

# THE CALLING

The background of the entire page is a vibrant blue space scene. A large, sleek, futuristic starship with a prominent circular saucer and a central nacelle is the central focus. It is surrounded by several smaller, more agile spacecraft. In the lower right, several astronauts in white space suits are seen floating in space, some with jet packs. The scene is set against a backdrop of a bright blue starry sky and a large, partially visible planet with a blue and white atmosphere on the right side.

RICHARD  
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# **THE CALLING**

## **PART 2**

**A Star Trek: The Original Series Novel**

*A Work Of Star Trek Fan Fiction By Richard Paolinelli*

## **The Calling, Part 2**

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# INTERLUDE

*April 2, 2145. A Time Between Sagas...*

Bari Forelni, Prince of Etaly, former Ambassador to Earth and current Etalyan Ambassador to The United Federation of Planets, stood in space dock and gazed at the gleaming new ship outside.

*Enterprise. NCC-1701.*

She looked nothing like the ship that bore the same name that carried him from Etalya to Earth nearly nine decades ago. As much as it would have pained his old friend Archer to hear, this new incarnation made her predecessor look like something found in a trash heap. She looked almost angelic, all white with a splash of light here

and there save for the red bussard collectors and at the front of each nacelle.

She was a promise of a great future but now it invoked in him memories of his past here on Earth. He'd spent most of those eighty-eight years here, with occasional returns to Etalya, but he never spent more than a few months at a time there. There was always something going on here on Earth that required his attention, including the formation of the United Federation of Planets in 2061, and his heading up the first few years of Section 31 while retaining his position as the Etalyan Ambassador to the UFP. It was a needed service for the newly formed UFP, to discover any threats to its existence that could be nipped in the bud before the threat materialized. He'd stepped down as Director of Section 31 ten years later to return home for nearly a year and was certain that he was leaving the organization in good hands.

“It has been fifteen years since you've walked the land of your home world, my son,” his father's recorded message intoned. “It is far past time for you to see your family and your people again.”

Initially, he had balked at the idea. Despite the passage of 15 years, the memory of that terrible day was still fresh in his mind. But he acceded to his father's

request and headed home. The people greeted him with such fervor that he felt shame that he'd delayed his return for as long as he had. All of the major families received him inside the Great Hall. Only the Antoniuses were absent. A few said it was out of respect. Everyone else knew it was out of fear. No one knew if a decade and a half was enough time for a Forelni's temper to cool.

"Paulo!" he exclaimed when he'd spotted his old friend. The two embraced warmly. "I see they've not run you out of office yet!"

"I haven't managed to get into as much mischief as you," Paulo replied, smiling. "They simply don't know how to handle that."

He presented himself to the King and Queen. She spared him with a cool nod. The Laudano's were known to be quick to anger and slow to forgive. But at least she wasn't yelling "Off with his head!" so he took it as a good sign. His father hauled himself off his throne and stepped down to warmly embrace his son.

"Welcome home, my son. It has been far too long."

His father had been right and he enjoyed his time back home. But he was still the sitting Ambassador and he was needed back on Earth before a year passed. His relationship with his mother was mending; Francesco had

been her ‘baby’, but he was still her son too. There was still work to do but it looked promising that the rift would heal.

When the Federation ship arrived to return him to Earth, he took his leave.

“Do not let it be so long before you come home again, my son. Are you sure you wouldn’t rather I appoint a new Ambassador in your stead?”

“I am sure, Father. There is much work for me to do there yet. I am needed.”

“You are needed here too.”

“As long as you are on the throne Etalya is in good hands. I am not concerned.”

“And you have found your calling it seems.”

Bari gave his father a quizzical look.

“Each of us has a calling within. As much as it saddens me that yours is not here, I have a father’s pride in a son that has answered his. Be well my son, and come home soon and often.”

He’d done just that for the next sixty years but it always seemed he spent years on Earth and only months on Etalya. There was always some new diplomatic crisis or issue of great concern to the UFP and Bari Forelmi’s name

was almost always among the first to be called upon to solve them.

Another dust-up between the Tellarites and the Andorians had recalled Bari from a visit home some fifteen years before. As it turned out, the matter had been overblown and easily settled. A dinner was thrown for the diplomats to celebrate.

“Ambassador Forelni,” the Vulcan Ambassador Sarek greeted him.

“Ambassador Sarek,” he replied in Vulcan, raising his hand in the Vulcan salute. “May you live long and prosper.”

“Peace and long life,” Sarek replied, returning the salute. “Your Vulcan has improved, Ambassador. I detect no trace of an accent.”

“You are too kind.”

“May I present my wife, Amanda,” Sarek indicated the lovely woman at his side, holding a young baby that appeared no more than a year old.

“An honor, Lady Amanda,” Bari replied, switching back to Standard.

“And our son, Spock.”

“Greetings, Young Spock,” Bari offered. The child looked like he was contemplating forming a tiny Vulcan salute. “My compliments on your family, Ambassador.”

“And your family, Ambassador,” Amanda asked.

“I have not yet married. I still have some time before I need worry about beginning a family.”

“Perhaps you’ve not met the right woman?”

“There is that too,” he admitted. “It seems all of the worthy ladies have already been claimed by my fellow Ambassadors. Again, my compliments, sir.”

“How very gallant,” Amanda accepted the compliment as intended. “I’m certain the right woman will be no match for your charms.”

“Perhaps, my wife, the Ambassador’s affairs are his to be concerned with?” Sarek interjected.

“Quite logical,” Amanda agreed, and Bari caught the slight wink she sent in his direction as she teased her husband. He kept most of his return smile hidden from Sarek’s gaze and took his leave. He barely made it three steps before he ran into Robert April.

“Ambassador Forelni.”

“Robert! A pleasant surprise. What brings you to this mixer?”

“You do.”

“Well, this should liven things up around here. What is on your mind?”

It was then that he'd been first introduced to Robert April's "Starships". The concept of a vessel of peaceful exploration to go out on long-term missions, to seek out new life and civilizations beyond those of known space had captured his imagination.

He'd thrown his full support behind the concept and here he was 15 years later seeing the culmination of April's dreams.

“Ambassador!” April's voice boomed out, breaking Bari out of his reverie.

“Robert,” he shook hands with his old friend. “She looks even better in orbit that she did in those animations you used during the presentations.”

“She does, doesn't she?” April agreed. “Have you met my first officer? George Kirk, Ambassador Bari Forelni.”

The copper-headed officer next to April extended his hand.

“Met, no,” Bari replied as he shook hands with Kirk. “But I've heard of your exploits, especially the unofficial ones involving that ship out there.”

“I thought those were top secret,” Kirk mumbled a little sheepishly.

“I have my connections, Commander,” Bari shrugged. “I understand your son, James, was along for the ride last time.”

“Yes, I thought the experience would scare him right out of space for good. But he’s enrolled in the Academy now.”

“He’s found his calling then,” Bari said, thinking back to his long-ago conversation with his father.

“Yeah, I guess he has.”

Bari turned back to look at the waiting ship.

“Are you sure you don’t want to tag along?” April asked.

“Tempting offer, Robert, but I must pass.”

“Careful, Mr. Ambassador, Robert has a way of sweet-talking you into doing whatever he wants you to do.”

“So I’ve heard, Commander,” Bari quipped. “But when it comes to the honey-sweet words of Robert April I am immune.”

“How so?”

“I’m allergic to honey.”

The three men shared a laugh and parted company, April and Kirk boarding the waiting ship while Bari waited until she had separated from Space Dock and sailed out of sight. There was something about that ship, something that called to something long ago buried within him.

His destiny, his calling, had led him from his home and out into space. But was Earth his final destination? Something within stirred and answered, *No*. There was somewhere else that he would go and he had the strangest feeling that the ship he'd just watched sail away would be very much involved in getting him there.

# CHAPTER ONE

“Damn it, Jim,” McCoy grouched as he fiddled with the collar of his dress uniform. “I’m a doctor, not a contortionist!”

“Look at it this way, Bones,” Kirk replied to the familiar complaint. “You won’t have to be in it for too long this time.”

McCoy tugged at his tunic as he, Kirk and Spock made their way toward the transporter room. Try as he might, his uniform looked rumpled. Neither Kirk nor Spock suffered as much as a thread out of place on their uniforms.

“It is unusual to welcome a new officer aboard ship in full dress, Captain,” Spock noted.

“I’ve never heard of it either,” Kirk admitted as the doors to the transporter room swooshed open. “But Admiral Cartwright insisted on it. I admit, if such an

exception is to be made, this would be the officer to do it for.”

“Bari Forelni. There’s a name that has become synonymous with the Federation and Starfleet.”

“Indeed, Doctor. His contributions to the founding of both organizations are most impressive.”

“His record as a Captain is even more so,” Kirk added. “When Starfleet announced they were building a new ship with an all-Etalyan crew he resigned as Etalya’s Ambassador to the Federation and enrolled in the Academy. He’s one of six candidates to be that ship’s first Captain.

“All six have graduated from the Academy and have experience as commanders in the field and all will be serving on starships as part of their final testing before Starfleet picks the new Captain. Admiral Cartwright said Commander Forelni requested to serve his tour on the *Enterprise*.”

“An honor.”

“Yes it is, Spock, and a little intimidating,” Kirk admitted.

A beep from the transporter console interrupted their conversation.

“Ready for transport, Cap’n,” Scotty, also in full dress complete with a proper Scottish kilt, reported.

“Bring him aboard, Scotty.”

Scotty’s deft hands moved the levers and a human form coalesced on the pad. When the process ended a tall, olive-skinned man who appeared roughly the same age as Kirk stood on the pad. He wore a regular duty uniform and his tunic was red, not command gold. His dark eyes quickly swept the room and lingered on the dress uniforms for a moment. A slight smile tugged at the corners of those eyes.

“Commander Bari Forelni reporting for duty, sir. Permission to come aboard?”

“Permission granted,” Kirk stepped forward and extended his hand. “And welcome aboard, Commander.”

Forelni stepped down with more grace than someone who’d lived over a century and a half had a right to possess and clasped his new Captain’s hand.

“A pleasure to be aboard, sir. I was quite pleased to hear that you had accepted my posting here.”

“Admiral Cartwright didn’t seem to be giving me an option to refuse, Commander,” Kirk replied.

“Yes, so I noticed. My apologies, gentlemen, for having to wear those torture chambers on my account. I

had asked the Admiral not to go to any extraordinary lengths on my behalf. I hope to be just another member of the crew while I am here.”

“That might be somewhat hard to accomplish, Commander, given your record.”

“Hmmm, I knew I should have tarnished my record more in my misspent youth,” Forelni quipped. “Now I have to suffer the terrible consequences of being a living legend. Alas.”

Kirk smiled, feeling much less intimidated now that he’d met the man behind the legend in person.

“Allow me to introduce our First Officer, Mister Spock.”

“Live long and prosper, Commander,” Forelni intoned in Vulcan, smoothly fashioning the Vulcan salute and drawing a slightly uplifted eyebrow in response.

“Prosperity and long life,” Spock answered in kind. “My compliments, Commander, your Vulcan is flawless.”

“Thank you,” Forelni replied, switching back to standard. “It has been some time since I’ve been able to use it. I believe I was speaking with your father at that time. How is Ambassador Sarek and the Lady Amanda?”

“Both well at last communication, thank you for asking.”

“I must say, Commander, you are somewhat taller since our last meeting.”

“I do not recall having met you before, Commander.”

“Well, to be fair, you were roughly two feet long and wrapped in a blanket in your mother’s arms at the time, I would be surprised if even a Vulcan could remember that far back with clarity.”

“Indeed,” Spock allowed.

“And our Chief Medical Officer, Leonard McCoy,” Kirk moved along in the introductions.

“Doctor, a pleasure,” Forelni replied. “I assume I’ll be visiting you soon for a medical exam?”

“The sooner the better, Commander.”

“Let me get unpacked and I’ll drop in tomorrow.”

Kirk continued the introductions. “And this is our Chief Engineer, Montgomery Scott.”

“Mr. Scott. A most smooth transport. My compliments.”

“Thank ye, sir.”

“Yeoman Brand will show you to your quarters. We’re having a mixer at 1900 where you can meet the rest of the command crew and officers,” Kirk said. “Commander, before you go...”

“Sir?”

“I am puzzled as to why you requested to be posted on the *Enterprise*, and as Chief of Security?”

“As for the first part, I appreciate the rapport between a ship’s Captain and his First Officer. I will only be posted here for six months. I had no desire to be a disruption to that rapport.

“As for the second,” Forelni continued. “In studying your reports to Starfleet Command, I got the impression that you were becoming sorely tempted to launch my predecessor out a photon torpedo tube. I have something of an aptitude for Security. I’d like to see what I can do to bring that department back up to a more acceptable standard while I’m here.”

“Commander,” Kirk said after a moment. “If you can pull that off, and Starfleet Command doesn’t give you command of that new ship, I’ll retire and you can have the *Enterprise*.”

“Well, let’s not let it get to that point, sir,” Forelni replied allowing the smile to reach his mouth this time. “*Enterprise* without James T. Kirk, wouldn’t be the *Enterprise*.”

## CHAPTER TWO

“Recreation Deck.”

Kirk stepped out of the turboshaft hoping to get in a quiet hour of work on the mat. McCoy had been after him about his weight again and the last thing he wanted to deal with was another dietary shift to salads. It was late in the evening and the deck was usually empty at this time.

But not this time.

*Nearly half the crew must be down here, he mused as he took a quick head count, I didn't see any notice posted for a special event.*

Making his way through the crowd he spotted McCoy near the front and adjusted his course accordingly. The object of everyone's attention in the room was his Security Chief. Dressed only in black workout briefs, Forelni was keeping both a heavy medicine ball that Kirk knew weighed nearly sixty pounds and a tall purple feather

in the air without either ever touching the ground. While engaged in that, he also simultaneously executed a series of fighting moves that seemed to be a blend of several disciplines; Human, Vulcan, Klingon, and many others.

It was an impressive display of power, control and elegance that explained why his new Chief looked like he'd been chiseled from granite. It also explained why the majority of the gathered crowd was comprised of the *Enterprise's* female crew. Knowing how much older Forelni was gave the Captain a twinge of guilt for not keeping himself in a little better shape.

"I wish I could look a tenth that good when I'm approaching my one hundreds," McCoy remarked. "And it looks like he's had cause to stay in shape over the decades."

Kirk noticed the scars that had caught McCoy's attention and wondered. Those scars, no matter how old, could easily be removed. Yet, he kept them anyway. They told a story of the battles he'd fought. Was that why he did not remove them? Was it pride in having earned them in the first place? He made a mental note to inquire about them later and watched the rest of the workout in silence.

After a few more minutes Forelni lobbed the ball high, waved his other hand gently under the feather to lift it

a few inches higher and then executed a series of spinning kicks that culminated in a fighting crouch. His left arm was fully extended, his hand in a fist save the index finger, fully extended. His right arm extended straight out and up, hand clawed with the tips of the fingers forming a cup. A second later the ball landed in the cupped right hand and the tip of the feather settled on the extended finger of the left hand. Both actions occurred simultaneously and neither object nor his hands seemed to bounce or react to the impact in any way.

Forelni held the pose, keeping both ball and feather in place without either moving a millimeter, for a full ten seconds before allowing a slight grin to form on his face. Deftly rolling his hand around the ball to gently settle it down on the mat while clasping the feather between two fingers, he stood up and bowed slightly as the crowd applauded. With a flourish he bowed once more as he presented the feather to Uhura.

“My compliments, Lieutenant.”

“Thank you, Commander,” she took the offered plume as he gathered up a towel and wrapped it around his neck.

“That was quite impressive, Commander,” Kirk said as he and McCoy walked up. “You do this every night?”

“Back when I first learned it I practiced every day, sir,” Forelni replied. “But after a few decades I only do this a couple of times a month, just to stay in practice. Or if I’m feeling a little out of balance with the universe I might throw in an extra session. That is the real purpose behind the exercise, keeping both body and mind in balance.”

