

THE CALLING

PART 3

RICHARD
PAOLINELLI

THE CALLING, PART 3

**A Star Trek The Next Generation/Deep Space Nine
Novel**

A Work Of Star Trek Fan Fiction By Richard Paolinelli

© 2020/2021 RICHARD PAOLINELLI. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. NO COPYING OR ANY OTHER REPRODUCTION OF THIS STORY IS PERMITTED WITHOUT WRITTEN PERMISSION.

This is a work of fan fiction based in the universe of Star Trek, created by Gene Roddenberry. It is not intended to be sold, to be used to aid in any sale and is not to be copied or used in any other way by any other party.

Contents

THE CALLING, PART 3.....	2
CHAPTER ONE.....	5
CHAPTER TWO.....	10
CHAPTER THREE.....	19
CHAPTER FOUR.....	30
CHAPTER FIVE.....	38
CHAPTER SIX.....	44
CHAPTER SEVEN.....	50
CHAPTER EIGHT.....	57
CHAPTER NINE.....	76

CHAPTER ONE

Ensign Ro tapped her foot on the carpet, impatiently waiting for the turbolift to arrive. When the doors finally parted, she quickly marched in without looking up.

"Bridge," she barked, spinning around to face the closing doors.

"And good morning to you too, Ensign," Ro nearly jumped out of her skin, she hadn't registered another presence in the lift when she entered and, of course, it would have to be Riker catching her in a moment's inattention.

"Good morning, Commander."

"A bit pre-occupied this morning, Ensign?"

"A little, sir. You don't happen to know what this meeting is about?"

"I'm afraid not, Ro," Riker replied. "The Captain asked me to assemble the staff in the conference room. Come to think of it, he did make it a point that you were to be in attendance, although he didn't say why."

Ro absorbed the information without further comment. She already half-suspected that she'd done something to offend ship's protocol, no doubt Riker was just itching to instruct her on "how we do things on board this ship, Ensign." In fact, she was surprised she hadn't received a lecture on greeting superior officers in turbo lifts, so she kept quiet, not wanting to push her luck. The lift mercifully arrived at its destination, and Ro made a beeline for the conference room with Riker, sweeping the bridge with a quick glance to assure himself all as well with the ship, right behind her. They entered the room to find Counselor Troi, Geordi LaForge, Worf and Dr. Crusher already there. Before anyone could so much as utter a greeting, Picard strode in from the opposite side of the room with Data in tow.

"Ah, splendid," Picard said, rubbing his hands together, "you're all here."

The Captain took his chair at the head of the table and the other officers quickly seated themselves.

"We've received a priority assignment from Starfleet Command," Picard began. "Mr. Data, would you kindly brief us on this assignment."

"Certainly, sir," the android began, standing up to face his fellow officers. "The Federation recently began

negotiations regarding a treaty, and possible Federation membership, with the government on Kyros VI."

Data tapped a control on the table, and a three-dimensional representation of the planet and its three satellites sprang into view over the center of the table.

"Ambassador Loomis was dispatched to the planet to head the negotiations and all appeared to be going smoothly until two days ago, when Starfleet Command received this message."

Data pressed another control and the image of the planet was replaced by the stern visage of a balding, middle-aged humanoid man with the pale yellow skin typical of the Kyrosian race.

"Federation Council," he began, "your Ambassador has been charged with espionage. You have seven of your Earth days to send a representative to attend his trial."

"Short and sweet," remarked Riker as the message ended with the disembodied face fading to black. "I take it we've been handed the invitation to this party, Sir."

"Quite right, Number One," Picard replied, "and we're taking along an additional guest. Our first priority is to resolve this matter diplomatically, if possible."

"Starfleet is obviously thinking that your reputation as a diplomat and the presence of a ship of the line in orbit above should turn the trick," Crusher interjected.

"Perhaps," Picard admitted modestly. "However, the Federation does not look kindly on its ambassadors being held against their will on trumped up charges, which is where our guest comes in.

"We are scheduled to rendezvous with the *USS United* in twenty-six hours and take on a Starfleet Special Security officer," Picard paused to let that information sink in.

Starfleet Special Security were usually sent in where Starship Captains feared tread. They had the authority to fold up the Prime Directive and put it in their back pocket when certain situations called for such extreme measures. In most cases, hotspots suddenly turned space-cold when a Special Security officer was only rumored to be on the way.

"Our orders are to find a way to resolve this through diplomatic channels, but if no such resolution is possible, we are to step aside and stand ready to assist this officer in any way."

"Who are they sending?" Worf asked.

"One of their best officers, I'm told," Picard replied. "His father is something of a Starfleet legend, served with Captain Kirk before entering Federation politics. When Commander Forelni comes aboard I'd..."

Ro nearly jumped out of her skin again at the mention of Forelni's name. Troi immediately sensed the Ensign's turmoil and was staring at her quizzically. Picard had stopped speaking, and the others couldn't help but notice the color drain from her face.

"Ensign? Is something wrong?"

"I'm sorry Captain," she stammered. "Did you say Commander Forelni? As in Paulo Forelni?"

"Yes, I believe that is his name. How do you know him?"

Ro took a deep breath to settle herself before dropping the bombshell on her crewmates, but her voice still quavered a little. "Paulo Forelni was Chief of Security on the *Wellington* at Garon II."

CHAPTER TWO

Picard waited anxiously next to the transporter console. Commander Forelni was due to beam over at any moment and Picard was still filled with uncertainty over the impending mission. The release of the Ambassador and his staff had suddenly become a secondary issue. Picard was now primarily concerned with Commander Forelni's motives for taking this mission. Picard had discovered that Forelni had volunteered for the mission, after learning the *Enterprise* had been assigned to Kyros VI. He'd even requested that Ensign Ro be present when he came aboard. Picard feared Forelni was looking for some sort of reprisal against Ro, and had voiced his concern at the briefing the day before. But other than commenting that Forelni had defended her at her court-martial and that she didn't believe he meant her any ill will, the Bajoran woman was keeping tight-lipped about the entire matter.

Picard had spent most of the night scanning the records of the Garon II mission and the court-martial that followed. It seemed Forelni was well on his way to starship command and was in charge of Security on board *Wellington*. Ro was a lieutenant and had just been assigned

to the ship as a security officer three months before the ship pulled into orbit around Garon II.

Ro had been assigned to a nine-member landing party that consisted of the entire command staff, with the exception of Forelni. Two days later, the entire landing party was dead with one notable exception: Lieutenant Ro Laren. How Ro survived, as well as what really happened, was never discovered. Ro certainly wasn't talking to anyone about Garon II. Despite her silence and the mounting circumstantial evidence against her, Forelni had defended her at the court-martial.

From the transcript, Picard could see Forelni had mounted a vigorous, at times combative, defense. But Ro's silence doomed any hope of her acquittal and the same three officer panel that found her guilty, leveled a charge of incompetence at Forelni. He was stripped of command of Security on *Wellington* and reduced in rank to lieutenant. His resignation from Starfleet was tendered minutes later.

Apparently, he had been conscripted into Special Security and was doing quite well. But Picard could not shake the feeling that hard feelings were at play and that Forelni might be looking to avenge his ruined career. A beep from the console signaled Forelni's impending arrival and Picard braced himself for an unpleasant visitor. Behind

him, Riker, Worf and Troi closed ranks around Ro, offering whatever support they could.

Picard stepped forward to greet the new arrival as soon as he materialized on the platform. Forelni was attired in the standard all-black uniform of Starfleet Special Security, with only one piece of silver jewelry attached just above the heart. But unlike the Starfleet insignia found on Picard's uniform, Forelni's was the ages-old symbol of justice, an evenly balanced scale over three solid black bars. Picard knew that the bars served the same function as the pips on his collar. Three pips, or bars, introduced the wearer as a full Commander.

Picard studied his visitor, noticing that Forelni was about the same height as Riker, a little trimmer and the hawk-like, clean-shaven face gave Picard an impression of the sheer face of a cliff. Only when you looked at his eyes, did you see any warmth. They were the darkest brown he'd ever seen in human eyes and they all at once seemed to take the full measure of everyone in sight, while not losing a small glint of mischief.

"Permission to come aboard, Captain?"

"Granted, Commander," replied Picard, "and welcome aboard."

"An honor to be aboard, Sir," Forelni shook Picard's hand as Riker stepped forward. "This must be Commander Riker, a pleasure Commander."

Forelni shook hands with the First Officer, graciously took Troi's hand, deftly brushing a quick kiss on it while managing a half-bow, reminding Picard that Forelni was descended from Etalyan royalty, before quickly straightening back up, his nose wrinkling in distaste.

"Captain," he said after a few sniffs, "either you recently passed a Romulan sewage plant," he paused for effect, turning to face Worf, "or Worf, son of Mogh, is on board this vessel."

"Strange," the Klingon growled in retort, "I was about to suggest that it smelled like a targ pit in here, or that Paulo Forelni was on board."

The two men faced each other, and Picard feared the two would come to blows. But before anyone could say a word, both faces broke into wide grins. Then to everyone's surprise, the two embraced in a bear hug, accompanied by back thumping that made Picard wince in sympathy.

"Worf," Forelni exclaimed, "you son of a targ!. It's been a long time, my friend!"

"A long time," Worf agreed, stoically. "It is good to see you again Commander. How is Marco?"

"He's doing well. A lieutenant and head of Security on the *Francisco*."

"Mr. Worf, I was unaware that you were acquainted with Commander Forelni."

"My apologies, Captain," Worf replied. "The Commander's brother, Marco, was my roommate at the Academy and the Commander was one of my instructors during my last year."

