..."

"Because you haven't been so far?"

Augustok drew a deep breath for composure. "Your compliments do not sound like those of congratulations but matters of coincidence that just happen to benefit you and Starfleet Intelligence. My crew fought for their lives on Norkan IV and were it not for the Khozi, we would simply be another set of records for you to seal. That does not strike me as a great accomplishment. It's more like telling someone you pushed off a cliff what a nice job they did falling to the bottom."

"You have the gift of hyperbole, Captain." Pocuva stood to look in Augustok's eyes and did so with a steely glare. "But let us be clear. The Romulans have plagued the Pi Hydrae system with their chess game of death for over a decade and each time we made a show of force in that system they ran into hiding without a trace, like rats in the basement. I was presented with a chance to catch them in the act and to do so with a minimal risk of resources. Now, if you don't think I was going to take that chance, then you are a walking insult to Vulcan logic. Yes, you and your

crew as well as the others were put at risk. We do that every time a starship leaves dock and if you aren't prepared to take that risk, maybe you don't belong in that uniform."

"We accept risks," Augustok shot back. "Because we understand we are not acting alone. We know we have support and can confidently speak to those on foreign worlds with integrity. Those are concepts that seem disposable to you, Admiral. Maybe you are the one in the wrong uniform? You smell like the Tal Shiar. What kind of organization abandons its crews for weeks without contact or response to rescue calls?"

The Admiral paused as the insult showed exactly the kind of response he hoped to invoke. This next step would be an excellent test.. "Captain, I admire your conviction. Anyone else I might court martial for insubordination. But it's true, Starfleet Intelligence classified the *Raven* distress call for two reasons. The first call told us the ship was lost and we had no evidence you survived. We didn't send ships for the aforementioned reason of scaring off the Romulan presence we wanted to catch. When you called again, we knew someone had survived and we began monitoring the progress of the mission. We didn't converge at the end until we knew Romulan Admiral Areinnye was present.

Now, the Empire will claim deniability and blame the Tal Shiar, but we hold the hard evidence.”

“YOU KNEW WE WERE THERE?” Augustok burst out, “You knew? Before we ever launched our mission against the targets? Before we risked facing warships in orbit with nothing more than low-level phasers and a single torpedo? YOU KNEW? How dare you...”

“Let me stop you before security comes, Captain.” Pocuva motioned for the Captain to sit down as he mused with satisfaction over each phase of the briefing. “As incensed as you may be, the truth was you were handling the situation just as well, if not better than any covert team we could’ve provided. Any action by us and the Romulans never would have acted to protect their interests as they did, a great deal of which was provided by their reckless abandon to capture you. I understand that you feel you have been used and, in a way, that is true. But for the intelligence agency, that is a daily part of our job. I will apologize if you feel slighted, but I did inform you from the start this mission was classified and high risk. If you are ever approached again, and I’m sure you will be, you will better understand what that means.”

“I already understand it enough to know I will never accept another action from you...sir,” Augustok replied with measured intensity.

Pocuva paused and then smiled. “Now, is that any way to speak to a superior officer that’s about to offer you a new command?”

“Another mission for you? Not hardly,” the Captain snapped back.

“Technically, not from me.” Pocuva stood behind the desk and started toward the door. “You see, Captain, much like our last meeting, I was never here. But you might be interested to know, Admiral Hayden has already reviewed your statement regarding the loss of the *Raven*. Any disciplinary action has been deemed uncalled for given your mission accomplishments, despite their being held as classified. I hope you enjoyed your passage here aboard the *Ghosthawk*. You see, Admiral Hayden will be in shortly to offer you the ship as your new command, returning to border patrol duty as before. You can give him your answer.”

“You intended to replace the *Raven* all along, didn’t you, Admiral?”

“A bit too suspicious, Captain. We started work on the *Ghosthawk* and her sister ships as soon as the *Raven* launched. You didn’t think we were simply going to sit on that technology, did you?” Pocuva nodded and stopped at the doorway, “Thank you, Captain, sincerely.”

This time Augustok didn’t bother following him to the door, knowing Pocuva had already vanished into the walls somehow. The entire experience had been surreal and just like before, left him with a very uneasy feeling. Pocuva felt like an ugly ghost that could appear on the other side of any given doorway, no matter where you were. Sincerely, he said, which sincerely felt like a promise he would show up again someday. Those thoughts washed away quickly as the meeting with Hayden went exactly as Pocuva said it would and he left the office as the new commanding officer of the *U.S.S. Ghosthawk*. The best news was the posting of Ship’s Counselor being returned to the duty roster and Ambassador T’Lier was already on her way to fill the post. He was given freedom to retain as many of his previous crew as he wanted so his next course of action was setting up reviews aboard his new ship.

After leaving Admiral Hayden, he contacted as many as he could to join him in Seven Forward aboard the *Ghosthawk*.

It appeared this was planned from the onset since Pocuva had only been acting commander, leaving no previous Captain to relieve of duty.

The gathering went well with most of his crew choosing to remain. Augustok always hated the idea of assigning crew members against their will but luckily, not one crew member he reviewed asked to be reassigned.

The next day, he was handling the details at his desk, getting to know the layout of his new vessel. Cmdr. Riley was enthusiastic and Cmdr. Br'tah accepted the position of First Officer. All was going well when someone walked though his door unannounced. Before he even looked up, Augustok could feel the touch of her mind but seeing her face after so long was like a vision. Her emotions flowed out and he could sense them like never before. Her face lit up and she reached out to him. It was better than the first time they met. He hurried around the desk and embraced her, holding her tight in his arms.

"I can feel your thoughts," T'Lier whispered. "I could never do that before. What happened to you?"

"Something amazing." Augustok kissed her and looked deep in her eyes. "There is a place I must take you. New friends I want you to meet. A place like I've never known."

T'Lier was thrilled to see her love again but even more excited to know what this experience was that changed him so. "Sit with me," she asked softly as she moved to the sofa and took his hands. "Tell me everything."

THE END