“That sounds almost Vulcan to me,” McCoy observed.

“I suppose it is,” Forelni agreed. “Then again I think every species has a lot more in common with each other than they are comfortable admitting to. I’d be happy to teach some of it to you both. I promise it’ll much easier than what I was doing here tonight.”

“No thanks,” McCoy waved his hands. “I’d be in traction for a month.”

“I could use a sparring partner, Commander, maybe you could slip in one or two things as we go along?”

“It would be my pleasure Captain...”

An alarm went off startling everyone in the room except Forelni.

“...but I have a prior engagement, perhaps another evening?” Forelni concluded before addressing the room. “There is no need to be alarmed. This is a security drill and the alarm is only sounding in here to let me know it is underway. My apologies. Please carry on.”

“Seems an odd time to spring a drill.” McCoy remarked.

“Can you think of a better time than when the Chief is supposedly otherwise occupied?” Forelni slipped on a black tunic. “They’ve got just about another ten seconds...”

The alarm suddenly shut off.

“Security to Chief Forelni,” blared from a nearby wall speaker. Forelni padded over to hit the switch.

“Forelni here. Go Michaelson.”

“Intruder discovered on Deck Fourteen, sir. In custody.”

“And four seconds earlier than I thought, well done. How is Mr. Riley?”

“Disappointed, sir,” the laughter in Michaelson’s voice carried through.

“I’m sure he is,” Forelni chuckled in reply. “Tell him I’ll expect my bottle of Irish Whiskey to be delivered to my cabin shortly after our next port of call.”

“That’s why it took us a little longer, Chief. He tried to fool us into thinking he wasn’t the intruder until after the deadline you set so he could collect a bottle of Etalyan wine from you.”

“Did he now? Put him on.”

“Riley here, sir.”

“Mr. Riley, did you lie to my security team and try to fool them into thinking you weren’t the intruder they were looking for instead of giving up as soon as you were contacted?”

“Aye, sir.”

“Well done, young man,” Forelni replied, shocking everyone within earshot of both ends of the conversation. “Cancel that bottle of whiskey and report to my quarters in one hour to collect your bottle of wine. Michaelson, I’ll expect a full action report on this drill in ninety minutes. Forelni out.”

Forelni turned from the wall to face the incongruous looks on Kirk’s and McCoy’s faces.

“I better keep an eye on that boy,” he said. “At this rate he’ll either become an Admiral or a master criminal. Good evening, Captain, Doctor.”

Kirk chuckled as Forelni departed.

“That wasn’t the reaction I was expecting from you, Jim.”

“Bones, in the two weeks since he’s been here, he has whipped Security into shape like none of his predecessors have before. And yes, I like his style too.”

“Enough to bet on it?”

“And what are we wagering on, Bones?”

“The Galactic Grandmaster Chess Tournament.”

“I’m not sure I follow.”

“Jim, you really need to pay more attention,” McCoy replied. “It’s the talk of the ship. Both Spock and Forelni are in the tournament and both have reached the quarterfinals. As they are in opposite brackets, the only way they can meet would be in the finals. They’re saying it would be held on the ship if they both make it.”

“I knew Spock was in, I didn’t realize Forelni was too,” Kirk admitted.

“Well, the betting pool is getting hot and heavy on both of them or either of them making it that far. There’s no telling how crazy it will get if they both make it in.”

“My money’s on Spock,” Kirk said with only the slightest tint of doubt.

“I’ll take that bet, Captain,” McCoy pounced. “A bottle of Saurian Brandy says they meet in the finals and our Prince Forelni walks away with the crown.”

“Very well, Bones, I’ll take your brandy off your hands.”

McCoy snorted as he walked away just as the wall speaker whistled for attention.

“Bridge to Captain Kirk,” Spock’s voice carried across the room.

“Speak of the Devil,” McCoy called out just before disappearing through the deck’s doors.

“Kirk here, what is it Spock?”

“We have received a priority message from Starfleet Command. A Federation Ambassador and his party have been taken hostage on Kallita Five near the Romulan neutral zone. We have been ordered to Starbase 11 to pick up Ambassador Kleine and take him to Kallita to begin negotiation for the release of the hostages.”

So much for my workout, Kirk thought.

“Very well, Spock, set course for Starbase 11 and take us up to Warp 6. Assemble the command staff in the briefing room in one hour. Kirk out.”

Riley will have to wait for his bottle of wine, Kirk mused as he headed out of Recreation. He couldn’t help

but wonder if he was about to see exactly what his new Security Chief could do in a real-life scenario. As he entered the turboshaft and the doors snapped shut behind him he suddenly felt sorry for the hostage-takers.

## CHAPTER THREE

“Starbase 11 reports they are ready to beam Ambassador Kleine aboard, Captain,” Forelni reported as Kirk, Spock and McCoy entered the Transporter room.

“Very good. Bring him up Mr. Kyle,” Kirk nodded at the man working the console. “Do you know the Ambassador, Mr. Forelni?”

“Yes. I worked with Dan Kleine on one or two negotiations before joining Starfleet. He’s a good, capable man.”

“I’m surprised Starfleet didn’t just ask you to serve as a negotiator when we get to Kallita,” McCoy remarked.

“I imagine my reputation for rescuing hostages and then shooting the hostage takers disqualified me, Doctor,” Forelni quipped. “It seems the Federation wants to

continue dealing with the current leader of Kallita instead of being involved in a regime change.”

“I trust Ambassador Kleine has no such rescue now and shoot later policy?” Kirk asked only half-jokingly.

“Dan prefers the live and let live policy, sir,” Forelni replied, that wicked little gleam in his eye shone brightly. “Most naïve for a man of his age if you ask me.”

The whine of the transporter cutoff any reply as the humanoid form of Ambassador Kleine took shape on the pad. He was a tall man, closer to McCoy’s age, with an almost wiry frame. Wisps of grey wove their way through his jet black hair.

“Ambassador Kleine,” Kirk stepped forward. “Welcome aboard the *Enterprise*.”

“Thank you, Captain Kirk.” Kleine stepped down from the pad.

“May I introduce my First Officer, Spock, and my Chief Medical Officer, Doctor Leonard McCoy?”

“A pleasure gentlemen, although I wish the circumstances of our meeting were otherwise.”

“And I believe you already know my Chief of Security...”

“Bari Forelni!” Kleine exclaimed. “How long has it been? Seven? No, eight years! Did I ever pay off that bet?”

“As a matter of fact, no, you never did,” Forelni shook hands with the Ambassador. “If I were to charge you interest I could bathe in Romulan Ale for a year and still have plenty left over to drink.”

“Serves me right for playing chess with you,” Kleine chuckled. “What do you say double or nothing that you don’t make the finals of the big tournament?”

“I’ll settle for the single bottle you owe me. Besides, I think we have a more pressing issue to resolve right now.”

“Of course,” Kleine sobered a little. “I have already been in touch with the Kallitan government. Upon arrival they will allow a small party to beam down to the planet to begin negotiations to release the hostages and resolve the original dispute.”

Kirk stepped into the conversation to ward off the impending, and likely loud, objection sure to come from his security chief.

“Ambassador, are you quite certain that is a wise thing to do? After all, they have already taken a diplomatic party hostage. It would seem you are giving them an opportunity to add more hostages.”

“Aye,” Forelni muttered in agreement.

“Captain, I have received assurances from their First Counsel, Judanc, that I and a party no larger than five will have safe passage to and from the ship. It seems the diplomatic party may have overstepped and violated some local law. I fully expect to have the whole matter resolved in a few hours.”

“That sounds overly optimistic, Ambassador Kleine.”

“Not at all, Mr. Spock, not at all. The First Counsel is a reasonable man. Surely he does not think he can stand up against the entire Federation. He is simply posturing. We’ll reach an equitable resolution to the matter.”

“Mr. Forelni will show you to your quarters,” Kirk broke in. “We’ll be underway for Kallita within a few minutes and we should arrive there in two days.”

Kleine headed for the doors and Forelni lingered behind for just a second.

“And after the Ambassador is settled,” Kirk continued in a lower tone, “I will be waiting for you and Mr. Spock, who is going to the bridge and get us on our way, in my quarters.”

“Yes, Sir,” Kirk’s First Officer and Security Chief replied in unison and followed the Ambassador out into the

hall. Judging by the look on Forelni's face, it was going to be an interesting meeting.

\* \* \* \* \*

"I'll assume you will enter a formal protest into the log regarding my beaming down to Kallita?" Kirk asked when Forelni arrived.

"No, sir."

"Your predecessor would have."

"Since Ambassador Kleine is insisting on beaming down then you have to accompany him for protocol's sake. But, I can enter a formal request that I go down with the landing party to provide adequate security coverage. I would, informally, add that the First Officer remain on the ship and that only one other crewman, from Medical, be included."

"Why?"

"We're already giving them another Ambassador and a Starship Captain as potential hostages, no need to sweeten the pot any further. And, as First Officer, Spock has the authority to take immediate action when they do decide to add the landing party to their haul."

"When, not if, Commander?" Spock asked.

"When, sir. You all read the same briefing material I did. The First Counsel has been in power for a decade

now and he is taking his people ‘back to the good old ways’ and that makes Caligula look like a benevolent ruler by comparison.

“He’s brought back gladiator-type games,” Forelni continued. “Stripped certain citizens of rights for any number of dubious reasons. Yes, Mr. Spock, whatever his plan is, we are only adding to the pieces he intends to use to his advantage when we beam down there.”

Kirk looked to his First Officer. “Spock?”

“Given what we’ve seen so far, Captain, the Commander’s misgivings do seem justified.”

“Very well, Commander, draw up an action plan and be ready to present it to me...,” Kirk trailed off as Forelni produced a data cube. “Are you telling me you drew up a complete plan in the short time it took you to go from the Ambassador’s quarters to mine?”

“No, sir,” and damned if that gleam wasn’t back in his eye. “I drew this up ten minutes after the initial briefing when we were ordered to Starbase 11 and I read the last report on the state of Kallita’s politics.”

“You are a suspicious man, Mr. Forelni.”

“Aye, Captain. I intend to live my full three centuries and then some and I’ll not have some want-to-be

despot in the middle of nowhere be the reason why you don't live to see a good portion of your second.”

“We'll try to see to it that I do then,” Kirk replied with a chuckle. “Very well, Commander, what have you got?”

## CHAPTER FOUR

“In orbit above the capital city of Kallita, Captain,” Sulu reported.

“Thank you, Mr. Sulu,” Kirk replied, swiveling the command chair toward communications. “Lieutenant Uhura, please raise the First Counsel.”

“Aye, Sir,” she replied, manipulating her board. “Hailing them now. The First Counsel is responding, Captain.”

“On screen,” Kirk ordered, nodding at the Ambassador standing beside the command chair. “The floor is yours, Ambassador.”

“Thank you, Captain,” Kleine stepped forward and gathered himself just as the Kallitan leader’s image flared to life on the main view screen. “Greetings, First Counsel. I am Federation Ambassador Dan Kleine here to negotiate the release of our diplomatic team, per your request.”

“Welcome to Kallita, Ambassador,” Judnac replied coolly. “We are prepared to receive you and your party at your convenience.”

“Of course, First Counsel. But may I request, as a sign of good faith, that our first meeting take place aboard the *Enterprise*?”

“Good faith, Ambassador? Is the mighty Federation afraid of one small planet?”

“There is the matter of the current status of our first diplomatic team, First Counsel. Starfleet is naturally concerned about sending a second party down under the present circumstances.”

“Our reasons for detaining your diplomats are quite legitimate, Ambassador. Whether or not we will release them back into your custody is a matter for discussion, down here on Kallita and nowhere else. We will lower our shield over the Capital City in precisely fifteen minutes. Your party will have thirty seconds to beam down before we raise it again. If you do not arrive at the appointed hour, the sentences against your diplomats will be carried out immediately.”

The screen went black as the First Counsel cut communications.

“I suppose that could have gone better,” Kleine remarked as he turned from the screen.

“A thirty-second window isn’t enough time for us to scan for and locate our diplomats,” Forelni added. “Much less beam them up.”

“Shouldn’t we at least try a diplomatic resolution first?”

“Of course, Ambassador,” Kirk agreed. “But given the apparent hostility from the First Counsel, we have to keep all options on the table.”

“Captain,” Spock interjected. “Given what we just witnessed are you quite certain you should be part of the first landing party?”

“Bucking for Chief of Security, Spock?”

“No, Captain. But it does seem likely that there will be some difficulty below.”

“Agreed, Spock. But they are expecting both the Ambassador and myself to beam down. Fortunately they did not object to the inclusion of Mr. Forelni and Dr. McCoy. I am certain Mr. Forelni’s expertise will be adequate should the Kallitans be up to something. And between you and Scotty up here on the ship you’ll be able to beam us back out in good order.”

Kirk caught the quick glance that passed between his Security Chief and his First Officer and resisted the urge to sigh. At least McCoy was still down in Sick Bay otherwise he'd be in jeopardy of being mother henned to death.

“Gentlemen, like it or not, we've got less than fifteen minutes to get to the transporter room and beam down to Kallita. I suggest we get started.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Four figures coalesced into being in a small receiving hall outside of the First Counsel's chambers. A dozen armed guards greeted them. One stepped forward and addressed Kirk.

“You will hand over all weapons now!”

“We came unarmed,” Kirk replied smoothly. “Just as your First Counsel requested.”

“You will hand over all weapons,” the guard repeated, pointing at Kirk's communicator and McCoy's medical tricorder.

“These are our communication devices and that is simply a medical device the Doctor needs...”

“You will hand over all weapons now,” the guard grumbled in a tone only one octave below a volcanic eruption.

“I see. Very well, gentlemen,” Kirk pulled the communicator from his belt and handed it over as the others followed suit. The guard nearly pulled McCoy off balance as he snatched the tricorder from the Doctor’s hands.

“Search them,” the guard commanded.

“Paranoid bunch,” McCoy muttered as he was roughly patted down.

“Bones,” Kirk warned as the search wrapped up. The guard waved for the door to be opened.

“Excuse me, sir,” Forelni chimed in suddenly. “But you missed something.”

Forelni slipped a thin, metallic strip from his left sleeve and extended it toward the guard.

“Careful,” Forelni warned as the guard gripped the object in his hand. “It’s quite sharp.”

A long, razor sharp blade snicked out to form a lethal-looking blade. Startled, the guard dropped the blade to the floor.

“Sloppy security work,” Forelni chided sadly. “Have you considered an alternative career path in food service?”

The guard’s face turned a shade of red that matched Forelni’s tunic but held his tongue. He grabbed the fallen

blade, spun on his heel and led the Federation party into the chambers. The Ambassador entered first while Forelni lingered back with Kirk and McCoy.

“He activated the tracer in the blade, Captain. Spock will hear everything that happens and within the hour he should have all Federation personnel located and ready to beam up as soon as the shield is lowered again.”

“Well done, Mr. Forelni,” Kirk replied as they entered the room.

“That was sneaky,” McCoy remarked. “I see why he likes Riley so much.”

The Ambassador stepped up to the indicated place and addressed the First Counsel.

“Greetings from the United Feder...” Kleine began before being interrupted.

“I do not need greetings from a prisoner,” Judanc’s tone was mockingly lazy.

“First Counsel we were guaranteed...”

“You were, now you are not. I will inform your Federation Council that you have been charged as accomplices and will be punished accordingly.”

Forelni shot a quick look at Kirk. *Straight to worst-case scenario*, Kirk thought, recalling their strategy session

the night before. Kirk gave a brief nod to his Security Chief to proceed as they'd discussed.

"I claim the Right of Challenge," Forelni announced as he stepped forward. The First Counsel actually looked amused.

"You are willing to battle my three champions?"

"In exchange for the freedom of all Federation and Starfleet personnel when I win..."

"If you win."

"When I win," Forelni re-emphasized. "In addition, you will begin good faith discussions regarding your claims, whatever they might be."

"This might actually be amusing. You really think you can beat all three?"

Forelni shot a disparaging look at the guards before replying.

"I've seen better."