"Worf even spent a summer at my home on Etalya," Forelni added, the glint of mischief spreading from his eyes to cover his face. "One of the most interesting summers on the planet in recent memory."

Knowing the history of Etalya and the Klingon Empire, they had been at war with each other as recently as the last century, and judging from the expressions on the two men's faces, Picard could just imagine how "interesting" that summer had been. The Captain found himself relaxing, his misgivings about the Commander's arrival fading away. But then Forelni focused his attention on the one officer he'd not yet been introduced to.

"Ensign Ro."

"Commander. It's good to see you again, sir."

"Likewise, Ensign," there was none of the genuine warmth that greeted Worf, but there was also no sign of hostility, either hidden or out in the open between the two. "It's good to see you back in uniform, Ensign. I'm looking forward to working with you again."

"Thank you, sir."

"Captain, I assume you received the briefing package and you've all had a chance to review it?" Forelni asked. Picard nodded in assent. "Good. We can have a formal briefing after I've settled in, that is if there are any questions or comments?"

"Your package was very thorough, Commander," Riker pitched in when everyone had shook their head in response.

"It seems like a pretty straightforward mission."

"Indeed," added Picard. "Number One, set a course for Kyros, maximum warp. Mr. Worf, please show the Commander to his quarters."

Picard waited for the officers to acknowledge his orders, before dismissing Troi and Ro to their duties. He then turned to Forelni.

"Commander," he began, "there were one or two points I'd like to discuss with you, nothing that requires a formal briefing, but if you don't mind talking on the way to your quarters?"

"Of course, Captain," and that glint of mischief was back in his eyes. "Lead on, Mr. Worf, and step lively man, I expect a bottle of blood wine to be ready and waiting in my quarters."

"I have one bottle of blood wine in my quarters, Commander," Worf growled, "and I'm saving it for a special occasion."

"That's okay, Lieutenant, I brought a bottle of Romulan ale. You can have the first glass," Forelni clapped the Klingon on the shoulder and both men shared a laugh, while Picard chuckled and shook his head as the trio stepped out into the hallway. As the men navigated the busy corridor Picard addressed his concerns with the mission.

"Commander, your presence here tells me that Starfleet doesn't hold out much hope in my abilities as a diplomat."

"On the contrary, Captain," Forleni responded. "Starfleet has every faith in your abilities. It's the Kyrosian government they're not sure of. The mission to release the ambassador is yours, and trust me Captain, I certainly hope you're successful. I'm only here as a last resort, in case the Kyrosians don't listen to reason."

"I see," Picard said as they entered Forelni's quarters. "Then I retain command of both the ship and the

mission throughout?" Picard had heard of instances where Special Security took temporary command of a ship until the mission was completed.

"Yes, at least until it is apparent that diplomatic measures are failing," Forelni replied solemnly. "And then I only take command of the mission, the ship is yours no matter what."

"Good," Picard said, relieved that his ship was still his ship. "There was one other matter, Commander..." Picard broke off, glancing at Worf, who immediately got the hint that the Captain wanted privacy.

"Perhaps I will make an exception and get that bottle of blood wine after all," Worf headed for the door.

"And now drops the other shoe," Forelni remarked as soon as the door had closed. "This other matter, it involves Ensign Ro?"

"Am I that transparent?" Picard asked, seating himself.

"No, but you wouldn't be a very good captain if you weren't concerned about your crew," Forelni replied, taking a seat across from Picard. "I assume you think I have an ulterior motive toward Ro. You needn't worry. I thought Ro was an excellent officer on the *Wellington*. You probably know that I defended her at her court-martial. I

thought she was innocent then and I still do today, despite the ruling against her."

"Forgive me, Commander," Picard was struck by the genuine honesty of the statement. "I seemed to have misjudged you."

"No offense taken, Captain. Like I said, you wouldn't be a good CO if you hadn't been concerned. One last thing Captain, about the mission and our Ensign Ro. I want to be on the first away team, just to get a firsthand look at what we're facing, in case things don't go well.

"I'd like Worf to stay on the ship," he continued, "to plan any rescue attempt, but I'd like Ro to accompany you on all away teams."

"Is there any particular reason why you want Ro down there?" Picard inquired.

"Yes," Forelni replied simply, leaning back in his chair with that look of mischief shining brightly, and said nothing more.

"I see," Picard conceded, standing up to leave. "Very well then Commander, we should be arriving at Kyros VI in the morning, we'll beam down an hour after we achieve orbit."

"I'll be there. Good night, Captain."

CHAPTER THREE

Five figures sparkled into existence in the main hall of government center on Kyros. Picard, Forelni, Ro, Troi and Crusher were met, pounced upon Picard thought, by an overweight, low-level bureaucrat who spoke too fast for Picard to catch his name. The man hustled the Starfleet group into a smaller hall filled to capacity on each side with Kyrosians, all armed with swords. At the far end stood a Kyrosian man in a purple robe three steps below another Kyrosian male, who Picard identified as the face on the message they'd seen on the briefing disk. He was seated, adorned in a red robe with gold trim and looked completely bored with the proceedings.

"Federation visitors," the man in purple boomed, "announce yourselves and state your business before the First Prime!"

"Captain Jean-Luc Picard of the Starship Enterprise," Picard replied, "Commander Paulo Forelni, Counselor Deanna Troi, Doctor Beverly Crusher and Ensign Ro Laren. We are here on behalf of the Federation regarding Ambassador Loomis and his party which you..."

At the mention of the ambassador, the First Prime suddenly became animated, clapping his hands together

loudly. Before the echo of the second clap died, the away team found themselves surrounded by armed Kyrosian guards.

"*Enterprise*, emergency beam-out," Forelni snapped, tapping his combadge. But nothing happened. "*Enterprise*, beam us up," he repeated and again there was no response.

"Your communication devices and your weapons will not work here, the entire city is electronically shielded. We raised our shield after you beamed in, Captain," the First Prime said.

"That explains why Loomis and his party never tried to call for help," Forelni whispered.

"First Prime," Picard exclaimed, outraged and confused by the reception, "what is the meaning of this. We are here to negotiate the ambassador's release in good faith and you greet us with weapons drawn?"

"My dear Captain," the First Prime drawled, "we are negotiating. As the representative of the Federation you will enter the pit. There you will negotiate for your Federation and, should you defeat my negotiator, your ambassador and his party will be released and we will consider applying for Federation membership. If however, you are defeated, the ambassador, his party and the rest of

your group will be executed as enemies of Kyros and the Federation will be forever banned from our world."

"How will we know who has won or lost our negotiation?"

A chuckle rippled across the room and the purple-robed man leaned toward the First Prime to whisper a quick comment.

"Oh, I see," the First Prime commented. "My dear Captain, perhaps you misunderstand. We Kyrosians do not settle our disputes with words and contracts. Ours is a simpler solution. You will battle our negotiator in hand-to-hand combat in the pit. The winner is the one left standing at the end of the fight, the loser dies and so does his entire faction.

"It is a quite marvelous spectacle, Captain," the First Prime drooled. "My negotiator is busy as we speak, perhaps you'd care to observe?"

He waved a hand and a screen above his head came to life. On it, a tall Kyrosian was pummeling a smaller man in a dirt-floor ring. The smaller Kyrosian was battered, bloodied and bruised in more places than Picard thought possible, while the taller man was hardly breaking a sweat. The beating, Picard couldn't bring himself to call it a fight, lasted only a minute longer. The taller Kryosian ended it with a powerful punch that drove his opponent into the

ground, where he twitched twice and then lay frighteningly still. The victor's face was amazingly free of any emotion as he received the applause of the crowd and a pair of men carted off the body of the loser.

"Congratulations, First Prime," the purple-robed man exclaimed. "Yet another victory!"

"Thank you, Second Prime," the First responded. "Well Captain, shall we begin the negotiation at first light tomorrow?"

"I don't think so."

Picard turned to Forelni in surprise. But Forelni ignored him and stepped toward the First Prime.

"Captain Picard is no longer the senior officer in command of this mission," Forelni's voice boomed in the shocked silence of the room. "Per Starfleet orders, I am assuming command of this mission. I will be 'negotiating' for the Federation, First Prime.

While the two Kyrosians conferred, Picard quickly addressed Forelni.

"Commander, I thought we agreed that the mission was under my command," Picard accused.

"Until diplomacy failed, Captain," Forelni shot back. "Last time I checked, fights to the death don't qualify as diplomatic solutions. Captain," he added quickly, heading off Picard's protest, "I have no doubt you can hold

your own in any fight and any man with your kind of record is no coward. But believe me when I tell you this, you wouldn't survive a fight against that," Forelni tipped his head at the screen and the First Prime's negotiator.

Before Picard could say another word, the First Prime spoke up.

"Very well," he began. "We will allow Commander Forelni to serve as Federation negotiator. You all will attend, tomorrow at first light. In the meantime, you will be escorted to your quarters for the night."

The First Prime waved them away and a squad of guards quickly hustled the away team to a single room. As they left, the guards locked the door behind them. Picard confronted Forelni before the lock clicked.

"Commander, I get the distinct feeling that you aren't the least bit surprised at this turn of events," he accused. "In fact, I believe this is exactly what you wanted all along. What else did you leave out of your briefing package?"

There was no glint of humor in his eyes as Forelni responded to Picard's charge.

"All of the facts were included in my briefing Captain," he retorted hotly. "It's unfortunate that it seems the rumors of the Kryosian custom of negotiation we'd heard of have turned out to be true. Regardless, it's quite

clear that the Kryosian's idea of diplomacy vastly differs from ours. This is what I've been trained to do Captain, now stand down and let me do my job."

"Very well, Commander," Picard replied. "It's your mission now. But I intend to file charges against you. It's clear to me you have manipulated the circumstances to your own purposes, up to and including the withholding of vital information that could have led to a peaceful, diplomatic solution of this crisis."

"File whatever you like, Captain," Forelni shot back. "At least you'll be alive to file it."

Forelni walked away from Picard, leaving the Captain fuming. Picard couldn't help but feel that he and his crew had been used and he was powerless to do anything about it but wait until the next morning. True to the First Prime's word, the guards arrived just as the sun rose above the horizon to escort the away team to the pit. Forelni was led to the arena floor below where his opponent was already waiting, while Picard and the others were seated next to the First Prime.

"Ah, Captain Picard, ladies," the First crooned. "A marvelous morning for negotiating."

"Yes, indeed," Picard answered curtly as the Second Prime stepped into the Prime's box and addressed the crowd. "Let the negotiations begin," he proclaimed.

Down below, the Kyrosian negotiator opened discussion with a stiff right cross to Forelni's jaw. The blow staggered the Etalyan and Picard was surprised to see blood streaming from the Commander's mouth. Etalyans were known for their physical strength, even a Vulcan would think twice about fighting an Etalyan. To Forelni's credit however, he responded with a flurry of impressive punches and kicks that would have brought down an entire army. The Kyrosian stood his ground, absorbed the punishment and backhanded Forelni into a sidewall.

Forelni picked himself up of the ground. Narrowing his eyes, he studied his opponent for a moment and launched a new attack. As the fight wore on, Picard marveled at the stamina of both men. One hour into the fight and both were still taking bone-crushing blows. Picard had little doubt he would have withstood ten minutes of such abuse. Blow after blow was thrown and landed without a single miss by either man until finally, the Kyrosian threw a haymaker that struck nothing but the air where Forelni's head had just been. Taking advantage of his opponent being off-balance, Forelni grabbed the extended arm and twisted it violently. Instead of bringing the Kyrosian to his knees in screaming agony, the man stood there while Forelni continued to twist the arm until

with a sickening, grinding rasp, the arm was torn completely out of its socket and ripped from the torso.

But instead of holding a bloody stump, Forelni was holding an arm that dangled wires and dripped lubricant. It was an arm that could only belong to an android. In the box above, the Second Prime leapt to his feet in shock, turning to face the First Prime with a look of disgust.

"You dare defile our most cherished custom," he spat. "How many of our people died at the hands of that abomination?!"

Picard ignored the commotion next to him, staying focused on the battle below. The android stared at its detached arm in bewilderment, but there was no surprise in Forelni's manner, as if he'd already known the true nature of the First Prime's champion. Instead, a feral grin came across Forelni's features as he plunged the disembodied arm, like a spear, into the android's chest. Electrical sparks rippled across both combatants, bathing them in sheets of blue fire until the android abruptly exploded. The force of the blast lifted Forelni high up and, for a moment, he was gracefully soaring through the air. But then Kyros' gravity snatched him cruelly from flight to slam him back down on the surface below. He bounced once, crashed down again and lay perfectly still.

Picard was certain the look of horror on the faces of Ro, Troi and Crusher were a match to his own. Then he heard the unmistakable whisper of a steel blade cutting through air, which ended in the *thunk* of that same blade burying itself in wood. Picard turned just in time to see the body of the First Prime tumble to the ground, followed closely by his head. The Second Prime was just letting go of his sword, leaving it buried in the chair.

"I'm sorry you had to see that, Captain," he began, "but there is no other response to such a dishonorable act." He addressed the guards, pointing down to Forelni. "Allow their Doctor to treat that man, lower the shield so they may contact their ship and release the ambassador and his party."

The men sprang into action, one escorted Crusher to the ring below, with Ro close behind.

"Captain, you and your people have been poorly treated," the Second Prime said regretfully. "All of you are free to leave Kyros in peace, and I would not blame your Federation if you never returned. But perhaps you might ask your ambassador if he would give negotiations, real negotiations, another chance?"

"I'm sure Ambassador Loomis will be more than pleased to begin anew," Picard assured the Second Prime, who looked back down as Crusher knelt down by Forelni.

"The First Prime has already paid for his crimes against Kyros, if the Federation desires reparations for your officer down there, I will offer myself as new First Prime."

"There has been enough bloodshed for one day, First Prime," Picard replied sadly. "I believe the best reparation would be a honest, above-board return to negotiations. The Federation and the Commander would both agree with that sentiment."

"A wise philosophy," the First Prime remarked, glancing below as Crusher tended to Forleni.

Crusher was dismayed at what she found. Electrical burns covered his face, arms and torso. Blood flowed from several wounds, and a trickle was running from one corner of his mouth. Even more shocking, he was conscious.

"Got a bandage, Doc," he quipped, his voice weak and raspy. "I think I nicked myself shaving."

Crusher ran her scanner over him, assessing the damage. She needed to get him up to sickbay and fast, but he needed to be stabilized first. Whipping out a hypo with one hand, she tapped her combadge with the other.

"*Enterprise*, standby by for emergency transport to sickbay," she barked, "and have a trauma team ready."

Ro, tears in her eyes, fell to her knees beside Forelni, but before she could say a word, he reached up and clamped a bloody hand on her shoulder.

"Ro," he husked. "I came to Kyros looking for the truth about Garon II. How much longer will you keep what happened hidden away? How long can you keep those skeletons locked up?" His eyes burned into hers, and his voice became clear and strong. "How much longer do you and I keep paying for the sins of others, Ro Laren?"

He let go of her then, falling back to the ground in a fit of coughing. Crusher quickly injected him with two more hypos and called for transport. Seconds later, they were gone, leaving Ro behind. She touched the spot where he had grabbed her and her hand came back sticky with red, human blood. Then the tears flowed and a stadium full of Kyrosians and two Starfleet officers watched as Ro curled up into a ball and sobbed.

CHAPTER FOUR

Amazingly, thanks to Crusher's efforts and to his heritage, Forelni was back on his feet and out of sickbay in three days. Ro had stayed away while he was in sickbay and had requested to be temporarily relieved of duty. Having heard Forelni's comments, Picard had granted the request. But he was curious to see what effect it would have on her.

Picard was walking on Deck 12, having just received an update from Ambassador Loomis, when he encountered Forelni. The man looked considerably better, but he was still a long way from robust health.

"Captain, I was just looking for you."

"And I for you," Picard replied. "I owe you an apology Commander. It's apparent that you knew the First Prime's negotiator was really an android. I would not have survived a battle with it."

"An unconfirmed rumor, I wasn't really sure until I hit it with my best punch," Forelni chuckled. "Damn near broke my hand. You needn't apologize, I did manipulate the mission to suit my own needs. It is I who should be apologizing."

"Seeing how well everything is working out Commander," Picard replied. "I think we can call it even."

"Agreed. Captain, could I impose upon you for one last favor?"

"What can I do for you Commander?"

"You know the real reason I took this mission."

"Ensign Ro," Picard replied and Forelni nodded in agreement. "What do you have in mind?"

Despite his injuries, that glint of mischief was back.

"I was hoping I could borrow a holodeck, your senior staff and your best transporter operator."

* * * * *

Ro woke up to find herself in a forest that bore absolutely no resemblance to the quarters she'd fallen asleep in. The place looked familiar to her, but she knew she wasn't on Kyros VI either.

"What the hell," she grumbled, picking herself up off the grassy mound she'd been sleeping on. After brushing off the twigs and dirt from her uniform, she tapped her combadge. "Ro to *Enterprise*, one to beam up."

Silence. She tried again and again, and with each attempt, silence was the only response, until she glanced down at her uniform and noticed it was an older issue, and

the combadge was slightly different. Her gaze went to her collar and the pips that identified her as a lieutenant.

"No," she whispered to herself, "this isn't possible. Computer, exit." Nothing. "Computer, end program and show me the exit!" she cried.

Nothing happened. A breeze rustled the trees and a small rodent scampered by, but no arch presented itself for her to escape. Behind a stand of bushes, shielded by the holodeck program, Forelni, Picard, Riker, Troi and Worf stood in the arch and watched the scene in silence. Intently watching Ro, Forelni muttered under his breath, "C'mon Ro, figure it out."

Ro slowly lifted her hand and tapped her combadge again,

"Ro to *Wellington*."

Forelni smiled and tapped a control in the arch.

"*Wellington* here, you're overdue Lieutenant. Status report." he said.

"Um, the Captain asked me to take a look at something," she stammered, still not believing that she was on Garon II again despite the evidence of her senses. "I'm sorry for the delay."

"Very well," Forelni responded calmly. "Keep in touch and don't separate from the away team again. *Wellington* out."

Ro shook her head again, "This can't be happening. It can't be."

"Why not?"

Ro spun around in shock. That voice, she thought, it can't be! Ro found herself face to face with the entire command crew of the Wellington. Standing with them was an elderly Bajoran man and a Cardassian, dressed in the uniform of the Obsidian Order.

"Well, Ro," the leader of the group, wearing the four pips of a Starfleet Captain, stepped forward to address the trembling Ro. "Why can't this be happening?"

"Because you're all dead," she replied.

"Ah, yes, that's right," he replied warmly. "And why exactly are we all dead, Ro?"

"Damn you, Captain Riggs," Ro exclaimed angrily. "You know why. I heard what you were planning to do."

"And you felt that death was a just penalty for our crimes?" the captain asked, insanely calm. "Is that why you rigged the explosive charge on our shipment? Because of what we planned to do?"

"Betray the Federation, sell out Bajor to the Cardassians," Ro aimed a look of pure hatred at the Bajoran behind Riggs. "All for personal profit and you have the nerve to ask why I had to stop you?"