"Oh, my three champions are not among my guards, Commander. These are my champions."

A large view screen above the First Counsel's head flared to life displaying a large practice area where the three champions were engaged in various training. All three were behemoths. Kirk imagined he could hear

Spock's eyebrows rocketing up his forehead from orbit above.

“Do you still wish to fight my champions now?”

Forelni favored the First Counsel with a bored look.

“Separately,” he asked, “or all three at the same time?”

## CHAPTER FIVE

“You notice he’s about twice as big as you are?” McCoy pointed out as Forelni prepared to enter the arena to face the first champion. “Not to mention he’s the smallest of the three and at least a fifth of your age?”

“Bet on him then,” Forelni quipped over his shoulder as he stepped through the gate.

“I just might,” McCoy yelled back over the roar of the crowd as the Kallitan warrior entered on the other side. “Damn it, Jim, this is insane. Why doesn’t Spock beam us out of here?”

“I assume both Spock and Scotty are busy trying to do just that, Bones,” Kirk replied as he, Ambassador Kleine and McCoy were led up to a box next to the First Counsel. “Our job is to stay alive long enough for them to get past the shield. Right now, that is Mr. Forelni’s mission.”

“How can you be so damned calm about this?”

“Because this was the most likely outcome according to both Spock and Mr. Forelni when we discussed scenarios,” Kirk lowered his voice as they were seated.

“He must be mad to think he can pull this off,” McCoy muttered.

“Or he’s as good as the legends about him say he is,” Kirk pointed out.

Down below in the large arena’s dirt-covered circle, Forelni stood silently as he sized up his opponent. Where he remained in full uniform, his opponent was garbed in green briefs and a loose leather tunic. He was also carrying a formidable-looking club wrapped in heavy chain. Forelni looked around for his weapon and found none was going to be provided.

With a look up at the First Counsel, followed by a mocking shrug, Forelni didn’t bother to wait for the traditional signal to begin the contest. He simply charged at the Kallitan, launched himself in the air and landed a solid kick right in the middle of the champion’s forehead.

The Kallitan’s eyes rolled up until only white was showing and he crashed hard to the floor and did not move. The crowd fell into a stunned silence. Forelni gathered up the club and slowly strolled back across the arena. The

rules of combat dictated that when a combatant fell he had 15 seconds to regain his feet after his opponent had pressed his designated plate, starting the timer.

Once at his plate, Forelni dusted off his uniform and inspected his nails, scornfully declining to push the plate and start the timer. After a few more moments he finally did so. The unconscious Kallitan never so much as stirred, though it was apparent he was still alive as his massive chest rose and fell.

“About those legends, Jim,” McCoy whispered.

Several men scrambled into the arena and carried off the beaten champion. One man cautiously approached Forelni.

“You are not permitted to keep that,” his voice unsteady.

Forelni favored the man with a bemused glance before casually flipping the club end over end to him. The guard staggered under the weight of the club as he caught it then turned and fled to the other side of the arena where he turned it over to the second champion as he entered. Taking the recovered club in his left hand, the champion pulled a similar-sized club from his belt.

Attached to the end of the second club was a thick chain and at the end of the three-foot length was a steel,

spiked ball that looked very much like a flail from Earth's Medieval period. The way the brute swung it around it looked like the man knew what he was about.

Forelni cocked his head up at the First Counsel and favored him with another mocking smile at the disparity in armament between the two combatants.

This time, the opponent didn't wait for Forelni to make the first move, stepping forward while he waved the flail in a constant arc over his head, the second club ready to swing should Forelni charge.

But Forelni simply stood his ground until his opponent drew near, then he rolled under the ball as it passed, driving a solid kick into the man's shin for good measure. The brute barely flinched, spinning to slam the flail down where Forelni was on the ground.

Forelni rolled out of the way just in time to avoid having his skull crushed, used another kick – this one striking the man's forearm – to propel himself out of the flail's range. The sequence repeated several times over, the brute attacked, Forelni dodged, landed a blow and got out of range before a counter-attack could land. But he wasn't making much of an impact on the champion, who didn't appear to be slowed by either the exertion or Forelni's blows.

Finally, Forelni stopped his dodge and roll routine. Stepping into the arc, Forelni braced himself and let the flail hammer into his left shoulder, one short spike digging into the flesh above the shoulder blade. Before the brute could react, Forelni grabbed the wrist holding the flail with his left hand and pulled it toward him hard while driving his right fist hard into the brute's forearm. The brute's howl barely drowned out the snapping of the bone.

Forelni swatted the flail away and spun around sharply to drive his left elbow into the brute's solar plexus. Balling his left hand into a fist, the elbow still positioned in the man's chest, he drove the palm of his right hand into the fist, like a hammer pounding a spike, three times in rapid succession.

The brute's mouth dropped open and Forelni closed it, driving the palm of his right hand into the brute's jaw, lifting him off the ground to slam unconscious to the ground.

The crowd was stunned into silence as Forelni slowly, obviously in pain this time and not showing off, made his way to his panel and pushed it. The fallen brute never tried to rise as the time ran down to zero. Then the crowd burst into cheers and many began to chant Forelni's name, much to the First Counsel's displeasure.

“Well done, Starfleet man,” the First Counsel raised a hand for silence as he rose from his seat. “You will face my third champion in the morning. This battle will be to the death.”

A gasp shot through the crowd. Kirk rose to protest but was waved back down by an armed guard.

“This is not within your own rules, First Counsel,” Kirk managed not to roar his protest.

“I just changed them,” he replied as he turned away.

The guards waved Kirk, McCoy and Kleine to follow them back to the cell where they would spend the night. Down below, several guards fearfully approached Forelni to escort him back as well. He limped slightly as he followed, his left arm dangled at his side. He’d won two fights, but had obviously paid a price in doing so.

He was shoved into the cell next to his three companions, despite McCoy’s protests that he needed to examine Forelni and his request for his med kit. All of his pleas were ignored.

Forelni leaned against the bars of the cell and McCoy did what he could with water and strip of a blanket from one of the small cots they’d been provided.

“The shoulder wound isn’t too deep,” McCoy muttered. “If I can stop the bleeding. How’s the knee?”

“Twisted it a bit when I dug in at the last,” Forelni reported. “I’ll be okay in the morning.”

“Hmpf,” McCoy disagreed but busied himself with the wound he could do something about.

“You there, stop that!” a voice command from outside the cells. The door to Forelni’s swung open and a young Kallitan woman, carrying a small woven basket, was harshly pushed inside. She was a slim, fair woman, dressed in a simple tan tunic that ran to an inch above her knees. She wore a braided leather necklace that held an onyx stone with a four-digit number – 8392 – carved into it. A guard rolled a cart of food and two jugs into the cell and slammed the door shut as he stepped back outside. Another cart of food and drink were rolled into the other cell for the three men.

“What’s this?” Kirk demanded.

“All the food and water you will get today,” the lead guard snarled as he stepped inside to draw a curtain between the two cells. “Make it last. If you wanted a woman, you should have stepped into the arena instead of him. Only men are treated like men here.”

“So you’ve never been with a woman you say?” Forelni dug a barb in for the hell of it. The young woman stifled a giggle. The guard’s face ran the gamut of reds before he slammed the curtain the rest of the way closed and slammed the cell door shut even harder and stormed out of sight.

“He’s going to be very cross with his men after that?” the young girl remarked.

“Good,” Forelni replied. “I’m only sorry I didn’t have the chance to put a boot in his backside on the way out.”

“You are a strange man, my lord,” she noted, withdrawing a clean cloth and a cup of what looked like a salve from the basket and looked over his wounded shoulder.

“My name is Bari Forelni, not ‘My Lord’,” Forelni said gently, not wanting it to sound like a command. “and yours is?”

“My...Bari Forelni,” she corrected. “No warrior has ever asked a slave’s name before.”

“Then I am delighted to be the first. What is your name?”

“Bryna.”

“A pleasure to meet you, Bryna,” he sketched a painful bow. “Thank you for attending to my wounds.”

“You must be in perfect health and well-fed,” she replied. “I have been ordered to do so.”

“So I’ll be able to put on a good show in the morning,” he replied dourly.

“No, My Lord,” she replied, forgetting his earlier admonition, as she finished patching the wound on his shoulder. “So that you will be ready to properly enjoy tonight.”

He was just about to ask her what was happening tonight when he recalled the drawn curtain that separated this cell from the outside world and then the guard’s response to his Captain’s query only a minute or so before.

*Obviously, the briefing material on Kallita’s gladiatorial customs had been somewhat incomplete,* he thought to himself as Bryna slipped out of her tunic.

## CHAPTER SIX

Forelni woke to the sound of someone softly snoring in his ear. Memories of the night before flooded into his awareness. He'd initially objected to the idea of someone being forced into copulation. But Bryna had surprised him by stating that it wasn't the case. She'd volunteered to replace the slave originally selected because she wanted to meet with the Starfleet men. The love-making, she'd informed him, was a pleasurable bonus.

His battle wounds from the day before were aching. He winced slightly as his ribcage reminded him they were still out of sorts and the action woke his companion.

"Good morning, my lord," Bryna greeted, snuggling closer.

"I thought we had discussed that earlier."

"We did, but I don't mind."

"Well I do, so stop doing it," he chided gently.

“As you wish.”

Forelni fought down a sigh as he realized she was teasing him.

“We need to talk before they haul me out to the arena,” he changed the subject, knowing when a prudent retreat was in order. “How many of your people are being held as slaves? How long has this practice been going on?”

“I don’t know the exact number,” she said after a moment. “It’s probably in the thousands. As for how long it has been around since before I was born.”

“There’s no way the Federation would have allowed Kallita to become a member if we’d known about this,” Forelni did the math in his head. “But it appears they hid this from us when their application was being considered. Has there been any attempt to end the practice on your world?”

“None that I know of. Any slave who dares speak of being freed is severely punished.”

Forelni scowled. “No one should be forced to do anything, even if they don’t mind doing so.”

“I did not mind being here with you.”

“But, what if you had minded? What if you did not want to be here and had been forced to anyway? That is very wrong, Bryna.”

“This angers you?”

“Greatly,” he replied.

\* \* \* \* \*

His anger hadn't cooled as he stepped out into the arena for the final battle. In the time they'd had before the guards had arrived to escort her away, she'd told him all about her people and how Kallitan society had judged them inferior and classified them as slaves. He was no longer just fighting for the lives of the diplomats and the Starfleet personnel. He'd become the champion for the oppressed people of Kallita and for a young woman he...

...cared deeply for? Loved, possibly?

He paused at the thought, glancing over where Bryna was standing with the other slaves in attendance. Was there more than just a physical attraction at play here, he wondered, and then shook away the thought. He could not be distracted right now. He had two battles to fight. One against the brute that was just now entering the arena to a cheering crowd, the other for the hearts and minds of that crowd and all who were no doubt watching planet wide.

His opponent was massive. His frame no doubt chemically enhanced as Forelni doubted any humanoid could naturally achieve that bulk of muscle. The brute's

eyes were wild, he seemed overly-agitated. No doubt more chemical inducement to achieve maximum adrenaline production. He carried a long spear with a shiny, and no doubt sharp, metal tip at the end. In the other hand a formidable-looking club that Forelni doubted even he could lift.

Unlike his two comrades, this champion wasted no time with the niceties. He charged full speed across the arena, spear fully extended, club drawn back to strike. Forelni waited calmly, stepping aside from the spear thrust, dodging the swipe of the club and used a judo throw to hurl the brute into the concrete wall. The arena shook with the impact. The brute barely registered it.

A backhanded swipe of the club caught Forelni in his damaged ribs, sending him sprawling into the dust. Forelni barely rolled out of the way to avoid a downward smash of the club aimed at his head and the spear thrust aimed at his chest. He launched a flying kick at an exposed leg and it felt like he'd kicked a mountain of solid granite. Favoring the ribs and a now-sore right foot, Forelni backed out of the range of the brute's weapons. The brute pressed the attack and Forelni found himself on a purely defensive front, unable to land any serious blows against his opponent. The man wasn't even sweating and Forelni knew

he couldn't maintain this pace much longer. A killing blow would eventually find its mark.

The edge of the spear sliced a small, stinging cut into Forelni's left forearm. He grabbed onto the shaft of the spear and snapped the wooden shaft in half with his right fist. A quick kick to the inside of the brute's left knee put the brute off balance. *It was now or never*, Forelni thought grimly.

A strong slash with the spear tip severed the tendons of the brute's left forearm and the club tumbled from his now useless hand. A slash across the right forearm rendered it useless too. Two more slashes to each calf and the brute crashed to the ground and lay there, completely helpless.

"Kill, kill, kill," the crowd began shouting and Forelni switched the spear to his left hand before picking up the club. It was lighter than it looked. He stood over the fallen man, then looked up at the booth where the First Counsel sat, then at his Captain, seated nearby. One blow with the club and the First Counsel would have to release the hostages and let them all go free. As the Crown Prince he could deliver that blow without regret.

He lifted the club above his head and drove it, the butt end first, into the ground...one foot from the brute's

head. He was not just a Crown Prince this day. He was a Starfleet Officer. A silence fell over the arena.

“I will not kill a helpless man,” he did not shout, yet the words clearly carried to every ear as if he had. “There is no honor in that. This fight is over. I have won and the First Counsel will honor the terms of this contest.

“People of Kallita,” he continued, slowly turning to look all around the arena. “You are better than this. You deserve better than this. Your leaders allow blood sports to determine who lives and who dies. You hold people as slaves for no other crime than an accident of birth. They deserve better. They deserve to be free like...”

He felt the impact in his back even as he heard the gunshot. It drove him into the ground. Even as he rose and turned he knew where it had come from and who had fired it. He hurled the spear at his target and it flew true, driving the First Counsel's hand, and the gun it was holding, into the back wall of the booth, pinning the screaming First Counsel to the wall.

“They deserve to be free like you,” he continued, the pain clear in his voice as he struggled to his feet. “You cannot be the people you can be until you free them, until you free yourselves from the bonds of tyranny that you have allowed yourself to be chained with.”

With that Forelni pitched forward and lay unmoving on the arena floor.

\* \* \* \* \*

Kirk had taken advantage of the confusion and relieved the still screaming First Counsel of his weapon.

“My officer has fulfilled the requirements of your contest, First Counsel,” Kirk said, not quite pointing the weapon in the man’s direction. “You will drop the shield, return our communicators and the Doctor’s equipment, and release all hostages.”

The First Counsel nodded his head vigorously and his men quickly produced the confiscated equipment. Kirk looked down at the arena floor. The Kallitan woman had somehow slid past the guards and had run out to Forelni’s side.

“Bones,” he tipped his head down to Forelni.

“On my way, Jim,” McCoy grabbed his equipment and headed down. Kirk flipped open a communicator.

“Kirk to *Enterprise*.”

“Spock here, Captain. The shield is down and we have already beamed the diplomatic team aboard. Standing by to beam the rest of you back now.”

“Stand by, Spock,” Kirk replied. “McCoy will let you know when to beam him and Mr. Forelni aboard. Have

a medical team standing by. There is a Kallitan woman next to Mr. Forelmi, Spock, beam her up too.”

“Understood, Captain. The Doctor has just called for beam up.”

Kirk watched as the three figures below dissolved in the transporter effect.

“First Counsel,” he turned back to the injured leader. “I will return to my ship now along with Ambassador Kleine. We will be in touch soon to schedule a new round of negotiations, on board my ship this time. Spock, two to beam up.”

Kirk tossed aside the gun as the *Enterprise* reclaimed the last of her children.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Forelni floated in a sea of fuzzy white, following a faint murmur of voices. He couldn't make out the exact words but clung to them like a lifeline.

"You're hard man to kill, Commander," McCoy's voice came through loud and clear, snapping Forelni out of the hazy fog. He was looking up at the ceiling of sickbay and the lone soft light shining down on his bed. He became aware of a hand holding his left hand and turned his head. Bryna was standing there, smiling.

"She hasn't left your side since we beamed up three days ago," McCoy said. "If it hadn't been for her getting to you and stopping the bleeding as quickly as she did we might have lost you."