"I told you to send her back up to the ship," the Cardassian interjected. "These Bajorans are a most untrustworthy race. Present company excepted, of course," he added with a nod at the Bajoran.

"See what you bargained with Kevas," Ro spat. "Did you think that being named Governor of Bajor would earn their respect? They were going to make you a puppet, to give the appearance that all was well on Bajor, so they could keep us under their thumb.

"And you Captain," she added, turning back to Riggs. "you were going to be hailed as a great peacemaker, raking in the glory and the money to retire a wealthy man on the backs of dead Bajorans. Yes, sir, what I did here was a just penalty for what you were going to do!"

"I thought so."

Ro stared at Riggs in surprise as the Captain and the others slowly faded away. She realized that Riggs hadn't spoken those last three words and slowly turned toward the direction they had come from. Forelni, standing just behind her in his all-black uniform, looked at her with a satisfied expression.

"Computer," he said, still looking at her, "save program and end."

The foliage of Garon II disappeared and was replaced by the grid of an Enterprise holodeck. Ro barely

registered the others standing off in a corner, her gaze fixed on Forelni.

"I've spent the last two years trying to find out what really happened on Garon II. I found some trace evidence of Cardassian and Bajoran DNA at the scene on Garon, but not enough to tell who it had been. It took a lot of digging to find out that Kevas Bern left Bajor in the company of Gul Temar of the Obsidian Order along with a lot of Federation credits. Their destination was Garon II," Forelni paused, stepping closer to Ro. "I rechecked the ship's logs and discovered two transmissions by Riggs to the Cardassian freighter Kevas and Temar were on. That same freighter had been in orbit around Garon II a week before Wellington arrived. It was returning to Garon II when the news of the tragedy was released. The freighter reversed course again and headed for Bajor, without Kevas or Temar. It didn't take much more digging to find out what the purpose of their meeting with Riggs was and then I knew why you did what you did. I just don't know why you didn't tell me. We could have stopped them without all of this trouble."

"I couldn't, I didn't..." Ro stammered.

"You didn't trust me?" he said sadly.

"Not you, Starfleet. I didn't know if they would stop Riggs and I couldn't risk Bajor."

"Starfleet wouldn't have allowed Riggs to get away with his plot, just like they won't let an officer throw away her career, no matter how noble the sacrifice."

Forleni held out his hand and Ro saw a pouch, puzzled she looked a question at him.

"A field commission, promoting you to the rank of lieutenant, along with a clean slate. Garon II is removed from your record, as is your court martial. A new hearing will be held and you will be found to have acted above and beyond the call of duty and a commendation will be issued," Forelni smiled broadly. "Starfleet is not much for admitting when they're wrong, but they do a good job at admitting when they're a little short of being right."

Ro stared at the pouch, mesmerized. She looked up at Forelni in disbelief. "You did all of this, you gave up a chance to command your own ship and nearly got yourself killed down there, for me? Why?" she asked.

"Because, Ro Laren," he began, "I found out a long time ago that wherever in the universe you were, that is where I wanted to be and it was much more important to me than anything else, even a ship."

Ro struggled to find words to respond, the look on her face was incredulous. Finally, she gave up on the attempt and simply took his face in both hands and kissed him. Almost as if grasping a porcelain doll, Forelni took

her in his arms and returned the kiss. Not wanting to intrude on the moment, Picard and the rest quietly exited the holodeck. But before the doors closed, Picard glanced back at the two officers. So typical of the very best of Starfleet, he mused, one officer sacrificed her career to save her homeworld and the other sacrificed his career path to save hers.

CHAPTER FIVE

Eventually, the negotiations concluded and the Enterprise moved on. Ro accompanied Forelni back to Starfleet Command for a new hearing on the Garon II incident. She would soon return to the Enterprise after attending advanced tactical training school and it seemed her career was back on track. Then came the mission from Admiral Nechayev to have Ro infiltrate the Maquis. But the mission ended in disaster and Riker returned with his report on Ro's desertion. Riker concluded by setting the pad in his hand on Picard's desk. He paused for a moment, seemingly searching for something to say to his Captain and his friend, anything to lift the dark mood that had settled in the room. But the words eluded him and he simply left Picard to his thoughts. Picard sat perfectly still in his chair, absorbing the impact of Ro's decision to turn her back on Starfleet, on him. After a few moments he levered himself up from the chair and walked over to the food replicator.

"Tea, Earl Gray, hot," he ordered, his voice barely above a whisper. A steaming cup materialized within seconds. Picard picked it up and raised it to his lips. But he

suddenly put it down untouched on his desk and looked out instead into the dark void of deep space beyond his office window. A beep from his desk interrupted his musings.

"Priority message for Captain Jean-Luc Picard," the computer intoned.

Odd, Picard thought, Priority messages are usually routed through the bridge. "Computer, accept communication."

The screen flickered from the UFP seal to a close-up of a recent Enterprise visitor.

"Commander Forelni, I can't say I'm surprised."

"You shouldn't be," Forelni replied dryly. "Nor should Nechayev. What did the two of you think she would do, given her history, when you sent her to infiltrate the Maquis? Are you really surprised by her actions?"

"No, I suppose not," Picard admitted ruefully, a slight smile tugging at his lips, a smile that quickly turned into a suspicious frown.

"Commander, I haven't yet submitted a report to Starfleet Command regarding the conclusion of this mission, how is it that you already know what has happened here?" Picard accused.

"She's been in contact with me since the mission began," Forelni replied. "She had doubts from the

beginning and they only got worse with each passing hour. She told me what she was planning to do."

"And you encouraged her to throw away a promising career, even after all you went through to clear her record?" Picard was incredulous. "I must confess Commander, I'll never understand why so many Starfleet officers are resigning their commissions to join up with the Maquis."

"Perhaps they disagree with the Federation's policy regarding the DMZ and the Cardassians," Forelni began. "Or maybe they see themselves as Davy Crockett at the Alamo."

"I don't follow."

"Crockett was a former Congressman from the United States, the fight at the Alamo was between Texas settlers and Mexico, it wasn't Crockett's fight and it was a hopeless one at that, but there he was anyway, because he thought it was the right thing to do." Forelni leaned back from the pickup allowing Picard to see that he was in civilian clothes and on a ship. "These officers feel Starfleet is wrong and they've chosen to fight on the right side, even if the fight is a losing one. It's a matter of principle, Captain, not disloyalty."

Picard had to concede the point, even as he registered the fact that Forelni was sitting on the empty

bridge of a small Starfleet vessel in civilian clothing. Suddenly their conversation took on a whole new meaning.

"Oh, not you too, Commander."

Forelni smiled to soften the blow.

"As of five minutes before I called you. I'm afraid I requisitioned this ship and some supplies before I tendered my resignation." He paused long enough to reset a control in front of him.

"I estimate it will be a few days before Starfleet receives it, red tape being what it is these days, but technically, I'm no longer allowed to be addressed as Commander Forelni anymore." He glanced back down at the console before continuing. "By the way Captain, please give Starfleet my thanks, and the thanks of the Maquis, for their generous donation to our cause."

Picard shook his head in disbelief. "Why?"

"Because it's the right thing to do, Captain, and I've always wondered what it would be like, fighting for a good cause, even when the fight looks hopeless." Forelni leaned forward and seemed to gaze right into Picard's eyes. "Besides, I once said that some time ago I discovered that being with her, no matter where in the universe it was, had become more important to me than anything else in my life."

Picard was struck silent by the sheer honesty of the moment. Whether or not he agreed with their decision, it was their right to make it and he had to respect that right.

"Captain, just one more thing. Tell Starfleet that our dispute is with the Cardassians. We will not engage Federation ships unless we are given no other choice. In a way we're still Starfleet officers, we don't want to fight our friends if we don't have to."

"I will relay your message Com...Mr. Forelni, but I fear a conflict between Starfleet and the Maquis will take place despite our best intentions," Picard predicted. "Nevertheless, good luck to you both, and tell Ro, she never gave me cause to be disappointed in her, not even now."

"Thank you, Captain." Forelni's smile, which had been full of mischief, turned warm and serious. "She'll be glad to hear that. Good bye, Sir."

The screen blanked out to be replaced by the UFP seal. Picard shut the computer off and returned to the window, pausing long enough to pick up his tea. Once there he took a long sip, feeling the liquid's warmth spread through him and some of the gloom that had enveloped him melted away.

Looking out at deep space Picard realized he wasn't disappointed at all. In fact, he was proud of them both and

there was even a small part of him that would like to have joined them in their stand against the Cardassians. Taking another sip of tea Picard addressed the universe beyond his window.

"Goodbye," he whispered with genuine warmth, "and *bonne chance mon amis*."

CHAPTER SIX

Office of the President of the Federation, Paris, Earth. Five years later...

Bari Forelni looked out the window at the iconic Eiffel Tower from an office he never expected to call his own. It was still raining outside, had been for three days now, but no one out on the streets complained. For the past six months since the Dominion War had ended, no one on Earth complained about anything. They were just happy to be alive and at peace again.

If only they knew how close we came to losing it all, he thought.

“You seem unusually quiet today, Mr. President,” Counselor Bokerah Brumley observed from behind him. He turned from the window and regarded her for a moment. She was seated next to his desk watching him quietly. This week she had chosen to weave in blue and purple highlights into her jet black hair.

Initially he'd been reluctant to have a counselor, a practice only recently instituted by Starfleet and within the Federation's administration. But the Earth woman assigned

to him had proven to be a valuable asset in his first year as Federation President. He'd come to appreciate her advice and found her affinity for all things chicken-related to be an endearment.

"I find myself becoming more and more reflective these days, Counselor," he admitted, cupping a clear crystal - hung from a chain around his neck - in the palm of one hand. "When I took this job I honestly thought I'd be the last person to hold this position."

"And yet many credit you for saving the Federation," she noted.

"Hah," he waved a hand dismissively, letting the crystal settle gently against his light tan tunic, and returned to his desk. "That credit belongs to the officers on the front lines, not to me. Whatever happened to Ben Sisko out there he's the one who saved the Federation from the Dominion and I daresay the Klingons and the Romulans. If he were still alive I'd have had him shipped home and plastered him with so many medals he couldn't move without an anti-grav belt on."

He sat down in his chair and let go a soft sigh.

"Now, I wonder, can the Federation be saved from itself?"

"Sir?"

“I have been placed in a rather... delicate... situation by the Council,” he explained. “I’m about to give an order that I do not agree with.”

“You could always refuse to give it,” she pointed out.

“I could,” he agreed. “And I would be impeached by the Council and removed. My replacement would be brought in with the understanding that he or she will give the order that I refused to issue.”

“Is it that odious?”

“It is ill-conceived,” he replied. “I understand why they made the decision, and for the short-term it even makes a kind of sense. But the long-term harm it will do...”

He shook his head and leaned back.

“I’ll be 275 years old in a few months,” he remarked. “If I make it another half-century I’ll have lived longer than my father did. I’d like to hope there will still be a Federation after I am gone.”

Before she could formulate a reply, the President’s Chief of Staff, Jim McCoy, entered. While not an empath or telepath, she always sensed amusement from the President whenever the man entered the room. She’d never worked up the courage to ask the President why this was so before.

“Why do you smile like that every time your aide walks into the room?” she asked quietly before the man got too close.

“Because since the first day I arrived and discovered that he’d been assigned to me,” he explained, “he reminds me, Counselor, that the universe has one hell of a sense of humor.”

“Mr. President,” McCoy stopped in front of the desk. “Mr. Glassey is outside. He says he has the information you asked for.”

“Let’s not keep the man waiting, Jim.”

Collin Glassey, a lieutenant in Starfleet Intelligence, was shown in and waved to one of the unoccupied chairs.

“If I need to leave...” Brumley offered.

“No need for that, Counselor,” he replied. “Just taking care of some family business. Well, Lieutenant, what have you found?”

“We’ve confirmed the rumors,” Glassey replied. “He’s still alive. We’ve reason to believe that he is en route to Deep Space Nine. As for the whereabouts of his wife, we are not absolutely certain, but her last known location was the Dominion prison camp on Nigassi.”

“I see.”

“Isn’t Nigassi a Federation planet?” Brumley asked.

“Yes, ma’am,” Glassey replied after the President nodded assent for him to answer. “But they sold out to the Dominion, along with four other planets, and agreed to house prisoners of war taken by the Dominion forces and their allies.”

“Jim,” Forelni said. “Contact Admiral Nechayev. Tell her to proceed to DS9 and intercept my son there. Tell her she is not to take no for an answer when she recalls him to duty in Starfleet. Then arrange transport for me to Etalya. I want to be en route by tomorrow evening at the very latest. Thank you, Lieutenant.”

“Yes, sir,” McCoy replied, collecting Glassey on his way out.

“Your son?” Brumley asked. “Why would he say no, especially if you are the one asking...whatever it is your asking him to do?”

“Because my eldest son, Paulo, is under the mistaken impression that I am angry at him for leaving Starfleet and joining the Maquis. I suppose it does not help that his brother Marco remained in Starfleet and was killed in action.

“Before you ask, Counselor,” he continued, once again holding the crystal. “I am proud of both of my sons and always have been. Unfortunately, my eldest son inherited one of my lesser traits: He’s as stubborn as a

Trilanian Mule. And the sad truth is, that trait is what he is going to need most on the mission I'm about to send him on."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Paulo Forelni slipped into Quarks, having just arrived on Deep Space Nine. He looked over the bar but did not find the face he was looking for.

Looks like Bethke is running late again. He sighed inwardly as he headed for the deserted end of the bar. He laid his satchel down on the bar, resting a forearm on top, and waited for the Ferengi bartender to finish serving the two customers, a hulking Lurian and an older humanoid man, at the other end. The rest of the place was fairly quiet aside from a couple of people gathered around the Dabo table. His eyes lingered for a moment on the Dabo girl running the game, namely on her hands.

She was cheating.

There was a time he would have done something about that. But that was another lifetime ago and petty theft was not among his concerns. So, he turned back and waited for the bartender to take his order, which was going to be delayed as the Ferengi was arguing with the humanoid customer.

“You’re insane, hoo-man,” the Ferengi exclaimed. “I’m telling you...”

“And I’m telling you.” The man put down the large cigar he’d been puffing on and picked up a tall, thin glass of some amber-colored liquor from in front of the Lurian. “Anything this walking slug can drink, I can drink twice over. As sure as my name is Dan Butler, if I can survive getting run over by a missile and tossed halfway across the quadrant and thirty years into the future, then I can drink this swill down.”

“I really wouldn’t do that,” the Ferengi warned as Butler raised the glass and downed its contents in one gulp.

“There,” he said, thumping the empty glass down on the bar with a smug smile on his face. “What did I tell you? Nothing to worry about...”

Butler paused, a pained look coming over his face as he clutched his gut.

“Oh no,” he said suddenly. “Not again...”

One instant he was there, the next he vanished in a haze of green smoke that quickly dissipated until nothing at all remained of the man but the smoldering cigar he’d left behind.

“I tried to warn him,” the Ferengi said to the Lurian, quickly sweeping away any evidence of Butler having been at the bar. “What? You think I want to give Kira a reason to shut down my bar again? As far I am

concerned no one named Butler ever stepped foot in my establishment. And that goes for you too, Morn!”

“Hey, Ears,” Forelni called out, seeing that Quark’s business at the other end of the bar had concluded. “I’d like some service down here if you don’t mind. Got anything that won’t reduce your customer to vapor?”

“I did try to warn him,” Quark repeated as he made his way down.

“That you did,” Forelni allowed. “Which is why I’m not going to say anything is anyone asks me about Mr. Butler. And that is why you are going to produce a bottle of Etalyan wine and not charge me an outrageous price for it or for the very clean glass you are also going to provide.”

“Now why should I make a reasonable profit on this rare vintage?” Quark replied as he pulled out a bottle of Etalyan wine, a not-so-rare vintage 2072, from below the bar along with a relatively clean glass.

“Because,” Forelni replied, placing a strip of gold-pressed latinum on the bar, “you are going to make a tidy profit on providing me other... services.”

“The wine is on the house, friend,” Quark said, claiming the strip and smoothly pocketing it.

“Thank you,” Forelni poured a glass and let the wine breathe for a moment. “You can start by telling me if

you've had any word about a smuggler named Bruce Bethke. I was supposed to meet him here."

"Take your time with that bottle," Quark answered. "You'll have a long wait ahead. Bethke got picked up by the Bajorans last week. They might let him out of prison in ten years or so."

Quark departed to deal with a newly arrived customer, leaving Forelni to stew over the bad news. He lifted the glass and drank about half of it. *Looks like Dad had a good year back then*, he noted trying to figure out where to turn next with Bethke out of the picture.

He was still sitting there an hour later when a Starfleet Admiral walked in. He didn't need an introduction. He'd crossed paths with Admiral Nechayev once or twice before his 'resignation' from Starfleet. She looked around the bar, locked eyes with him and then made a direct path to where he was sitting.

"Good evening, Commander," she said as she took the seat next to him, waving away Quark before he could approach.

"It's just plain Mr. Forelni now," he replied simply. "I haven't been in Starfleet for years."

"Not anymore, Commander," she repeated his old rank as she placed a chip on the bar in between them. "You've just been recalled to active duty."

“Last I heard not even the C-I-C could do that,” he left the chip on the bar. “And since all Maquis were pardoned by the current President you can’t even arrest me and drag me back.”

“True on both counts,” she agreed. “But within that pardon the President included a clause in the small print. It gives him sole authority to recall you to duty. He just did, Commander. And before you say no, your father instructed me not to take no for an answer from you. Pick it up, Commander.”

“What’s on it?” he asked, not making a move.

“Your orders,” she replied. “You will rendezvous with the Enterprise-E and lead a recovery mission to Nagassi, near the Cardassian border. It seems it was used as a prisoner of war camp for the Dominion toward the end of the war. You will oversee the repatriation of all Federation personnel still alive and recovery of any remains.”

“And why would I do that?” he asked. “It sounds like a mission Picard could easily handle.”

“Let us say there are certain...security concerns,” she answered. “Your father wants you to handle it.”

“And those are?”

“On the chip that you are going to pick up, Commander.”

“You still haven’t given me a good reason why, Admiral.”

“Because on a partial roster of Federation personnel being held there that we obtained,” she replied, getting up. “Is the name Ro Laren.”

“My wife died on Athos IV almost three years ago, Admiral.”

“It appears that you were misinformed, Commander. The Jem’Hadar took some prisoners after all and she was among their number. She was alive when she was placed in the camp on Nagassi. As to her current status, we simply do not know. The rest of the information you need is on that chip, along with a holo-vid from your father fully explaining your mission. My ship leaves in two hours. I suggest you use one of the holosuites here for the briefing, get yourself presentable and be on my ship in ninety minutes.”

Nechayev turned and left the bar without another word. Forelni stared at the chip for half a minute, swore, snatched it up and headed for the nearest open holosuite.

For three years he’d been a dead man walking, looking only to hunt down the last of those that had betrayed the location of the last Maquis hideout to the Jem’Hadar and led to the death of his wife. He could only hope that somehow she’d managed to survive all this time.