"Thank you," Forelni added a light squeeze of her hand before looking back at the doctor. "How long did you say?"

“It’s been three days since the fight,” McCoy repeated. “Between the battle and the bullet you took quite a beating. But you’re going to be fine. You can sit up if you want and if you behave I might let you walk around a little. But don’t even think of trying to go back on full duty or whatever that is you call exercise down in Rec for awhile.”

“Aye, sir,” Forelni cracked. “So what happened after the fight, which I recall winning.”

“You won,” McCoy confirmed, “and delivered quite a speech before you keeled over. The First Counsel has been on and off the ship in talks with the Captain and the Ambassador every day since. I’m told an agreement on planet-wide reforms is nearly done.”

“That’s good to hear.”

“I have hope for my people for the first time,” Bryna cut in. “We have you to thank for that. But that also means you will be leaving Kallita soon and that saddens me.”

“I’m sure we will have reason to return,” Bari assured, as he slowly sat up, surprised to discover how deeply he shared her sentiment. “We’ll see if my jailer will allow a tour of the ship before you go home.”

“Seeing as how you didn’t collapse after sitting up, we might see about cutting you loose tomorrow, for a tour and light duty only, understood?”

Forelni sketched a salute and got a patented McCoy grumble in response. The doors to sickbay parted, allowing entry to Kirk and the Ambassador before sliding shut.

“Mr. Forelni,” Kirk smiled. “Good to see you’re awake. How are you feeling?”

“Battered and bruised, sir, but ready to get back to work.”

“After he gets some more rest,” McCoy added sternly, ignoring the knowing look that passed between Kirk and Forelni.

“We bring good news, Bari,” Kleine said. “We’ve reached an accord with the Kallitan government on wide-ranging reforms. The practice of slavery will be abolished. You made quite the impression down there, I must say. In fact, the First Counsel is waiting outside. He’d like a word with you if you are up to it?”

Forelni eased himself off the bed and stood up, waving off McCoy’s protestations.

“I’ll be damned if I receive that man while looking up at him, Doctor.”

Kirk walked back to the doors, silently noting that Forelni had positioned himself between the young Kallitan woman and the entrance.

“First Counsel,” he invited after the doors had parted. The Kallitan leader walked in and surveyed the room before addressing Forelni.

“Commander, my congratulations on your victory and your recovery.”

“Thank you, First Counsel,” Forelni replied, his tone matching the First Counsel’s lack of sincerity. “Most gracious of you.”

“It is the least I can do. Now that you have recovered, and our negotiations have concluded, I must ask that all Kallitan citizens on board this ship return to the planet with me at this time. We have much work to do down below.”

“And if the young woman wishes to remain as our guest for awhile longer?” Kirk’s own tone was less than cordial.

“I’m afraid, as a Kallitan citizen, she does not have a choice in the matter.”

Forelni turned and activated the panel next to his bed.

“Bridge, communications please.”

“Communications,” Lt. Uhura answered.

“Lieutenant, please send the following message to the Royal Court on Etalya, to the attention of the Court Chamberlain: Honorable Sir, effective this stardate in recognition of her actions, Bryna of Kallita, is granted full Etalyan citizenship and is hereby appointed as Etalyan Ambassador to Kallita. Signed His Royal Highness, Crown Prince Bari Forelni. Please send it as top priority.”

“Message transmitted, Commander.”

“Thank you, Lieutenant, Forelni out,” he snapped off the link and turned back to face his adversary.

“What does that mean?” Bryna asked.

“It means you may remain on the ship if you like,” Forelni explained. “You may even request transport to live on Etalya if you so desire. It also means, if you choose to return to Kallita, you will do so as my world’s official representative, with all of the protections that position entails.”

“And if we choose not to recognize her new status?” the First Counsel all but growled.

“It would not go well for you if you choose that path, First Counsel.”

“I see.”

“I will return home,” Bryna cut in.

“Are you certain?” Forelni turned to her, ignoring his foe as he took her hands in his.

“Yes, there is much I can do for my people now. Thank you for that and for all you have done.”

She favored him with a chaste kiss and walked toward the First Counsel.

“Let me be the first to welcome you, Ambassador,” Kleine stepped in, “and allow me the honor of escorting you to the Transporter Room. We can set up an office for you in the Federation Consulate when our diplomats return to the surface until something more permanent for you can be arranged.”

Kleine led her out of the room with the First Counsel following a few steps behind. Forelni waited until he was at the threshold.

“Not a scratch, First Counsel.”

The Kallitan hesitated for a split second before continuing out of the room without saying a word. Forelni stared at the closed doors.

“She’ll be fine,” Kirk said. “Making her an Ambassador will protect her. He wouldn’t dare do anything now.”

“I hope you are right, Captain,” Forelni sounded unconvinced as he glanced at the wall chrono. “My regular

watch is scheduled to begin in three hours. Permission to go back on duty, sir?"

"Now wait just a second," McCoy barged in. "Granted you've managed to remain standing for more than five minutes without falling flat on your face, but you're a far cry from being cleared for duty, Commander."

"I can rest in a chair on the bridge just as easily as I can in my quarters, Doctor."

"Perhaps light duty only, Bones," Kirk offered. "He can stand a watch on the bridge and call me if anything happens?"

"Provided the Commander gets something to eat first and engages in nothing more strenuous than sitting," McCoy allowed with a grumble. "I swear you're a worse patient than Spock and the Captain combined."

"Commander, I suggest we make our retreat before he changes his mind," Kirk quipped. "I will see you on the bridge in three hours."

Forelni wasted no time in taking his Captain's suggestion and departed. He had to admit, three hours later as he made his way onto the bridge, a sonic shower and some food had done wonders. He was still sore in several places, and he doubted he was up to any kind of a fight, but he was feeling much better.

“Commander, it’s good to see you back in uniform,” Kleine greeted him, being the first one to spot his arrival.

“Thank you, Ambassador. It’s good to be back in it. Checking up on me already, Doctor?”

McCoy just harrumphed his reply as the evening watch crew arrived to relive their counterparts. After all were settled in, Forelni looked at Kirk.

“I believe your watch just ended, sir.”

“Indeed it has, Commander, the bridge is...”

“Incoming transmission from Kallita, Captain,” Ensign Karina Fabian, Uhura’s relief at Communications, interrupted. “It’s the First Counsel, sir.”

“On screen,” Kirk ordered.

The screen switched from the orbital view of the planet to the interior of the First Counsel’s chamber. The man was seated, flanked by the other members of the Kallitan government. He was holding a length of chain in one hand and wearing an ominous smile on his face.

“First Counsel,” Kirk greeted warily. “What can we do for you?”

“Ah, Captain Kirk, and I see Ambassador Kleine and Commander Forelni are present as well, good,” he

began. "I am calling to inform you that the Kallitan government is formally withdrawing from the Federation."

"Captain," Spock called out, having returned to his station. "The force shield is back in place above the city."

"Yes it is," the First Counsel confirmed. "As there are no Federation citizens on Kallita, and none of our people are aboard your ship, this should be of no concern."

"There is the matter of the Etalyan Ambassador, First Counsel," Kirk said, beating Forelni to the punch by a whisker.

"Oh, yes, about that," the man's smile grew. "We have decided not to recognize her claim of Etalyan citizenship, nor do we accept her as your Ambassador, Prince Forelni."

He snapped hard on the chain and Bryna, the other end of the chain hooked to a collar around her neck, tumbled to the floor in view of the pickup. She'd been badly beaten and her clothes were shredded rags. Then the viewscreen cut back to the orbital view of the planet.

"Communications ended, sir," Fabian reported in the shocked silence that had fallen onto the bridge.

Kirk placed a hand on Forelni's shoulder.

“Commander,” he said softly, and then repeated it a little louder the next time to finally get his officer to turn away from the screen.

“I should have killed that man when I had the chance,” Forelni said in a tone devoid of emotion.

The vision of the badly beaten woman still fresh in his mind, Kirk couldn’t honestly say that he disagreed.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

“Captain,” Kleine broke the shocked silence of the bridge. “I will report this to the Federation Council. We’ll have a formal protest delivered to Kallita by the morning. Until then, prudence dictates we take no provocative action.”

“Thank you, Ambassador,” Kirk replied, not pointing out that a protest would do little good to help the young woman planet side. “Ensign Fabian, see that the Ambassador’s message is sent top priority.”

Kirk returned his attention to his Security Chief, who was far too quiet for his liking.

“Commander, if you’d prefer to be relieved for this watch I’m sure Mr. Arex will not mind taking the conn.”

“Thank you, Captain, but I’d rather stay on watch and keep the conn as scheduled,” Forelni answered quietly.

Then he blew out an exasperated sign as he heard the unspoken words in Kirk's offer.

"Mr. Arex," he ordered Sulu's relief at the helm. "Please move us to fifty thousand kilometers beyond maximum transporter range from Kallita."

"Aye, sir," the Edosian responded as he complied.

"Bridge to Transporter Room," Forelni toggled a switch on the command chair's armrest. "Mr. Kyle, until further notice, no one is allowed to transport off of the ship without a direct order from the Captain. Please pass that order along to the Shuttle Deck."

"Aye, sir," Kyle's voice replied over the speaker.

"This ship will take no provocative action, nor will anyone from this ship take direct action against the planet during my watch, Captain," Forelni reported, a wry smile taking any hint of insubordination out of his actions.

"You didn't need to do all of that, Commander," Kirk chided.

"I did since you would have stayed awake in your cabin all night if I hadn't, sir."

"I see," Kirk surrendered the point, since that was probably what he would have done. "In that case, a pleasant watch to you Commander, ladies and gentlemen."

A chorus of “Good night, sirs,” followed Kirk, Spock, McCoy and Kleine into the turbolift before the closing doors cut them off.

“You really think leaving him at the conn is a good idea, Jim?”

“He’s a Starfleet Officer, Bones, he knows his duty.”

“Captain, I can monitor the bridge from my quarters...”

“And admit I don’t trust one of my officers, Spock? No. We heard the orders he gave. I trust he’ll follow them as much as every other member of my crew will.”

\* \* \*

Forelni waited a full five seconds after the turbolift doors closed.

“Mr. Lehman, I doubt the First Counsel would have severed relations with the Federation so easily without a replacement plan at the ready. Please scan for all vessels within two days’ journey at Warp 6 from Kallita and put the results onscreen please.”

William Lehman, Chekov’s relief at the helm, quickly complied. The main viewscreen switched to a relief map with Kallita in the center. Roughly two dozen ships were within range and their names were displayed

underneath a white dot indicating their current position. Forelni studied the map silently.

“Lt. Bock, I’d like you to monitor the Kallitan shield. It must take a lot of energy to maintain. Now that we are outside transporter range they might decide to lower it to conserve energy.”

Brena Bock, Spock’s relief at the science station turned toward the conn.

“I want to offer the Captain the option to mount a rescue attempt should the Kallitan’s offer us the opportunity, Lieutenant, nothing more,” Forelni added, reading the question in her stance before she could phrase it.

“Aye, sir,” she turned back to her station.

“Ensign Fabian, please open a channel to the freighter *Specter*, you’ll find her roughly one light day away at 287 Mark 4. I’ll want to speak with her Captain, L’ee S’king.”

“I have Captain S’king now, sir,” Fabian reported a minute later. “On screen.”

“L’ee, it has been far too long, old friend.”

“Bari Forelni,” S’king replied. “Still as handsome as ever. And in command of Starfleet’s flagship now.”

“Third in command, L’ee, and I’m an old bridge troll compared to you.”

“So, what do I owe the great honor of the Crown Prince’s communication?”

“Boredom actually. I’m sitting here near Kallita with nothing to do. The planet just withdrew from the Federation and unless they change their minds all I can do is just sit and watch. Even if a fleet, Romulans, Klingons, or say even an organized pirate fleet at that, were to come along and attack that’s all I could do. Can’t interfere in a non-Federation world’s issues. Anyway, I noticed you were in the area and I remembered that you never did deliver that case of Romulan Ale you owe me. You still have it, don’t you?”

“Oh, of course. Would you like me to bring it to you now?”

“As a matter of fact, I’d appreciate it if you did.”

“I think we can arrange that. We’ll see you soon.”

The screen went dark and Forelni sat back with a cold smile.

\* \* \*

“Commander,” Lehman shouted. “Ten vessels just dropped out of warp and are on an attack run toward Kallita. It appears the *Specter* is the lead ship and the

others match configurations for known or suspected Orion pirate ships.”

“I’d heard there was a rumor that L’ee had joined up with the Orions, but I never believed it was true,” Forelni remarked calmly.

“Shouldn’t we raise shields and go to Red Alert, sir,” Arex inquired as the invading ships opened fire on the Kallitan shield.

“Are any of those ships targeting *Enterprise* or any other Federation vessel or world, Mr. Arex?”

“No, sir.”

“Then this is not a matter of concern to us, is it?”

“No, sir.”

“Shouldn’t we at least raise shields?” Bock asked.

“In case there is a stray shot.”

“A prudent precaution, Lieutenant. Mr. Lehman, raise shields please.”

“Sound General Quarters, sir?”

“Not yet, Ensign Fabian. I’ll report to the Captain first and see if he wishes us to go to GQ.”

Fabian’s board whistled for attention.

“Incoming communication from Kallita, sir,” Fabian reported. “It’s the First Counsel.”

“I’m sure it is,” Forelni replied softly as he toggled the comm switch on his armrest. “Answer the hail and put him on hold until after I’ve reported to the Captain. Bridge to Captain Kirk.”

“Kirk here.” *You weren’t resting at all, were you Captain*, Forelni thought with a knowing smile.

“It appears a fleet of pirates, possibly Orion or Orion-backed, are attacking Kallita. I have raised shields but as none of them are targeting us or any Federation interest I have not yet gone to Yellow Alert.”

“I’m on my way up, Commander, order Yellow Alert.”

“Aye, sir,” Forelni snapped off the comm and pressed the necessary tab on his armrest to trigger Yellow Alert. “All hands, Yellow Alert. I say again, all hands Yellow Alert, this is no drill.”

Forelni glanced over his shoulder.

“Put the First Counsel on screen,” he ordered as he rose out of the chair. An angry and frightened First Counsel quickly formed on the main viewscreen.

“*Enterprise*, we are under attack... You!” the First Counsel sputtered when he realized he was addressing Forelni. “Where’s the Captain?”

“Captain Kirk is off duty and I have the conn, First Counsel,” Forelni said calmly. “We have noticed the attack. It does seem like you have a problem, sir.”

“A problem,” the First Counsel roared. “Those ships are battering our shield down and once they get past that they will cause no end of death and destruction!”

“Indeed, they will.”

“Well, are you just going to sit there?”

“Actually, that is exactly what this ship is going to do until it or any other Federation interest comes under attack. As Kallita is not a part of the Federation this ship is prohibited from interfering in any of its affairs. I’m sorry, but my hands are tied. I wish you good luck, First Counsel. *Enterprise* out...”

“Wait,” the man all but screamed the word before regaining his composure.

“Yes,” Forelni asked with maddening calm.

\* \* \*

Kirk listened to the exchange between Forelni and the First Counsel on the way up inside the turbolift. Spock, McCoy and Kleine had joined him.

“Technically, the Commander is correct,” Spock offered. “But I doubt Star Fleet Command would object to interfering during an attack by Orion pirates, Captain.”

“He knows that, Spock,” Kirk agreed. “But the First Counsel doesn’t.”

The doors parted as the four men exited. A security officer, Dan Butler, who’d come aboard when they’d picked up Ambassador Kleine, started to announce his Captain. Kirk placed a hand on the young man’s shoulder and waved him off. Holding up his other hand, he stopped the others from stepping out onto the bridge. He was ready to step in if needed, but Forelni had clearly set this up and he wanted to see what was next.

“We were too hasty when we withdrew from the Federation,” the First Counsel stammered. “I can see that now. We formally rescind our withdrawal from the Federation.”

“Only to reinstate it once the present danger has passed?”