He wasn't sure what his reaction would be if he got to Nagassi and discovered she hadn't.

CHAPTER EIGHT

“Admiral Nechayev,” Picard greeted. “Commander Forelni. Welcome aboard the *Enterprise*.”

“Thank you, Captain,” she replied smoothly without stepping off the pad. “I wish I could stay longer but my ship is required elsewhere.”

“She thinks she needs to make sure you and I get along, Captain,” Forelni stepped off the pad. “Me being such a dangerous traitor and all.”

“I am confident both of you will carry out your orders as Starfleet officers.” She favored the Etalyan with a cool look. “Captain, I only have time to remain on board long enough to answer any questions you may have regarding your orders. Make them brief.”

“The only question I have at this time,” Picard replied, “is one regarding the wisdom of putting a former Maquis in command of the mission. I am certain my crew and I can handle delivering relief supplies and recovering our people.”

“If that were the sole purpose for the mission, Captain, I would agree. But your orders come directly from the Federation Council and have been co-signed by the

President and Starfleet's C-I-C. Commander Forelni is in charge of the mission. Shall I put him in charge of your ship as well?"

"That won't be necessary," Picard relented.

"Good, now that everything is settled, I'll be returning to my ship. Good luck, gentlemen. Ensign, energize."

The Admiral beamed back to her ship, leaving Picard and Forelni to engage in a staring contest.

"Ensign," Forelni addressed the woman at the transporter controls. "Get lost."

"That will be all, Ensign. Thank you," Picard said when the woman failed to leave the console.

"If you feel the need to haul off and slug me," Forelni began when the doors closed shut. "Or, berate me with a long-winded speech, Captain, get it out of your system now. Once we get underway to Nagassi, I don't want to hear it."

"I don't know what kind of strings you pulled to get back into Starfleet..." Picard began. Forelni cut him off.

"I didn't pull anything, Picard, I was drafted back into Starfleet Special Security. Trust me I'd rather be anywhere else than here. But I've got a job to do, so I am going to do it."

“So no one else in Starfleet can do this?” Picard retorted. “And you had every right to say no to being recalled. So why are you here, Commander?”

“As for the first question, apparently a lot of people seem to think so,” Forelni shot back. “As for the second, you haven’t seen the names of the detainees at Nigassi, have you?”

“That information has not been provided.”

“Well, there’s one name on the list, Captain, that concerns both of us. She was sent there three years ago and I pray she will still be alive when we get there.”

“You don’t mean?”

“Yes, my wife, Ro Laren. So I am going to Nigassi to recover my wife and make a report back to Command on whether or not Nagassi, along with the other four planets that betrayed the Federation, should be allowed back in. In the meantime, you will recover Federation personnel being held there and, if I give the go ahead, deliver the container that was beamed aboard your ship just before I was.”

“About that container,” Picard said. “It has a security code on it. What is inside?”

“The manifest listed it as relief supplies, didn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“Then that must be what is inside. Any further questions, Captain?”

“Not at this time,” Picard relented. “For the duration of the mission, Commander, I would appreciate it if you would confine yourself to quarters until we reach Nigassi.”

“That suits me fine, Captain,” Forelni replied and departed without waiting to be dismissed. Picard pursed his lips and stared at the door after it closed. He tapped his combadge.

“Picard to bridge,” he called out.

“Bridge here, sir,” Riker replied.

“Assemble the command staff in my ready room in one half hour, Number One,” Picard ordered.

“Aye, sir. Did he shed any light on the mission?”

“No, he did not,” Picard replied. “There is something off about this mission, Will. I don’t like it and until we find out what’s really going on I want the Commander kept under close watch, even when he goes down to Nagassi.”

“That might not be so easy to do.”

“Likely not, Number One, but we’re going to do our best anyway.”

* * * * *

Nigassi was a strange world, one half of its surface was barren ice, the other a near paradise. While the citizens of Nigassi enjoyed the comforts of paradise, they had relegated the prison camp to the barren ice. Forelni, Riker, Dr. Crusher and a dozen members from Security beamed down to the surface in parkas and full weather gear.

They materialized inside the camp, a collection of five buildings in all, on the frozen plane. There were no fences up and one lone hill of ice thrust out from the surface at a height of thirty meters just behind the largest building, which lay a good distance from the other four buildings. Some type of flitter was parked near the four buildings. A small man, accompanied by three others, exited one of the small buildings and greeted the landing party.

“Welcome,” he said. “I am Commandant Zar. You must be Commander Forelni.”

“Commandant,” Forelni returned. “This is Commander Riker, Doctor Crusher and my security team. I was informed that you alone would be waiting for us here.”

“Well, I retained a small unit from my own Security forces, for my own protection.”

“Interesting concept of Security you have here, Commandant,” Riker said. “No fences?”

“We are hundreds of miles from the nearest shelter,” the man replied. “At night you would freeze solid in minutes. Where would anyone escaping go? No, our prisoners know there is no point in leaving their barracks.”

“You hold all four hundred prisoners in that one building?” Forelni asked, pointing at the largest.

“We can if we have to. Fortunately we are holding just two hundred and thirty-six prisoners at this time.”

“We were told you had over four hundred,” Crusher pointed out.

“Oh, we do, but only two hundred and thirty six are housed there,” Zar replied. “The other one hundred and seventy-nine are located in there.”

He pointed to an opening in the ice hill.

“The prisoners call it ‘The Cave of Tears’,” he explained. “They carved it out of the ice themselves when the first of them died. I suppose if they’d remained here we’d eventually have all of them in there.”

“Nearly two hundred dead?” Crusher replied, shocked. “What have you been doing to these people?”

“This side of Nigassi is not an easy place to live upon, Doctor. I’m afraid your people just didn’t have what it takes.”

“Are there any other personnel of yours here, Commandant,” Forelni broke in.

“Just the four of us.”

“Then perhaps the four of you should be on your way back to your government to report the closure of this camp?”

“Well, we should remain and make sure...”

Forelni ended the conversation by drawing out his phaser and rapidly shooting holes into the small structures, exposing them to the bitter cold. When he finished with them he took aim at the flutter.

“You are welcome to depart in your flutter right now,” Forelni offered, “or you can walk back home. Your choice, Commandant.”

The four Nigassians turned and fled for the flutter and quickly departed for the warmer side of the planet.

“There might have been some useful information inside one of those buildings,” Riker pointed out. “IDs of the dead for example?”

“Forelni to Data,” Forelni tapped his combadge. “Did you get it?”

“Yes, Commander,” Data replied. “We completed a full download of the camp’s computer three minutes ago.”

“Thank you, Forelni out.” He tapped the badge again and looked at Riker. “Not my first rodeo, Commander.”

“No, I suppose it isn’t, Commander.”

“Let’s get over there and see what condition our people are in,” Forelni ordered. “I need two men standing guard out here, in case our Commandant gets a bad case of bravery and tries to come back. Rotate two men out every fifteen minutes until we are ready to depart. I doubt it’s a good idea to stay outside longer than needed in these conditions.”

He led his team to the large building and stepped inside. It smelled just like you’d expect a place overcrowded with less than perfect sanitary conditions would. People lay on cots stacked three high while others leaned up against walls or milled about.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Forelni announced as he stepped further in. “My name is Commander Paulo Forelni. We are here to take you home. Those of you who are able, help those who are not to get ready to be checked by our Doctor and beamed aboard our ship. We’ll have food and clean clothes for you up there.

“Doctor,” he said, looking over at Crusher. “I suggest you have your medical staff beam down to assist and you should probably have Counselor Troi come down too, Commander. It looks like these people are going to need as much help as we can give them. And have a burial detail ready to beam down, we’re going to need help recovering our dead.”

While Riker made the call, Forelni wandered deeper into the building, scanning each face for the one he sought. On the third attempt to ask if anyone knew where she was a frail man in a tattered Starfleet uniform pointed to the far corner.

“Try the Doctor’s tent,” he said.

Forelni made his way over, stopping to reassure those who asked that they were going to be alright. A small tent, made from thin worn-out blankets had been erected. Next to the tent, a small toddler played with something that resembled a toy. A woman, in science blue, stepped out as he approached.

“Doctor?”

“Not a doctor,” she replied. “I was a medic on the *Excalibur*, but I’m the closest thing to it here.”

“I’m looking for Ro Laren,” he replied. “Is she here?”

The woman glanced down at the toddler and then quickly back at Forelni.

“You’re Paulo,” she said. “Paulo Forelni?”

“Yes.”

“Then this is your son,” she stooped down and gathered up the boy. “His name is Marco.”

“And Ro?” he asked as he took the boy from her. The child looked healthy despite the conditions and had a lot of his mother in his face.

“I’m sorry, Commander, but she’s out in The Cave of Tears with the others. We couldn’t bury them so we laid them on shelves of ice inside the cave and carved their names and Fleet IDs in the ice above them.”

“When?” he said, feeling a pain in his chest.

“Six months ago. If we’d had any medicine we might have saved her but they barely give us enough food to survive here. Your son is a sort of camp mascot, the only child here. We’ve taken turns sharing what little food we have to keep him healthy.”

“Thank you,” he whispered and turned away to find Riker and Troi standing nearby. Troi’s eyes were bright.

“I’m sorry, Commander,” Riker said. Forelni nodded and tapped his combadge.

“Forelni to Picard.”

“Picard here, Commander.”

“We have nearly two hundred and forty survivors and just under two hundred dead down here, Captain. They have been placed in an ice cave and not buried. Have the burial detail beam down and report to me outside.”

“We’ll have them down there in ten minutes, Commander,” Picard replied. “Any word on Ro Laren?”

“She’s out in the ice cave, Captain. Forelni out.”

He stepped over to Troi and held out Marco.

“Counselor, would you please make sure my son is taken aboard until I beam up?”

“Of course, Commander,” she replied, taking possession of the boy. “Hello, Marco.”

The boy smiled at his new companion.

“Commander, take over evacuating these people in here,” Forelni ordered. “I’ll take command of the burial detail.”

“Are you sure you want to do that?” Riker asked.

“It isn’t real until I see her body, Commander,” Forelni replied then walked away.

“Deanna?” Riker asked as they watched him head for the exit.

“Pain, Will,” she replied sadly. “For three years he thought she was dead, then for a brief time there was hope that she was alive. Now that hope is gone and all that remains inside him is pain.”

* * * * *

Forelni met the detail of thirty and led them to the cave entrance.

“We have nearly two hundred bodies to recover,” he explained. “Make sure you ID each one before beaming them up. Whoever discovers Ro Laren, you will inform me and do nothing until I get there. Is this understood?”

They all nodded in the affirmative.

“We have a hard task ahead of us,” he said. “Let’s go get our people out of there and take them home.”

The bodies inside were perfectly preserved by the ice, as were the carved IDs. They quickly worked their way through the process: ID the body, place it into a body bag, scan the bag’s ID code and enter the ID info then beam the body up.

Ten minutes into the process, Forelni got the call.

“Commander, we found her in the third tunnel branch.”

“On my way.”

He made his way back to the branch, finding the chamber empty save for one body and an Ensign from the burial detail.

“We cleared the rest out, Commander,” the woman reported. “So you could have some time, sir. We’ve already done the scan for you. I’m sorry.”

“Thank you, Ensign,” he replied, grateful for the gesture. “I’ll tend to her. Go help the others and contact me when we’ve evacuated everyone.”

“Aye, sir,” she replied and left.

He slowly approached Ro. The ice had preserved her, she looked as if she was merely sleeping. The illusion held until he gently touched her face and found it as cold as the ice she reposed on.

They’d fought, their last day together. She wanted to go to Athos IV with the others, while he argued to continue with hit and run attacks on whatever targets they could find. Never thinking it would be the last words between them, they’d parted in anger. He’d never seen or spoken to her since that day and now he never would.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered, even though she could not forgive him.

He sat there silent and unmoving for several minutes before he unfolded the bag and gently worked her into it and sealed it shut.

“Riker to Forelni,” his combadge pierced the silence.

He tapped his badge. “Go ahead, Commander.”

“We’re beaming the last group up now, Commander.”

“Very good, I’m on my way out with Ro,” he replied. “I’ll beam up as soon as we’re outside.”

He carefully gathered her up and carried her out of the caves. The sun was setting as he exited. He took one

last look around and then called up for beam-up. Picard was waiting for him in the Transporter Room, along with two men holding an anti-grav stretcher.

“Commander,” Picard said as Forelni gently laid his burden down on the stretcher. “My condolences.”

“Place her in stasis until I can arrange to take her home,” Forelni ordered the two men, who carried her out of the room. He turned to face Picard. “My son?”

“Counselor Troi took him down to Sick Bay for a checkup. I can take you down to see him,” Picard offered. The Commander looked old, blasted and was far too quiet for Picard’s liking.

“Not yet, Captain,” Forelni replied. “There is one last task to perform before the mission is over.”

“I can tend to this for you, Commander.”

“Thank you, Captain, but this is my job to finish. Shall we go to the Bridge?”

“As you wish, Commander.”

The two men rode up to the Bridge in silence. Picard stepped out and took his place in the command deck. Forelni walked over to tactical.

“Mr. Worf, open a channel to the other ships in the task force.”

“They’re on standby waiting for you, Commander,” Work reported. “They have beamed their containers down and await you sending out the access code.”

“Very well then, open a channel to the Nigassi Council of Elders. And beam down the container to their chamber.”

“On screen,” Work replied after a few seconds. “Transport complete.”

“Ah, Captain,” the Elder said. “We just received the container you promised. I trust you have recovered all of your people?”

“We have, Elder,” Picard replied evenly.

“I take it then we’ll be allowed to rejoin the Federation?”

“That is not a decision I will be a part of, sir. My only purpose here was to recover our people and deliver the container.”

“I see,” the Elder replied. “And the access code to open it?”

“Will be provided by Commander Forelni.”

“Worf, bring up the other ships on the screen now,” Forelni ordered and made his way down to the command deck.

“On screen,” Worf replied, and the main screen split into five views.

“Gentlemen, patch me into the leaders of the planets you’ve been assigned to.”

Four of the view switched from bridge views to those of the ruling halls and chambers of the other four worlds that had joined with the Dominion.

“I assume you all have received the containers?” All five leaders nodded. “Very good. Access the control panel and it will ask for the code.”

The five did so and Forelni could see the containers’ lock display asking for the three-digit code.

“The code you will each enter is six-six-six,” Forelni instructed. “Do so now and you will be rewarded as promised.”

Picard frowned at the numbers as all five began entering them.

“Commander...,”

Before he could finish the thought the views of all five cut to black and the view screen switched to a view of the planet below, the green side of the world and dead center, where the Hall of Elders stood, a mushroom cloud rose into the sky.

“Sir!” Worf called out. “A massive detonation at the Hall of Elders. The entire planet has been hit with an EMP. No sign of communications or any electronic activity

below. The other ships report similar explosions on the worlds they are orbiting.”

“Commander,” Picard confronted. “Explain this act of... terrorism!”

“Mr. Data,” Forelni said calmly. “When I gave out the access code, it should have unlocked a file marked ‘666’ in the orders this ship received prior to my arrival. Please access that file and read its contents to your Captain.”

“Accessing,” Data replied, then looked at Picard with his best startled expression.

“What is it, Data?” Picard asked. “What was in that file?”

“By order of the Federation Council,” Data intoned, “and co-signed by Federation President Bari Forelni and Starfleet Commander-In-Chief Lyr J’Havre: The governments of the planets Nigassi, Coverone, Hushicki, Wivern II and Lyveel have engaged in war crimes against the Federation. For those crimes they have been found guilty and punishment has been rendered. A full blockade of all five planets is now in effect for the next six months. The five planets will receive no aid from Starfleet or be allowed to receive aid from any other source during that time. All five planets are on their own.”

“I don’t believe this,” Riker said as Picard looked at Forelni in shock.

“Don’t look at me like that, Picard,” Forelni said. “This wasn’t my idea.”

“But you went along with it,” Picard objected. “You knew what was going to happen. You could have prevented this and you didn’t.”

“I said it wasn’t my idea, Picard. I never said I disagreed with it.”

“Is this the kind of Federation you want,” Picard thundered. “One that sanctions cold-blooded murder?”

“Maybe you should go down to your ship’s morgue, Captain,” Forelni fired back. “And ask the one hundred and eighty people lying inside of it that question. And who knows how many more are lying in the morgues’ of the other four ships.”

“And that is supposed to justify this?” Riker asked.

“Apparently the Council and a lot of other people in the chain of command think so.”

“There will be an accounting of this matter, Commander,” Picard promised.

“From whom, Picard?” Forelni asked as he headed for the turbolift. “Everyone you could file a grievance with signed off on this mission. Protest all you like, Picard. No one will care.”

“Including you, Commander?”

“Especially me, Captain,” Forelni replied without looking back as he stepped into the turbolift and the doors closed behind him.

CHAPTER NINE

Picard stood seething as the doors closed on the turbo lift. He refused to believe that someone up the chain of command wouldn't share his outrage over what had just happened here.

"Captain!" the officer at tactical exclaimed. "A ship is coming out of warp...it's massive, sir!"

"On screen," Picard commanded, forgetting for the moment his displeasure with the recently departed Forelni.

"Aye, sir," the officer replied. "Configuration unknown, sir, but it is signaling that it is a Starfleet vessel. The U.S.S. *Seeker*, NCC 2009. They are hailing us."

Picard studied the ship pulling into orbit above Nigassi, well within transporter range of his ship. It was massive indeed. He'd never seen a ship of such size. It had no saucer section, just a massive flat-bottomed hull with four warp nacelles, two on each side. There was a section of the ship that sat on top of the hull near the bow that appeared to be its bridge.

"It must have at least a hundred decks," Riker remarked and Picard heard the awe in his Exec's voice. He had to admit he was feeling somewhat awestruck himself.

“Put them on, Lieutenant,” he ordered.

Nechayev appeared on the screen.

“Captain,” she began without preamble, “I’ll be beaming aboard your ship in three minutes with a VIP. You, Commander Forelni, Commander Riker, and Commander Data will meet me in your Transporter Room. *Seeker* out.”

“Someone’s in a hurry,” Riker noted.

“Apparently,” Picard replied. “Number One, Mr. Data, let’s go meet the Admiral. And get word to our guest that his presence is required as well.”

* * * * *

Forelni stepped into the Transporter Room just as two figures began to form on the pad. He’d briefly considered ignoring the summons but figured he could be thrown into the brig until he formally resigned from Starfleet again. He supposed he shouldn’t have been surprised to see who the two new arrivals were.

“Mr. President,” Picard stepped forward. “If we had known...,”

“Which is why I forbade the Admiral here to tell you,” Bari Forelni replied. “I’ve had more than my fill of pomp and ceremony, Captain.”

“Of course, sir,” Picard said. “May I introduce my officers? My First Officer, William Riker, and Commander Data.”

Bari Forelni briefly shook hands with both and then turned to his son.

“Well, it looks like you’ve managed quite well out here, son,” he said.