“No, Commander, my solemn word. We will not withdraw again.”

“I see,” Forelni paused a beat. “Very well. Stand by to lower your shield and produce Ambassador Bryna for immediate beam-up. Put the First Counsel on hold, Ensign Fabian, inform the transporter room to stand by for a beam up and have a medical team sent to the transporter room.

Have an armed security team report to the transporter room as well. Then get me the Captain of the *Specter*.

“Mr. Arex,” Forelni continued, “move us toward the attacking fleet and within transporter range of the Capital City, best possible speed.”

The screen split into two images, the now-muted First Counsel on the left and Captain S’king on the right.

“Commander invading fleet,” Forelni affected an overly formal tone. “You are attacking a Federation planet. You will cease hostilities immediately and withdraw to a distance of one million kilometers from the planet and hold there for further instructions.”

“We were told this was no longer a Federation world,” S’king affected an air of outrage.

“You were misinformed,” Forelni replied. “Withdraw or we will destroy your fleet.”

“Of course we will withdraw. We would never knowingly attack a planet of the mighty Federation.”

Half of the screen went dark.

“The pirate fleet is breaking off their attack,” Lehman reported. “They are moving out to the specified distance, sir.”

“Put the First Counsel back on, Ensign,” Forelni waited a beat. “The invading fleet have broken off their

attack and have moved out of firing range. Lower your shield and produce the Ambassador.”

Looking ashen, the First Counsel nodded his head at someone out of range of the pickup.

“Shield down, sir,” Lehman reported then audibly gasped as Bryna was carried into range of the pickup. He wasn’t the only person on the bridge to do so. It appeared she’d suffered even more abuse in the time since they’d last seen her on the screen.

Kirk readied himself to step in and countermand any order should Forelni decide to correct his earlier oversight regarding the First Counsel’s status as a living being, even as he fought down the urge to let Forelni do whatever he wanted to the monster capable of what they had witnessed.

“Transporter Room,” Forelni’s voice was frighteningly calm. “Lock on to the woman on the main screen and beam her aboard now.”

“Locked on,” the tech reported. “Beaming up now. Transport confirmed, the medical team has her now.”

“Is the security team there?”

“Aye, sir. They’re standing by.”

“Then beam everyone else in that room up now. Have them escorted to the Main Briefing room to await the pleasure of the Captain and Ambassador Kleine.”

The entire council of Kallita faded from the room below in a sparkle of transporter effect and Forelni waved for communications to be ended.

“They’re all aboard and being escorted as ordered.”

“Thank you. Bridge out.”

A hushed silence fell over the bridge, even the computers and control panels seemed to have gone quiet as everyone watched the center of the bridge as if waiting for a supernova to erupt.

“Dr. McCoy,” Forelni broke the silence without turning around. “I believe you have a patient in need of your services in Sick Bay.”

McCoy shot a look at Kirk before entering the turbolift.

“Mr. Butler,” Forelni still held his gaze on the viewscreen. “The Captain of this ship walked onto this bridge less than two minutes ago, did he not?”

“Aye, sir.”

“And yet, I did not hear you announce him. I believe that is one of your duties when on the bridge,

especially during an alert?" Forelni finally turned around and walked over to his security officer.

"I told him not to, Commander," Kirk stepped in. Forelni narrowed his eyes.

"I see," he favored Butler with a piercing gaze. "I suppose in that case we'll let it slide. This time, Mr. Butler."

"Aye, sir. Thank you, sir."

"Hmmm," Forelni turned back to the screen. "Put Captain S'king back on, Ensign."

"On screen, Sir."

"Captain, I'm inclined to overlook this incident as are the Kallitans as no actual damage was done. However, I'm sure we would all feel much better if you and your ships were to go on your way. Immediately."

"Of course, Commander. Most gracious of you. I understand there was a matter of a shipment of Romulan Ale..."

"What shipment of Romulan Ale would that be, Captain?" Forelni deadpanned.

"I seemed to be misinformed once again, Commander. Must be my day for it. Good day."

The screen darkened and switched to the fleet turning away from Kallita and jumping back into warp.

“Well, Mr. Lehman, I think we can lower shields and call off Yellow Alert now. Wouldn’t you agree?”

“Aye, sir. All hands, stand down from Yellow Alert.”

Forelni turned back to the Ambassador.

“I believe you now have a more receptive audience to negotiate with, Ambassador. Captain, would you like the conn back now?”

“I think Mr. Spock and I will join the Ambassador to make sure the First Counsel behaves himself, Commander. Have Mr. Arex relieve you of the conn. I don’t think we’ll have any more excitement tonight.”

“Sir?” Forelni asked.

“I assumed you’d rather be down in Sick Bay.”

“Aye, sir, I would. Thank you, sir. Mr. Arex, the conn is yours,” Forelni headed for the turbolift.

“Commander,” Kirk called out as Forelni stepped inside.

“Sir?”

“Well played.”

Forelni nodded, keeping a smile from his face, but not out of his eyes as the doors slid shut.

## CHAPTER NINE

“Well, Captain,” Kleine remarked as they exited the briefing room and walked down the corridor, “I think that went well. In a few days we can have a formal signing and relations between the Federation and Kallita can go back to normal.”

“Assuming we can trust the First Counsel to keep his word,” Kirk replied as he stepped into the turbolift. “Sick Bay. That might be a big assumption given his previous record.”

“I don’t think that will be an issue going forward,” Kleine dismissed as the doors slid shut and they began the brief journey. “Not after they got a taste of what life would be like without Federation protection. I must say, Bari really managed to put the fear of God into the First Counsel.”

“I’m surprised you approve of it, Ambassador.”

“Bari has always been the Federation and Starfleet’s greatest champion,” Kleine replied as the lift doors opened and they made their way toward Sick Bay. “He’d never do anything to harm either institution. He’s also loyal to a fault, which is why he didn’t do anything that would reflect poorly on his Captain. It wouldn’t surprise me that he had a resignation letter at the ready, taking full blame, had things turned out otherwise.

“No, Captain,” Kleine continued as they stepped inside Sick Bay. “Starfleet will be happy, the Federation will be happy, so I’ll be happy. Sometimes a little gunboat diplomacy has its place. Trust me, we have nothing to worry about.”

Kirk pulled up short as he spotted McCoy, seated at his desk, and staring at a filled glass of Saurian brandy. Another filled glass sat nearer the edge.

“Bones?”

“I lost her, Jim,” McCoy replied softly. “About an hour ago.”

“How?” Kleine exclaimed.

“There’s only so much damage a humanoid body can take, Ambassador,” McCoy’s tone bristled. “And only so much medical science can do to repair it. We’d fix one

damaged organ and two more would begin to fail. We never could keep up...”

“You did your best, Bones.”

“Yeah, that’s what I keep telling myself. Maybe I’ll actually start believing it,” McCoy picked up the glass and downed it.

“Forelni?”

“He’s in there,” McCoy indicated a door to the treatment area with a nod of his head. “He’s just sitting next to her. He hasn’t said a word since she died. You want some advice from an old country doctor? If your business with the First Counsel is done, you get them off the ship and break orbit now. My mama always said to watch out when someone goes quiet like that.”

Before Kirk could reply the outer doors parted and Lieutenant Frank Luke, the ship’s Chaplain, entered with branches of some sort in his hands.

“Excuse me, Captain,” Luke said. “I was told there was a death connected to an Etalyan and I needed to collect these. Their culture calls for placing these in the hands of the deceased. It isn’t the same plant as found on Etalya but Hydroponics had these and they are pretty close. The Etalyan custom calls for those closest to the deceased to sit vigil over the body until it is laid to rest, never leaving it

unguarded lest its spirit gets lost. They also place a specific coin over the eyes. I couldn't find anything close to that though."

"I'm sure Commander Forelni will appreciate the thought," Kirk replied. "Right now he is with the deceased."

"Of course. Doctor, if I may wait over here for now?"

The treatment room doors parted and Forelni stepped out into the room. He looked suddenly old and tired. It took him a moment to realize there were more people present than just McCoy.

"Commander, my condolences," Kirk said simply and Kleine quickly followed suit. Forelni nodded and stepped over to the communications panel, pressing the button firmly.

"Sick Bay to Bridge, Science station."

"Sciences," Arex replied, manning the post while Spock had the conn.

"Lieutenant, please locate the nearest Etalyan-flagged vessel of any kind."

"Aye, sir. Stand by," a long pause. "I have it, sir. The *Audace*. A freighter commanded by..."

“Enzo Cocci,” Forelni finished. “An old friend. Thank you, Mr. Arex. Would you transfer me to Communications please?”

“Uhura here.”

“Lieutenant, would you please hail the *Audace* and connect me to her Captain? I’ll wait here in Sick Bay.”

“Aye, sir.”

“Captain,” Forelni cutoff the panel. “There are certain responsibilities I have regarding the death of an Etalyan official. May I request that I be placed on leave until I fulfill those duties? I anticipate no more than a week will be needed.”

“Of course, Commander,” Kirk replied. “Effective immediately?”

“Yes, sir. Thank you,” Forelni nodded as Kirk borrowed McCoy’s computer access to enter the leave into the log and duty roster. The comm panel whistled as Uhura transferred the call to the *Audace* to Sick Bay.

“Enzo, my old friend,” Forelni greeted.

“My Prince, to what do I owe the honor?”

“Ill tidings, Enzo. I must impose upon you and your crew.”

“You have but to ask, you know that.”

“I am in need of your ship to carry the body of our Ambassador to Kallita back home, Enzo, so she may be laid to rest among her people. I cannot do so myself.”

“Consider it done, my Prince,” Cocci replied immediately. “How did she die?”

“Not well, Enzo, but that is a matter for my own concern. When you arrive back at Etalya, you and your crew will be my guests at my dimora. Your ship will be resupplied and restocked and any repairs will be taken care of while you are there.”

“My Prince, that is most generous, but not necessary. We would take our sister home without a credit of compensation being paid.”

“I know, Enzo, but please accept my generosity all the same. And one more thing, before you rendezvous with *Enterprise*...”

“My Prince?”

“Do not forget to bring the *Vendicatore*.”

“We will not forget that,” Cocci replied after a very long pause. “We will be there in three days.”

“Thank you, Enzo, *Enterprise* out,” Forelni toggled the switch again. “Uhura, I need to send a priority diplomatic message to the Royal Court of Etalya and to the attention of the Court Chamberlain.”

“Proceed, Commander.”

“Message begins: To his Honorable Chamberlain, our slain Ambassador to Kallita, Bryna, is being escorted back to Etalya by the Etalyan ship, *Audace*, which is en route to Kalitta with the *Vendicatore*. I will not be able to accompany her home. However, I formally request that she be laid to rest in the gardens of my dimora following her state funeral. I also formally request an official protest against the government of Kallita be filed with the Federation regarding her death at the hands of its First Counsel. In addition, the crew of the *Audace* are to be guests at my dimora, their ship to be given every consideration and fully loaded with cargo upon their departure from Etalya. All expenses to be drawn from my personal treasury. Message ends.”

“Message sent, Commander.”

“If you gentlemen will excuse me,” Forelni said, turning back toward the treatment room.

“Commander,” Luke stepped forward, offering the branches. “I thought you might need these and some company while you sit vigil.”

“I’d appreciate both,” Forelni replied, slipping two coins from his pocket as Luke followed him inside.

\* \* \*

Three days passed quietly, with the final signing of the agreement taking place on board the ship. The *Audace* dropped out of warp only a few minutes later. Forelni had sent messages to the ship's officers, inviting them to be at the somber ceremony when *Audace* docked with *Enterprise* and Bryna's body was transferred aboard the freighter. That Ambassador Kleine was invited to represent the Federation was not a surprise. That the Kallitan contingent had also been invited was.

Attired in dress uniforms, the invitees had gathered in the bay near the docking ring as the *Audace* docked. Her crew stepped through once the port opened and quickly lined up against a near wall. A tall man, dressed all in black and wearing a mask, followed the Captain out and took up station next to the port.

On the other side of the bay, the door parted and an honor guard from security crisply marched in and lined up. Scotty, in dress kilt and carrying his beloved 'pipes, marched in playing *Amazing Grace*. He was followed by the stasis tube bearing Bryna's remains, floating on an anti-grav. The security team snapped to attention as the tube, steered by Forelni, passed by. He was not in his Starfleet uniform.

“Captain,” Spock whispered softly. “That is the official uniform worn by the Crown Prince during a time of war on Etalya.”

Forelni was attired in a flowing black robe with a blood-red stripe running the length of each side, a gold-trimmed, purple cloak adorned with many medals and a formidable-looking sword at the belt. Forelni looked every inch a Crown Prince in dress. His face was that of a god of war, Kirk thought to himself. He glanced over at the First Counsel, who looked bored, and was suddenly worried about why Forelni had invited him.

Scotty ended the tune as the procession reached the crew of the *Audace* and he stepped over to join his fellow officers. Cocci stepped forward, placing a hand on the tube.

“We will bear our sister home,” Cocci said. “Where she may rest in peace among her people.”

The *Audace* crew each stepped forward, surrounding the tube and guided it through the port and into the freighter with Forelni in tow. He stopped at the port and faced the man in black, holding his own gloved hand out. Kirk spotted a data chip in the palm of his officer’s hand just before the other man clasped it.

“Thank you, my brother,” Forelni said, before breaking the handshake and stepping back before executing a slight bow.

“It is I who thank you, my brother, for this honor,” the man replied, clenching his hand into a ball before returning the bow and wheeling around to disappear through the port. The hatch closed and the *Audace* immediately separated from the ship. Forelni walked over to the *Enterprise*’s officers.

“I was not aware you had a living brother, Commander,” Spock said.

“During such times, Mr. Spock, the *Vendicatore* is considered family, a brother in spirit if not in flesh, if you will,” Forelni replied. “Captain, on behalf of the Ealyan people, I thank you and your crew for your presence here. You do her, and us, a great honor.

“Mr. Ambassador,” Forelni continued, looking at Kleine. “Thank you for representing the Federation. We are honored.”

“My pleasure. I only wish it had been under more pleasant circumstances.”

“Indeed,” Forelni said then turned to face the Kallitan contingent. “Mr. Ambassador, for the record, the Ealyan government formally protests the murder of its

Ambassador to Kallita and demands justice. Etalyan justice. And that justice will be done.”

“And how do you plan to do that?” the First Counsel sneered.

“With my hands around your throat, First Counsel,” the icy calm in which the threat had been delivered froze everyone in the bay. Forelni turned away and approached the security team, commanded by Officer Butler. “Mr. Butler, my compliments to you and your team, sir. I believe our Kallitan guests have concluded their business aboard ship. See to it that nothing delays their immediate departure.”

Butler and his team hastily escorted the Kallitans to the transporter pads on the far side of the bay. Once all five had been beamed down, Forelni turned to face his Captain.

“Do you think it was wise to publically threaten to kill the First Counsel?” Kirk asked.

“Maybe not,” Forelni allowed. “But consider, how well do you think he’ll sleep trying to keep one eye open looking for me? Captain, my duties to Etalya have been completed. I request permission to be returned to active duty.”

“Are you sure?”

“Quite sure, sir.”

“Very well, Commander. I will so note in the log.”

“Thank you, sir. Mr. Butler,” Forelni called out as he slipped off the cloak and out of the robe. He was dressed in his red duty uniform underneath. He folded up both garments and handed them to Butler. “Run these over to the transporter and have them beamed over to the *Audace* with my thanks to her Captain for bringing them to me from Etalya.”

He turned back to a host of strange looks from the crew.

“You don’t think I pack that around with me everywhere I go, do you?” He allowed a ghost of a smile to form as he headed out of the bay. “I’ll see you on the bridge in two hours, Captain.”

“I just don’t know, Jim.”

“What is it, Bones?”

“I just can’t buy he did all that just to play head games.”

Kirk remained silent. He had to admit, McCoy might just have a point.

## CHAPTER TEN

“The *Audace* is breaking orbit now, Captain,” Sulu reported as Forelni led the evening watch crew onto the bridge. “She’s setting a course for Etalya.”

“Good timing, Commander,” Kirk greeted as Forelni approached. “The freighter just finished a very slow orbit around Kallita.”

“A final salute over the field where our Ambassador fell, Captain,” Forelni replied, watching the departing ship. “Typical when one of ours falls on a planet other than Etalya.”

Kirk rose from the command chair as the relief crew smoothly replaced their counterparts at their respective stations.

“Message from the *Audace* to Commander Forelni, Captain,” Uhura called out before Ensign Fabian could claim her station. Kirk nodded.

“Go ahead and read it, Lieutenant,” Forelni said.

“We take our leave to escort our honorable sister home. The *Vendicatore* sends his respects. Message ends.”

“Thank you, Lieutenant. Acknowledge message received only with no reply,” Forelni ordered as he took his place in the command chair. On the screen the *Audace* warped out in a blaze of rainbow light. “Orders, Captain?”

“Remain in orbit, Commander. The Ambassador wants to remain nearby for a few more days to make certain the Kallitans are sincere.”

“Understood, sir. Pleasant evening, Captain.”

“Pleasant watch, Commander,” Kirk said as he entered the turbolift and departed the bridge. Forelni stared quietly at the planet below for a few minutes before finally breaking his silence.

“Ensign Fabian, please get Under-Counsel Zuran for me.”

“It’s late evening in the capital city, sir. He’s probably at his home.”

“No doubt,” Forelni agreed. “But I am sure there is a way he can be reached.”

The process took a few minutes, and two relays, before the young Council member appeared on the screen, sitting at a desk in his home.

“Commander Forelni,” Zuran greeted cautiously. “To what do I owe the honor?”

“I was hoping to speak with you, Councilor, if the time is convenient? I’m told you alone on the Council would have Kallita be a much better place for all of her people.”

“I’m afraid that position makes me somewhat unpopular with my fellow council members,” Zuran admitted.

“Yet very popular with your people.” Forelni pointed out. “I would like to discuss that if we might?”

\* \* \*

“The Kallita you would like to bring about is one I would like to see, Zuran,” Forelni remarked many hours later. He’d waved off his relief when the late watch had arrived to relieve the evening watch. Now, the day watch was only minutes away from taking their posts.

“But it is a vision that will take many years to fulfill, I’m afraid,” Zuran said, stifling a yawn.

“Perhaps,” Forelni admitted. “But sometimes the future does not take as long to arrive as we might think. Forgive me, Councilor, I appear to have kept you up all night.”

“It is no matter. I enjoyed our discussion. Good day, Commander.”

The screen went dark before switching back to the planet view and Forelni sat back in the chair.

“That was an interesting conversation,” Ensign Caroline Furlong remarked from the science station.

“How so?” Forelni swung the chair around.

“It was almost as if you were gauging to see how receptive he was to the idea of taking over the planetary government.”

“Merely gauging the measure of the man, Ensign, to see if he would be worthy should the moment present itself.”

“And is he, sir?”

Forelni said nothing in reply, merely turning the chair back to face the forward screen before rising to his feet.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he stretched the kinks out of his back, “it has been a pleasure standing a watch with you this night.”

Kirk walked out onto the bridge with the rest of the day watch personnel in tow just to a chorus of “Thank you, sir” and looked around bemused.

“I take it that was aimed at you, Commander,” he said, stepping down to the command chair. “And either you are very early...”

“...or I took the liberty of standing a watch with the night crew, sir,” Forelni finished, stepping aside from the chair.

“Captain,” Ensign Julian Thompson called out before Uhura could step out of the second turbolift car bearing the day watch crew. “Something is happening planetside. Major uproar on all of their NewsNets, Sir.”

“Onscreen, Ensign,” Kirk ordered, catching a fleeting emotion he couldn’t place race across Forelni’s face. The view switched to a planetside network report. The scene it displayed was horrifying. Several men had been hung by the neck from a cross beam in front of the Council chamber. A banner, hung from the dead men’s feet, swayed in a gentle breeze. FOR BRYNA had been written in blood red, whether in paint or in actual blood Kirk could not tell.

“Repeating this urgent story,” a voice broadcasted from Kallita. “The First Counsel and five of the six Under-Counsels have been executed by person or persons unknown. Their bodies were discovered moments ago just as you see them here. We are getting word that Under-

Counsel Zuran is unharmed and is being brought in under heavy security to take control of the government.

“We are hearing reports of mass celebrations breaking out as word of these events are getting out,” the woman continued. “Chants of ‘For Bryna’ and ‘Free Kallita’ are echoing throughout the city...”

Kirk waived for the report to be cutoff and turned to face Forelni.

“Captain,” Spock interrupted, “A small vessel has broken from orbit and is heading at high speed toward the Sun. I estimate it will plunge into the star in less than ten seconds.”

“Let him go, Captain,” Forelni said softly. “It’s what he wants.”

“Who, Commander?” Kirk demanded. “Why does he want to die?”

“The *Vendicatore*, Captain. He has fulfilled his duty and it is now time for him to travel to Elysium.”

The small craft plunged into the star, the *Enterprise* too far away to even attempt rescue.

“Explain yourself, mister,” Kirk ordered.

“One moment, Captain,” Forelni looked over at Uhura. “Please send a message to the *Audace* that the

*Vendicatore* has arrived in Elysium and have a security detail report to the bridge on the double.

“Captain, when my people left Earth from Sicily,” Forelni explained as Uhura made the calls, “there was a small group of engineers from Greece that went with us. Their descendants formed a small colony on Etalya and they have served the Forelni family ever since. There is an order in the colony, the *Vendicatore*, who live in the lone hope of dying in the service of the Royal Family. They have come to believe that is the only way they can enter Elysium, what you would call Paradise.”

“You sent him down there to do that,” Kirk pointed at the now-blank screen.

“Yes, sir,” Forelni replied as the turbolift doors parted and two men from Security, Butler and Mike Kozlowski, stepped out. “I believe Starfleet regulations require that I be arrested until a board of inquiry can be formed, sir?”

Kirk could only nod his head.

“Confined to quarters, not the brig,” Kirk instructed the two security officers.

“Thank you, sir,” Forelni replied and turned for the turbolift.

“Commander?”

“Sir?”

“Given you will likely be drummed out of Starfleet at best and imprisoned at worst,” Kirk asked when Forelni turn back around. “Was it worth it?”

“She saved my life, Captain,” Forelni responded. “So yes, sir, it was.”

Forelni spun on his heel and entered the lift with his guards in tow and a bridge in stunned silence behind him.

\* \* \*

Admiral Matthew Bowman sparkled into existence on the *Enterprise's* main transporter pad three days later. A short, stocky man whose stature had earned him the nickname “Munchkin” at the Academy, Bowman had the reputation of a man not to be trifled with. Especially when angry and the Admiral was an angry visitor to the ship. He stormed off the pad with his assistant in tow.

“Admiral Bowman,” Kirk greeted. “Welcome aboard, sir. This is my First Officer, Spock.”

“Captain, Commander,” Bowman indicated his aide. “My aide, Lieutenant Lori Janeski. Are you ready to begin the Court Martial of your Security Chief?”

“As ordered, sir. Mr. Forelni is being escorted to the briefing room now. Are you certain you want to begin right away?”

“Quite,” Bowman replied and headed out of the room. “The sooner we get this done the better. We’re damned lucky this hasn’t turned into a major diplomatic incident.”

“Admiral,” Kirk said as he followed Bowman. “It seems the Kallitan government has filed no formal protest over the matter. We’ve been told by the new First Counsel, Zuran, that his predecessor had no intention of living up to the recent agreement negotiated by Ambassador Kleine...”

“All’s well that ends well, Captain?”

“I don’t think anyone can argue with what we’ve seen on the surface in just three days, sir. The practice of slavery has been abolished. Major reforms are already being put into place. It is a much better Kallita than the one we first encountered.”

“Be that as it may, Captain, we can’t have Starfleet officers running around playing kingmaker on every backwater planet they encounter.”

They arrived at main briefing with Forelni seated in the defendant’s seat in full dress and flanked by Kozlowski and Butler. McCoy and Scotty, also in full dress, were seated against the back wall and Ensign Shira Tomboulian serving as court reporter. Bowman, Kirk and Spock took their seats at the judge’s table while Janeski claimed a seat

next to McCoy. Bowman reached over and rang the ship's bell three times in rapid succession.

"This court of inquiry into the actions of Lieutenant Commander Bari Forelni at Kallita is now in session," Bowman began. "Admiral Matthew Bowman, Captain James T. Kirk and Commander Spock serving as tribunal judges in this matter.

"Mr. Forelni," Bowman continued. "You are accused of arranging for the assassination of six members of the lawfully established Kallitan government as well as arranging for a new government to be put in place and that said actions represent conduct unbecoming of a Starfleet officer. How do you plead to these charges?"

"Not guilty, sir, to the last charge at least. And I object to the wording of the first two charges, thus I must plead Not Guilty to both of those as well."

"Would you care to explain yourself, Commander?" Bowman's eyes narrowed.

"Gladly," Forelni turned to face Spock. "Commander, if you would be so kind as to consult the computer as to my exact duty status at the moment I first spoke with the Captain of the *Audace*?"

“You were listed as on official leave to deal with an Etalyan matter,” Spock reported after consulting the computer.

“And would you be kind enough to read Section Three, Paragraph Seven, of my official transfer orders from Etalyan Space Command to detached service in Starfleet?”

Spock’s eyebrow rose sharply as he located the indicated verbiage.

“According to this document, Admiral,” Spock looked at Bowman. “In situations when the Commander was needed to act as an official representative of Etalya, once granted leave by his commanding officer to do so, he was no longer officially a member of Starfleet.”

“And was I a member of Starfleet when I handed the *Vendicatore* his orders at the docking port regarding the six Kallitan Councilors, Mr. Spock?”

“According to this, Commander, you were not.”

“Nor did I have any contact with the *Audace* or the *Vendicatore* to give them any further orders after I returned to active duty, correct?”

“That is correct, Commander.”

“Then in that case, Admiral,” Forelni turned his gaze to Bowman. “I ask that the conduct unbecoming charge be removed.”

“Very well, Commander, let’s toss that charge out. You still are guilty of arranging the murders of six men, are you not?”

“Would you call that murder, Admiral?”

“Yes, I would, Commander.”

“I disagree.”

“And just what would you call it then?”

Before Forelni could answer, the bridge called. Kirk saw a small smile form on Forelni’s face.

“Bridge to Admiral Bowman,” Uhura’s voice carried from the overhead speaker. “Priority message from Starfleet Command, Admiral Nogura.”

“Go ahead,” Bowman ordered.

“The Federation Council has received an order for the execution of the six murderers of Ambassador Bryna from the ruling government of Etalya, said order being issued after the criminals had been tried in absentia and found guilty under Etalyan law and lawfully sentenced to death. Further, the Etalyan Government having officially carried out the execution hereby withdraws its formal protest against Kallita, welcomes the new Kallitan government and hopes to establish long and peaceful ties between the two worlds.

“The Kallitan Government,” Uhura continued, “accepts the judgment of the Etalyan court and considers the matter closed, as does the Federation Council. By order of Starfleet Command, no further inquiry is ordered and the matter is to be considered closed with no further action taken against any of those involved. Signed Nogura, CIC, Starfleet Command.”

No one in the briefing room said a word or even so much as moved. Forelni affected a poker face that would shame a Vulcan and stared down Bowman.

“You sneaky son of a ...”

“Admiral,” Forelni said softly. “My mother and I have our differences, but she is still my mother.”

“You set this all up,” Bowman accused, “right from the beginning.”

“Not quite all of it,” Forelni admitted. “But most of it, yes.”

“Why didn’t you just explain this on the bridge,” Kirk asked.

“Because I needed to wait for Etalya to file the documents with the Federation and have the Council’s decision trickle down to Starfleet Command.”

“So everything you did here would be legally sanctioned.” Bowman finished.

“Aye, sir. With no blame falling on Starfleet or on Captain Kirk.”

“You really think this is the way the Federation and Starfleet should operate, Commander?” Bowman asked. “Cloak and dagger regime change?”

“When it is confronted with its own member planets keeping its citizens in chains for no other reason than an accident of birth? Yes, Admiral, that is exactly what it should do and not by cloak and dagger, either.

“Whenever we see even one individual wrongfully chained,” Forelni continued. “Whenever one group stands up and denies any being’s right to life and liberty for no other sake than to enrich or to empower themselves, we should each of us stand up and say no. This is not right. This will not stand!”

“You say that for every individual everywhere in the galaxy, Commander?”

“Yes, sir, I do.”

“Would you be this passionate about Kallita if you were not personally connected to this Bryna person?”

“Yes, sir, I would.”

“Then it appears that you are a better man than I, Commander.”

“Yes, sir, I am.” Forelni replied and only then did Kirk realize just how angry his Security Chief had really been this past week. Because all of that anger carried through in all four words of his response and everyone in the room could feel it as he stared down the Admiral.

Bowman reached over and rang the bell sharply, twice in rapid succession.

“Given the recent communique from Starfleet Command,” he kept his gaze locked on Forelni. “This board of inquiry is hereby dissolved and Commander Forelni is returned to active duty. You are dismissed, Commander.”

“Orders, Captain?” Forelni looked at Kirk.

“I think it has been a long day, Commander, suppose you call it a day and report for duty in the morning.”

“Aye, sir, thank you,” Forelni nodded and exited the room. The others followed suit, leaving only Bowman, Kirk and Spock behind.

“You know something,” Bowman said, staring at the closed doors. “He’s going to make a hell of a Starfleet Captain, if he doesn’t get himself killed or tossed in the brig first.”

“That is a most surprising reaction, Admiral,” Spock remarked.

“Oh, I actually agree with a lot of what he said, Commander,” Bowman admitted. “And I can’t say the universe isn’t a better place without those six despots around. I may disagree with his methods, but I can’t disagree with the results.

“There was one other task I have to complete, now that this hearing has concluded the way it has,” Bowman added, pulling a data chip from his pocket and handing it to Kirk. “Your orders, Captain. Since Mr. Spock here and your fire-breathing Security Chief are playing for the Galactic Chess championship, Starfleet wants to take full advantage of the PR opportunity.”

“How so, Admiral?”

“By ordering *Enterprise* to Starbase 28 where you will pick up a team of archaeologists and transport them to Auriga III. It’s a dead world now but they have discovered an old civilization there. The team wants to dig it out and *Enterprise* will remain in orbit to make sure the team is not bothered by any pirates or smugglers while the chess tournament plays out on ship.

“Once the tournament concludes and the team is settled with proper security to keep the pirates at bay,”

Bowman continued, “you will receive new orders to transport Commander Forelni to Earth where he will take command of the new Federation-Class Dreadnought, nearing completion as we speak.”

“I thought he was getting the new starship being constructed at Mars?” Kirk asked.

“They’ve hit a delay and someone at Starfleet decided to turn Mr. Forelni and his all-Italayan crew loose on the galaxy in a dreadnought instead. He’ll give it a proper shakedown and begin patrolling along the Romulan Neutral Zone. But you are not to tell him until the official orders are cut. No need making him even more insufferable than he already is.”

“Yes, sir,” Kirk replied diplomatically as Bowman turned to leave.

“Oh, and Mr. Spock,” Bowman stopped and looked back. “About that upcoming chess tournament?”

“Yes, Admiral?”

“Good luck,” Bowman said as he continued out the door. “You’re going to need it.”

“Indeed,” Spock agreed, one eyebrow rising.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

“Checkmate, Commander.”

Spock released his hold on his white bishop, completing his trap of Forelni’s black King.

“Indeed it is, Commander,” Forelni said, foregoing the traditional post-match handshake by lifting his hand in a Vulcan salute as he rose from his chair. “An excellently played game.”

Spock returned the gesture and nodded his head.

“This concludes the twenty-second match,” Sondra Bateman, the President of the Intergalactic Chess Federation, announced. “The series is now tied at six wins each with ten draws. Tomorrow’s match will be for the Galactic Championship. Should it end in a draw, another match will be played and we will continue until a match ends with a victor.”