“We fulfilled the mission parameters, Father,” Paulo Forelni replied evenly. “Although the Captain here does not seem to agree with them.”

“Oh?” Bari replied, turning to Picard. “You object to the Council’s decision regarding the punishment of the five traitorous planets, Captain?”

“Yes, sir, I do,” Picard stood his ground. “I consider it barbaric and criminally wrong.”

“You do?” Bari replied. “Well, Captain, let me clue you in on something. So do I.”

The room was struck silent. Picard finally found his voice again.

“But you signed the orders yourself,” he pointed out.

“Yes, as did the C-I-C,” Bari replied. “If we hadn’t we both would have been out of a job and our replacements would have signed them anyway.”

“And before you point out that at least I would not have my name associated with it,” the President continued, “at least this way I would still be in a position to do something to mitigate what has happened out here.”

“What do you mean?”

“Commander Data,” Bari looked over at the android. “What is the date and time on Earth right now? In Paris to be precise?”

“It is midnight and the date is September 1st, Mr. President,” Data replied immediately.

Bari closed his eyes and took a deep breath, slowly letting it back out, like a man freed from prison after many years.

“Mr. Data,” he said. “There was a file marked 777 in the orders packet the *Enterprise* received. This file was locked. You will find that is no longer the case now. Please access that file and report its contents to us.”

“Yes, sir,” Data replied, cocking his head slightly as he access the requested file. As he had before he affected a startled expression.

“Mr. Data?” Picard prodded.

“It is the President’s resignation, taking effect at this time,” Data replied. “It also states the Council has agreed to abide with his final two orders which are listed in the file.

“The first,” Data continued, “countermands the six-month embargo of the five planets and has ordered several ships to bring relief supplies to the planets and begin efforts to rebuild. They are also to be re-admitted to the Federation with immediate effect.”

“But why go through with it...?” Picard asked.

“Because the Council wanted their pound of flesh, Captain,” Bari explained. “There was no way to prevent them getting that. You don’t know how close we came to losing the war, Captain. Starfleet was preparing to ask for terms just before Sisko pulled that rather large rabbit out of his hat. These five planets throwing in with the Dominion put us in a very bad position, Picard. The vast majority of member planets are not happy with them right now. And I can’t say as I blame them.

“But the punishment did not fit the crime,” Bari continued. “So I arranged to have the explosive charges set to only take out the government centers, so that those directly responsible for the betrayal to the Federation, as well as the deaths of our people in their prison camps, would bear the brunt of the punishment.

“The EMP flash will dissipate in hours,” he continued. “By that time the relief ships will arrive. You’ll have some work to do here, especially in the way of getting

both sides to trust one another again, but it's a job you're suited for Captain. You'll get it done."

"Rebuilding trust won't be easy," Picard pointed out.

"It'll be a lot easier now," Bari replied, "than it would be six months from now after the hell those people down below would have gone through if the Council had their way."

"And the second order?" Picard conceded the point.

"Concerns that big ship over there," Bari replied, "and you personally, Commander Forelni. Mr. Data, if you would be so kind?"

"To Commander Paulo Forelni," Data recited the order. "From Commander-In-Chief Starfleet. By order of the President of the United Federation of Planets, you are hereby promoted to the rank of Captain and assigned command of the U.S.S. *Seeker*. Your mission orders will be provided to you directly from the President in person. Signed Lyr J'Havre, Commander-In-Chief, Starfleet Command."

"Before you say something unacceptable," Bari turned to address his son, "such as 'no', I heard about Ro. I am truly sorry, my son, she seemed to make you very happy. I understand we are to be congratulated, you on becoming a father and I a grandfather."

“She named him, Marco,” Paulo said quietly.

“A fine name,” Bari replied. “How is he?”

“The prisoners in the camp made sure he was well taken care of. I was on my way down to see him when you called me here. And about the ship...”

“I already told you,” Bari held up a hand, “no is not one of your options, Captain. The *Seeker* is a colony ship. We started building her at the Etalya shipyards when it looked like we were going to lose this war. The intent was to send as many of our people away to try to find somewhere far from the Dominion to rebuild.

“When the war turned in our favor,” Bari continued, “there was no need to uproot all of Etalya and find a new home. We really have no need for a ship like this here in the Alpha Quadrant, so I hit on the idea of sending out a long-range mission. Sending her out to establish far-flung Federation outposts, in case we don’t survive the next crisis. She needs a Captain who will be around for decades, finding suitable planets, establishing a colony, then moving on until the ship reaches capacity again and finds the next colony world to seed. Along the way you will send messages back to Starfleet keeping them abreast of what you’ve found and where the colonies are when they finally get out there to them. A Captain with no ties to this quadrant any longer. You, Paulo.”

“I don’t know...,”

“Imagine the worlds you will discover,” Bari offered. “The wonders you can show your son. Do it for him, if not for you. Don’t leave him with another to be raised. The years you will miss with him can never be recovered. Trust me, I would give anything to have the first five years of your life back, the years I missed because my grief blinded me to what I needed to do.”

“What about you? Where will you go?”

“My presidential yacht is currently in your shuttle bay,” Bari explained. “Yes, the bay is that big. I think I’ll follow Scotty’s example and go sailing about. See some places I haven’t gotten around to just yet.”

“I’ll take the Captaincy on one condition,” Paulo said. “You come with us. We could use an Ambassador for anyone we run into out there. And you really should get to know your grandson.”

“Blackmail already, Captain?” Bari replied, but there was a hint of laughter in his eyes. “Very well, but I will give you one order which you will follow.”

“Fair enough.”

“When my time in this universe is finally done,” Bari said, pulling out a crystal hanging on a chain around his neck, “you will lay me to rest on a nice peaceful planet. On this crystal is the transporter pattern of your mother’s

remains. You will arrange to have her laid to rest next to me, my son.”

“I promise.”

“I’m not done just yet,” Bari said, letting the crystal drop to his tunic as he pulled another from his pocket and handed it to Data. “Mr. Data, I assume Ro is in stasis?”

“Yes, sir.”

“You will transport her from stasis, keeping her in the buffer. You will then download her pattern onto this crystal. Once you confirm the transfer is complete, you will clear the buffer and give the crystal to Captain Forelni.

“When your time comes, my son,” Bari turned back to Paulo, “you will want your son to do the same for you and Ro.”

“Nothing to keep us here because we are taking everything that matters with us,” Paulo said.

“Exactly,” Bari replied. “While we wait for Mr. Data to finish his task, I believe we are missing one Forelni. Maybe you should gather up your son and whatever you brought aboard with you? We do have a starship to catch.”

“Aye, aye, sir,” Paulo surrendered with a shake of his head and left the room.

“Well, Captain,” Bari turned to Picard, “still ready to charge the halls of Starfleet Command and raise hell over this?”

“It still strikes me as choosing the lesser of two evils. Mr. Presi...,” he paused and Bari waved a hand.

“Just Mr. Forelni will do, Captain,” Bari said. “I grew weary of titles a long time ago. And you are right. It was the lesser of two evils. But at least this one might preserve the Federation we just fought a long, hard war over to keep. Trust me, Picard, there was no other solution that would have a better long-term impact than this one. I salvaged what I could and all I can do now is hope that it was enough.”

“You realize they will blame you for ordering the attacks,” Picard noted. “You and J’Havre and the Council will be more than happy to let you take the brunt of it.”

“Once the opinion polls come in? Of that I have no doubt. J’Havre resigned as well and is enjoying her retirement far from the Halls of power. She is fine with it, as am I, as long as it ends the way we want. By the time History decides to judge me, Captain, I’ll be long gone and beyond caring.”

“The transfer is complete, sir,” Data reported, handing the crystal to the former President.

“Thank you, Commander,” Bari replied, looking around. “You know, I never did get around to boarding the ‘D’ before she went down. It’s the only *Enterprise* I never did visit. This one looks like a fine ship, Captain.”

“She is at that, sir,” Picard agreed as Paulo returned with Marco, a small satchel thrown over his shoulder.

“Ah, Marco Forelni,” Bari said as he handed Paulo the crystal and took possession of his grandson. “I have many stories to tell you about your father. I promise none of them he’ll approve of.”

“I’m beginning to wonder if inviting you along was such a good idea,” Paulo sighed as he placed the crystal in the satchel until he could find a better place to store it.

Marco chose that moment to giggle.

“You seem to outnumbered, my son,” Bari said. “Admiral Nechayev’s ship will be arriving with the relief ships in a couple of hours, Captain, but the mission here is yours. And if you will all excuse the three of us I believe it is time for us to take our leave and begin our mission. It is our calling, or so it would seem, to go out into the unknown and light the way forward.”

The three Forelnis walked up onto the pad.

“Captain Forelni,” Picard said, and was amused when both men reacted.

“Sorry, old habits,” Bari said when he realized which Forelni was being addressed.

“Despite everything,” Picard said. “I wish you... *bonne chance*, Captain.”

“Thank you, Captain,” Paulo replied, then looked over at Data. “Energize, Commander.”

When they were gone, Picard stood still, staring at the empty pad.

“Something wrong, Captain?” Nechayev asked.

“No, Admiral,” Picard replied. “I was just wondering how many historical figures throughout time have made momentous decisions they felt were the right ones to make and have been judged fairly or unfairly centuries later?”

“I wouldn’t even begin to guess, Captain,” she replied. “But I suspect, like him, they made the call at the time the best they could and didn’t worry about how history was going to judge them. In the meantime, we have work to do in the here and now.”

Minutes later, as the *Seeker* broke out of orbit *Enterprise* began beaming down the first relief crews and supplies to the planet while they awaited the rest of the fleet to arrive.