“Commander Spock, may I have a moment of two of your time?” L.J. Ramones, from Starfleet’s Public Relations Office, stepped up as Forelni turned away from the chess table set up in Main Rec. Ramones, like Bateman, had boarded the ship at Starbase 28 and the tournament finals had immediately gotten underway. Playing two matches a day, Spock and Forelni had spent the last eleven days playing what many of the ‘Nets were calling the best chess seen in the history of the game.

“An interesting decision, Commander,” Kirk observed as he walked over to where Forelni had taken station, near one of the vid screens.

“What decision, Captain?”

“You could have easily played to a draw,” Kirk explained. “Then all you would need to do would secure another draw tomorrow and the title would be yours.”

“I played for the win,” Forelni agreed with a slight shrug. “And Spock figured out what I was up to and made me pay the price for it. Besides, it doesn’t seem...”

“Sporting?” Kirk offered when Forelni paused.

“Honorable,” Forelni settled on a word. “Playing it safe in battle when prudence dictates is one thing. Playing it safe in chess? What’s the point of that?”

Before Kirk could reply, the comm panel whistled for attention.

“Bridge to Commander Forelni.”

“Go ahead, Uhura,” Forelni thumbed the switch and the vid screen flared to life with Uhura’s image.

“Receiving transmission for you from the Grand Palazzo on Etalya.”

“Send it down here, Uhura.”

“Aye, sir.”

The viewer shifted and Forelni did a very good imitation of a raised Spockian eyebrow.

“Father, this is an unexpected surprise,” he said when he recovered his voice. “Allow me to present my commanding officer, Captain James T. Kirk.”

“Your majesty,” Kirk greeted with a slight bow of his head. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“The pleasure is mine, Captain,” the King returned. “You must bring your ship to Etalya so we may meet in person. I trust my son, aside from recent events, has otherwise been behaving himself?”

The younger Forelni bit off the long-suffering sigh universal among all sons when their father is teasing them.

“He’s been doing just fine so far,” Kirk answered, diplomatically hiding a grin.

“That is good to hear, Captain. Still, if you should need...”

“Was there a specific purpose to your call, Father?”

Bari Forelni cut in.

“A proud father cannot call to congratulate his son on how well he is representing our world in the chess championships?”

“Father...”

“Very well, my son, I wanted to make sure you had received the video packet of Ambassador Bryna’s funeral.”

“I did. Thank you for sending it and please send my thanks to the Chamberlain. He did a splendid job on the arrangements.”

“I will do so. I also wanted to tell you that most of Etalya shared your outrage at her death. I need not tell you that they approved of how you handled getting justice for her. When you take the throne, my son, you may do so with more popularity than Genoa himself.”

“Most, you say. I suppose I need not ask who can be counted among those who disapproved.”

“The usual suspects, of course. Which is why I wanted to call and speak to you.”

“I care little about what Marcus Antonius and his lapdogs on the *Consiglio* think of my actions, Father.”

“This I know all too well, but that was not the reason for my call. I could not help but notice that the number of Antonius’ cadre on the *Consiglio* is the same number of Kallitan councilors you sent the Vendicatore after.”

“A coincidence,” Bari Forelni replied, but Kirk heard uncertainty in his tone.

“Perhaps,” the King allowed. “Or perhaps all of the anger, the guilt over what happened to Francesco that you have carried in your heart for over a century and the fact that you could not strike down those you felt were responsible finally found an outlet? You stayed your hand back then, because politically it made sense. But here was a situation where you did not need to exercise such restraint, as long as you could maneuver the situation exactly the way you did. And no one would protest the result.”

The Prince remained silent.

“Let Kallita be the end of carrying that weight from so long ago, Bari. And do not carry any guilt over the death of Bryna for the next century. You have avenged the dead, my son, let them – and yourself – find their peace.

"Captain, it has been a pleasure," the King continued. "Keep an eye on my son and bring him home sooner rather than later."

The screen went dark and Forelni stared at it for a very long time.

"You know, I really hate it when he does that," he finally broke the silence.

"What's that, Commander?"

"Makes a point that I can't counter," Forelni replied, a slight smile forming. "Especially when he's right. It's damned annoying."

"Fathers seem to be really good at that," Kirk agreed. "It's a universal trait."

Forelni nodded, still thinking over what his father had just said.

"Commander, you're going to be a starship Captain pretty soon..."

"That's still not yet settled, Captain..."

"Don't give me that," Kirk held up a hand. "You've earned it, even if you weren't the frontrunner all along. And yes, I say that even in light of Kallita. But your father is right. You can't carry around the guilt of those you couldn't save. All you can do is try to do better the next time."

“Aye, sir, and thank you, Captain.”

“It looks like they are finally done with Spock,” Kirk clapped a hand on Forelni’s shoulder. “It’s your turn to be interviewed. I’ll see you at the dinner later.”

\* \* \*

“Congratulations on your victory this afternoon, Mr. Spock,” Dr. Bear Whitme greeted the First Officer as he arrived for the officer’s dinner. Whitme was the head of the team that would be working the ruins found on Auriga III.

“Thank you, Doctor. Commander Forelni has been a most formidable opponent.”

“Well, I for one am glad we’ll get to see the last match before we arrive at Auriga III tomorrow,” Dr. Kirsi-Marja Niskala replied. “I hope what we discover down on the planet is half as exciting as the first twenty-two matches have been.”

“Oh, I think we can arrange that, Dr. Niskala,” Forelni said as he came up from behind the two Doctors. “If Commander Spock tries to pull that same move with his bishop tomorrow I’ll draw my phaser and shoot it off the board.”

“Not only would that be most illogical, Commander,” Spock raised an obligatory eyebrow. “It would also be quite illegal.”

“Hmmm. Such a stickler for the rules. Well, I suppose I will have to devise some other strategy for tomorrow then. Speaking of strategies, Doctors, once we get you beamed down and settled in, how will you proceed with the dig?”

“Much easier than the initial dig was able to, thanks to the presence of your ship in orbit for starters,” Dr. Whitme replied. “Apparently what remained of Auriga III after its sun burned out was a perfect hideout for smugglers. They didn’t appreciate the presence of an archaeological team digging about and the team had to evacuate quickly.

“What they did discover before they had to flee,” Dr. Whitme continued, “indicated a culture that was rapidly, and quite unexpectedly, advancing just before the end came. We’re hoping to find out exactly what triggered that rapid advance.”

“That sounds like quite a mystery to solve,” Forelni replied. “As we’ll remain in orbit for a while, to make sure those smugglers don’t come back, I hope you’ll find the answer before we break orbit.”

“Commander, most digs like this require a lot of work before they reveal their secrets. You may not be in orbit when we find those answers.”

“Well, one week, one year or more,” Forelni said. “I’ll leave a bottle of Etalyan wine behind for you to open when you finally find your answers, Doctor.”

“I would think you would save that for celebrating, or commiserating, depending on the outcome of tomorrow’s match?”

“Oh, heavens no, Doctor,” Forelni quipped. “I have a bottle of Saurian Brandy set aside for that.”

## CHAPTER TWELVE

Spock gently laid the tip of a single finger on his queen as he calmly studied the board. Forelni kept his face as blank as possible, affecting an air of indifference to his opponent's actions.

But in reality he really needed Spock to move his queen, currently threatened by Forelni's well-protected bishop, and open the door for checkmate in three moves. If Spock failed to move the Queen, instead choosing to block the attack, Forelni would have to reset his attack and the match would likely end in a draw and a needed twenty-fourth match.

However, if Spock chose to sacrifice his queen and moved his knight down from the third level, Forelni would be checkmated in two moves and there wouldn't be a thing he could do to prevent it. Spock started to lift the queen, and then paused as an eyebrow lifted.

*Uh oh*, Forelni thought keeping his face a mask. Spock withdrew his hand from his queen and reached up for that white knight and moved it exactly where Forelni didn't need it to be moved to.

Forelni scanned the board one last time, looking for a way out of the trap he'd apparently set for himself. Finding no other option he reached for his king and gently tipped it over as he rose from his chair. Several in the gallery gasped as they suddenly realized what he'd seen coming. Spock had won.

"Congratulations, Commander," Forelni sketched a bow as the gallery applauded. "It's been an honor, sir."

"Thank you, Commander," Spock extended his hand. "You have been a worthy opponent."

ICF President Bateman stepped forward and presented Forelni with a silver disk, given to the runner-up. She then turned to present Spock with a golden medallion suspended from a gold chain – awarded to the Galactic Grand Champion.

"Ladies and Gentlemen," Bateman said after the applause died down. "On behalf of the Intergalactic Chess Federation, and in recognition of perhaps the greatest final series in tournament history, it is my honor to confer onto

both you, Commander Spock, and you, Lt. Commander Bari Forelni, the status of Intergalactic Grand Master.”

As another round of applause broke out, she produced two pendants and pinned one to each of the lapels of their dress uniforms. Forelni took advantage of Ramones interviewing Spock to take his leave of the stage. Spotting several members of his security crew glumly gathered near the buffet he headed on over.

“Mr. Butler,” he greeted. “You gentlemen appear to be taking my loss harder than I am.”

“We had a bet, sir, with the crew down in cargo control.”

“Oh? I hope it wasn’t for too many credits.”

“It wasn’t credits, sir,” Officer Rick Ewald admitted.

“I see. How are you expected to settle your wager, Mr. Ewald?”

“We have to handle the cargo transfers, both ways, while we are in orbit over Auriga III,” Butler answered.

“That’s quite a lot of work, especially later today when we start beaming supplies down.”

“Aye, sir, we know.”

“Well, gentlemen, I suggest we take full advantage of this buffet and eat hearty,” Forelni said with a wave of his hand. “We’re going to need it.”

“We, sir?”

“Mr. Butler, what kind of a commanding officer would I be if I let my crew pick up the check for my shortcomings in chess?”

\* \* \*

“Mr. Kyle, we’re starting to pile up out in the hall,” Forelni remarked later that afternoon in the main cargo hold, after the *Enterprise* had made orbit around Auriga III. He’d seen both Bateman and Ramones and four members of their staffs off on their shuttle. Ensign Pamela Stump, who was transferring to the *Lafayette*, was flying them to Starbase 16 where they would catch a ride back to Earth. Now he was helping his men settle their debt with cargo.

“Aye, sir,” Kyle acknowledged as he adjusted the transporter console. “We’ve been picking up some odd, low-level radiation coming from Auriga ever since we made orbit. Whatever it is, it’s something Mr. Spock says he’s never seen before.”

“Should we take a look at using shuttlecraft instead?”

“No, sir. Mr. Spock has been making adjustments to the shields based on his readings. I just need to make a few minor adjustments to the transporter. Mr. Scott has already rerouted additional power to the transport console here from the Main Transporter Room since we’ll be doing all the transporting of cargo down here.”

“We’ve got two hours before Dr. Whitme’s team is scheduled to beam down,” Forelni pointed out. “Can we get this cargo down below in time to bring the main transporter back online?”

“Shouldn’t be a problem, sir,” Kyle looked up from the console. “We’re ready to send the first shipment down.”

“You heard the man.” Forelni helped his six-man crew load the first six containers onto the platform. Kyle completed the process and had confirmed transport as Drs. Whitme and Niskala rushed in with the rest of their team in tow.

“You’re a little early, Doctors,” Forelni said.

“We just got a message from the site,” Dr. Whitme explained. “They’ve found an intact structure below ground. They’re waiting for us to get down there before they open it up. We’d like to get down there as soon as possible.”

“I suppose that’s understandable,” Forelni looked over at Kyle. “Any problems with that transport?”

“No interference from the Auriga radiation. Shouldn’t be a problem.”

“Very well then. Doctors, if you and your team will step up on the pad, we’ll get you down there and we’ll get the rest of your equipment down as soon as possible.”

“Thank you, Commander,” Niskala said as she stepped onto a disc.

“Good digging. Energize, Mr. Kyle.”

The team dissolved into the transport effect and disappeared.

“Transport complete.” Kyle reported.

“Very good. Alright gentlemen, let’s get the rest of this stuff down below on the double.”

“What’s the hurry, sir?” Butler asked.

“Mr. Butler,” Forelni replied with a wicked gleam in his eyes. “The sooner we get this job done, the sooner we can start planning on our revenge on cargo for winning that bet.”

A chorus of “Aye, Aye, sir!” rang out loud and clear on the deck.

\* \* \*

“Remind you of anyone?” McCoy asked from the other side of the cargo deck, where he and Kirk had quietly been watching unnoticed.

“What exactly are you implying, Bones?”

“That he’s going to make a hell of a Starship Captain.”

“That’s what I told him.”

“I thought you were supposed to keep that quiet?”

Kirk just shrugged.

McCoy chuckled. “Like I said, doesn’t he remind you of someone?”

\* \* \*

Five days passed quietly. There was limited space under the temporary dome and construction of the larger, more permanent dome was still incomplete. Which meant no one from the ship could beam down to the surface and check out the dig.

Spock and his science department focused their attention on the old star, trying to determine what was generating the odd radiation waves that occasionally spiked and required the ship to raise shields. The dome’s shielding was sufficient to keep those on the surface safe.

The rest of the crew made use of the quiet time to catch up on less important work that usually got set aside

during normal ship's activity. Forelni ran a few security drills but Kirk never heard what, if anything, Security had done in regard to the lost wager with Cargo.

"Message from Dr. Whitme, Captain," Uhura announced.

"On screen," Kirk ordered. "Doctor, how goes the dig?"

"Very well, Captain. Maybe even too well. We're running out of space to store the artifacts after we catalogue them. I was wondering if we could send up some containers and have you take them back to Starbase 28 so they can be shipped back to our University on Centauri IV?"

Kirk hesitated, as he knew his orders weren't going to send *Enterprise* back to Starbase 28. However, they would pass close enough to the Centauri system that he could detour long enough to drop off whatever was sent up at the University.

"I wouldn't ask if we had any other place to safely store them until the permanent dome is finished, Captain," Dr. Whitme added, mistaking Kirk's silence for reluctance.

"It's not a problem, Doctor. It's just that we are scheduled to depart in less than two days," Kirk explained. "The *Sierra* will be nearby to make sure no smugglers

return to the area. I'm not sure how much we'll be able to beam up and store on the *Enterprise* before we depart."

"Anything you can take on would be a great help, Captain."

"Very well, Doctor, we'll start beaming up as soon as you are ready."

"Thank you, Captain."

"Mr. Forelni, it looks like you've just drawn a lot of overtime for you and your men," Kirk closed communication with the planet as he swiveled toward the Security station.

"So it would seem," Forelni agreed, toggling the communications button at his station. "Bridge to Lieutenant Piatt."

"Here, sir," Paul Piatt, the ship's Cargo Officer replied.

"Mr. Piatt, bet or no bet, we've got a lot of cargo coming our way from the surface and little time to get it up here," Forelni informed the officer. "Get all your people up and meet me and all of my available Security personnel on the Cargo Deck in five minutes. You might as well wake up Mr. Kyle and ruin his off-duty time too."

“Have fun down there, Mr. Forelni,” Kirk said as his Security Chief headed for the turbolift. He got a dour look in return just before the doors closed.

“Next time, Captain, remind me to use the phaser-to-white-knight-2 maneuver.”

\* \* \*

“Just one more item to send up and I think we’ll be able to handle the rest until the dome is finished, Commander,” Dr. Niskala reported thirty-six hours later.

“That’s good to hear, Doctor,” Forelni replied. “I’m not sure we have room for anything else up here. You really hit the jackpot down there.”

“We sure did,” she agreed. “It looks like we found the Royal Palace. We’ll be studying this site for years if this location is any indication.”

“I don’t doubt it. So, what is our final item?”

“Here, I’ll show you.”

The view from the Doctor’s pad swung away from her to a life-sized portrait of a woman. She wore a crown over raven-black hair, a necklace of several large jewels and a dark blue cape over a lighter blue full-length gown. Whoever the artist had been he or she had been a master, the model a stunning beauty, and the blue eyes on the portrait seemed to be alive.

“Wow,” Forelni said softly.

“That seemed to be the consensus reaction down here when we discovered it.”

“Well, let’s bring it on up as soon as you are ready, Doctor.”

“Go ahead, Commander,” Niskala said after making sure the portrait was secured in its case.

“Energize, Mr. Kyle.”

“Transporting now, Sir,” Kyle replied as he manipulated the controls.

“Incoming radiation spike,” Spock reported, “increasing power to the shields.”

“Kyle?”

“I can’t complete the transport until the shields go back down, sir,” Kyle said. “And I can’t reverse it either.”

“Can you hold the pattern?”

“Not for much longer without more power and I’m at maximum now.”

“Cargo Transporter to Engineering,” Forelni stabbed to comm panel. “I need emergency power to the transporter now.”

“We can’t divert any from the shields, Commander,” Scotty reported.

“Can you tap into the warp engines?”

“Aye, lad, that I can give ye. Stand by.”

“Quickly, Mr. Scott.”

“Power levels increasing, sir,” Kyle exclaimed.

“Cargo Transporter to Bridge. Is there an estimate on how long until we can lower shields?”

“This wave should pass in fifteen seconds, Commander,” Spock answered. Forelni glanced at Kyle, who nodded that he could hold the pattern that long.

“The danger has passed,” Spock called out fifteen seconds later. “Lowering shields now.”

“Alright, Mr. Kyle, finish bringing it aboard.”

Kyle’s hands flew over the console. But instead of a large rectangle shape forming on the pad, a humanoid form was taking shape, solidifying into a very human-looking woman as Kyle announced transport complete.

A raven-haired woman with piercing blue eyes, garbed in a blue cape and gown with a gleaming gold crown in her hair. In a flash she withdrew a very nasty-looking blade from the scabbard at her belt – an item the artist had failed to record in the original portrait, or Forelni hadn’t seen when he looked at it.

Obviously frightened and disoriented, her gaze darted around as if she were trying to decide who she was going to stick that blade into first.



## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Forelni kept his hands well out to each side, palms open and facing the woman on the transporter in as much of a non-threatening pose as he could muster. That this was the same woman from the portrait they'd been beaming up from the surface was indisputable.

How she had come to be here and what had become of the portrait itself were mysteries he would happily explore after figuring out how to deescalate the current situation. First, he needed that blade in her hand returned to its scabbard.

He heard Kyle sound the alarm for an intruder alert an instant before the red alert lights began flashing around the bay, accompanied by the blaring alarm sound. All of which only alarmed their already frightened visitor who tensed as if she were about to launch an attack.

“Mr. Kyle, kill that alarm now,” Forelni ordered, keeping his tone level and as non-threatening as he could. “And activate the universal translator if you please.”

“Translator tied-in, sir,” Kyle reported as the alarms and lights cut off. “But we’ll need her to start talking and it will likely take some time before it will start working.”

“I’m aware of that, thank you. Who is nearest the inner hatch?”

“That would be me, sir,” Engineering Mate Jim Bellmore answered.

“I want you to make sure no one comes onto this deck until I give the “all clear”, Mr. Bellmore,” Forelni ordered. “I don’t care who, just keep them out. We don’t want to make things worse here by adding more people to the mix.”

“Aye, sir.”

“Now then,” Forelni turned his attention back to the woman on the pad, taking a slow careful step toward her. “We mean you no harm. You are among friends here.”

She rewarded him with a narrowed look and a quick, but ineffective, swipe of her blade in his direction.

“Okay, Plan B then,” Forelni muttered softly, taking one step back. “Anyone holding something in your hands, slowly set it down. Then I want everyone on this

deck to take a knee, just as slowly as you can, and stay there until I say otherwise.”

“Sir?”

“This woman is royalty, Mr. Butler, likely a Queen. We’re going to speak to her in a language that she can understand. Take a knee.”

Forelni led the way, slowly kneeling and adding the Etalyan gesture of a slight bow with the right hand over the heart, as everyone else on the deck followed suit.

\* \* \*

“Smart move,” McCoy whispered, standing behind Kirk and just outside of the inner hatch. “Do everything possible to calm the situation until the translator can kick in. Now, he needs to get her talking.”

They had rushed down together when the intruder alert sounded, arriving just behind the six-man, on-duty security team. Now all eight of them could only stand and watch. Kirk had considered entering the bay, only to have McCoy caution against it.

“Your Security Chief knows what he’s doing, Jim,” McCoy had said quietly. “And he was an Ambassador before either of us was born. Let the man work.”

\* \* \*

“Your Majesty,” Forelni said, looking up but remaining on one knee. “My name is Bari.”

He tapped his chest, repeated his name, and then repeated the process twice more as she stared at him, more inquisitive than hostile now.

“Bari,” he said a third time, tapped his chest and then held out his hand in her direction, with what he hoped was a “And your name is?” look on his face. She rewarded him with a single word and he repeated it as best as he could.

“Avion?” he asked, then repeated her name, repeated his with another tap on his chest and waited. When she repeated his name and then his he reached over and touched a nearby crate.

“Crate,” he said. Repeated the word twice and then looked at her. She spoke a single word that he couldn’t quite repeat but must have been close enough. He repeated the process several times; Wall, floor, ceiling, hammer, any object close enough to point to or touch. Finally, he pointed at the blade in her hand and said its name aloud. Her eyes widened slightly.

“How is it you have the same name for my blade?” she asked in perfect Standard. Forelni smiled.

“Because we are finally speaking the same language, my lady,” he replied.

“What magic is this?”

“No magic, my lady, simply a tool,” he explained. “Much like your blade there. Only this tool works on language so we can better understand those we meet in our travels. Sometimes it takes a little longer for our tool to work however.”

“How incredible,” she replied in a hushed tone, but the blade remained out and pointed at Forelni.

“Allow me to properly introduce myself,” he fashioned a slight bow. “I am Lt. Commander Bari Forelni, Chief of Security aboard this vessel, and Crown Prince of Etalya. And you are?”

“Queen Avion, 47<sup>th</sup> ruler of Chandera,” she replied. “I have never heard of the Etalya anywhere on Chandera. But wherever it is it has declared war on Chandera by kidnapping me.”

So Chandera is the name of her planet, Forelni thought as he tried to figure out how to explain she was not a kidnapping victim, and she rules over all of it. So there goes claiming they were from another part of the world.

“My lady,” he said aloud. “You have not been kidnapped, I assure you. How you arrived aboard our

vessel is a mystery to me, but it was not by our design. As long as you are here you are our guest, not our prisoner, and you have nothing to fear from anyone on this ship.”

“Then return me to my palace immediately.”

“If I could, my lady, I would. But until we discover how you got here this is not possible. I am afraid we are too far away from your home to do that.”

“You lie!” she accused. “You are carrying me further from my people...”

“Mr. Bellmore,” Forelni called out, cutting her off. “Raise the outer force field and then open the outer hatch.”

Bellmore glanced over at Kirk, who immediately guessed what Forelni was up to, and nodded his approval. Bellmore rose to his feet, threw two switches and then pulled down on a lever. The outer hatch cracked open, each half sliding into the hull, revealing the destroyed world of Auriga III hanging in space beyond the open hatch.

Avion took a stumbling step forward, unable to tear her gaze away from the sight. Her blade clattered to the deck.

“What is that?” she asked, her voice barely audible.

“That,” Forelni replied, trying to soften the blow. “Used to be the world you called Chandera at least five thousand years ago.”

She stared at the lifeless ball below, then her eyes rolled until nothing but white showed. Forelni stepped forward and caught her before she fell to the deck.

“Doctor McCoy,” he called out, turning toward the inner hatch without setting her down.

“Subtle work, Commander,” McCoy said as he waived his medscanner over her.

“She dropped the knife, didn’t she?”

“How is she, Bones?”

“Shock, for obvious reasons, but readings well within humanoid norms. Let’s get her to Sickbay. Commander, since you seem to be well suited to serve as an ambulance, would you mind?”

“Of course, Doctor. Mr. Butler, secure that blade and bring it to me in Sickbay, if you please. Mr. Bellmore, we seem to be finished beaming things up until further notice. Secure this cargo, and by all means close that hatch if you will.”

Forelni followed McCoy off the deck and out the inner hatch.

“Mr. Spock,” Kirk toggled the comm panel, “stand down from intruder alert. I trust you and Mr. Kyle are going to figure out exactly what just happened down here

and why. More importantly, how we are going to return our visitor where she belongs.”

“That, Captain, may take quite some time.”

“In that case, Spock, I suggest you get started right away.”

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“Will she be okay, Doctor?” Forelni asked as he laid the unconscious woman on the biobed in Sickbay.

“I think so,” McCoy replied as he scanned the overhead readouts. “She had two pretty good shocks to her system. But she seems humanoid, she could almost pass for an Earth woman. In fact, she could...”

McCoy’s assessment was cut off suddenly as Avion’s eyes opened. One hand shot up to grab McCoy by the collar while the other reached for the now-empty sheath at her belt. Forelni quickly placed a hand on each of hers.

“It looks like her recuperative powers are as quick as her reflexes,” McCoy remarked dryly.

“My lady,” Forelni said gently. “You are in no danger here. This man is Leonard McCoy. He is a doctor, a healer.”

“Then why was my blade taken from me?”

“It was not taken,” Forelni released his hold on the hand grasping McCoy’s tunic and waived Butler into the room. Butler handed the blade to Forelni, who in turn handed it to her. “You dropped it when you collapsed on the cargo deck. You have my word you have no need for it here.”

McCoy mumbled a “thank you” as she turned loose of his tunic and reclaimed her blade. He was about to ask if giving her back a weapon was a good idea when he noticed she wasn’t doing anything at all with her reclaimed knife. She wasn’t waving it in a threatening manner nor was she making any move to return it to its sheath. He noted with interest that Forelni’s hand was still on top of her other hand and neither of them seemed in any hurry to change that status. McCoy didn’t need to look at the overhead to know there was something going on between them. The way they silently held one another’s gaze told him that.

“Your name is Bari...?”

“Bari Forelni, Crown Prince of Etalya, my lady.”

McCoy pulled a very good imitation of a Spockian raised eyebrow. Forelni should have introduced himself by his Starfleet rank.

“And you are in command of this vessel?”

“Not yet,” Kirk said, having entered just in time to hear the question. “But I suspect that one day, if I’m not careful, he’s going to end up running it.”

“My lady,” Forelni smoothly moved to introductions. “May I present the commanding officer of the *Enterprise*, Captain James T. Kirk. Captain, Her Majesty, Queen Avion of Chandera.”

“An honor, your majesty,” Kirk managed a bow and his legendary smile. “Welcome aboard my ship.”

“Thank you, Captain,” she replied coolly, turning her attention back to Forelni. “Strange, a Prince serving under the command of someone other than his King or Queen.”

“I have found in all of my travels, my lady, that there are some men in this universe that a Prince would consider it an honor and privilege to serve under. This is such a man.”

She turned back to Kirk, a little more warmth in her tone than before.

“My apologies, Captain.”

“Quite understandable,” Kirk said smoothly. “You’ve had quite a day.”

“Yes, I have,” she looked back to Forelni. “You said I arrived here accidentally. How did it happen?”

Forelni shot a questioning glance at Kirk, he nodded for him to proceed.

“We’re still trying to figure out how,” he began. “We were transporting...an item aboard our ship. But, instead of it, we got you instead.”

“From Chandera? Without my permission?”

“Yes, on both accounts.”

“So, you are thieves then?”

Forelni spared another glance at Kirk.

“I don’t think the Prime Directive applies in a case like this, Commander.”

“No, I suppose it doesn’t,” he agreed. “No, we are not thieves. There was no one to ask permission when we found a portrait of you, one I suspect you were sitting for shortly before you appeared here, correct?”

“That is true. I was in the gardens of my palace and then I was here.”

“That was where we discovered your portrait. We brought it up with several other artifacts to be studied and preserved, not to be sold for profit.”

“And no one tried to stop you?”

“There was no one there to do so. There has been no one on Chandera to do anything for a very long time.

The accident that brought you aboard our ship also brought you forward in time.”

“How long?” she whispered, fear of the answer in her eyes but not her voice.

“Nearly five thousand years.”

McCoy was ready to step in with a hypo as she absorbed this latest shock, but she rallied quickly.

“That is why I did not recognize my world...”

“Sometime during your reign, your sun will burn out and nothing on Chandera survives. We only recently discovered your world and a team of scientists have begun digging out the site where your palace was. They hoped to find out more about your world from the artifacts they uncovered and sent them up to our ship for safekeeping.

“One of those items,” he continued. “Was the portrait you were sitting for. We were bringing it up when something happened and during that event you were brought forward in time in place of your portrait.”

“That seems impossible.”

“Before today, I would have thought the same. And yet, here you are.”

“Can you send me back?”

“Until we understand how you came to be here, I cannot make that promise to you.”

“But in the meantime,” Kirk stepped in. “You are our guest and we will make you as comfortable as we can. Mr. Forelni will see that quarters are assigned to you. If you need anything, I’m sure he’ll be more than happy to see to it. Perhaps a tour of the ship when you feel up to it? And when we have a better idea of what happened, we can discuss what your options are.”

“Thank you, Captain.”

“If Dr. McCoy has no objections?” Forelni asked.

“She seems fine, under the circumstances,” McCoy agreed. “No shipwide tours just yet. Give her a day first and if you feel anything that seems off I want you to call me right away.”

“Of course. Thank you, Doctor.”

Forelni helped her stand up from the biobed to escort her out of Sickbay when the doors parted and Spock walked in.

“A demon,” she exclaimed, drawing close to Forelni as if to use him as a shield. Forelni heard McCoy mutter something about a mechanical rice picker, only to be shushed by the Captain.

“No, my lady,” Forelni forced down a chuckle as Spock’s eyebrow arched high. He continued with a conspiratorial wink and a grin. “This is Commander Spock,

First Officer of the *Enterprise*. He is from the planet Vulcan. A desert world. His people developed ears to aid in hearing in their world's thinner atmosphere...and, I've begun to recently suspect, to intercept their opponent's chess strategies and ruin exquisitely planned traps."

"Indeed?" Spock's other eyebrow joined its partner.

"Commander Spock, her Majesty, Queen Avion of Chandera."

"Your Majesty," Spock nodded in her direction.

"Commander," she replied, keeping Forelni between them.

"I was just showing our guest to the VIP quarters, Commander. If you will excuse us," Forelni explained as they continued out the doors.

"Well, Mr. Spock," Kirk said after the doors closed. "What news do you have?"

"We are still examining the data, Captain. Curiously, the radiation signature from Auriga during the surge closely resembled some of the patterns recorded around Forever World."

"You're not saying there's another Guardian of Forever down there are you?"

"No, Doctor, I am not. I suspect that when power from the warp engines was used to hold the portrait's

pattern intact outside of the raised shields that radiation was augmented. It opened a temporal tunnel, connecting the portrait in the present to the portrait in the past. The Queen was likely standing close by and was gathered up by the effect and brought forward.”

“Spock, that sounds highly...improbable.”

“Agreed, Captain. I calculate the odds to be twelve billion...”

“Can we just leave it as ‘highly improbable’ but it happened anyway?” McCoy grouched. “The woman is here, appears to be exactly who see says to be, and is just as humanoid as the rest of us.”

“As you wish, Doctor.”

“Two items of importance, Spock. If it happened once, can it happen again? Until we know for sure all transport in either direction is to be by shuttlecraft only.”

“A wise precaution, Captain. We will need to take more readings of the star, the planet and the space between to determine the exact cause and ensure the safety of all personnel.”

“Until we have some answers we’re remaining in orbit in case we need to evacuate the site below.”

“And the second item?”

“Can we send her back to her own time or not?” Kirk answered. “She’s handling her situation well so far. But that could change if her exile becomes permanent.”

“Of course,” Spock nodded as he turned to leave. “I will endeavor to have answers for you at the earliest possible moment.”

“What do you make of those two, Bones?” Kirk asked, staring at the closed doors.

“Aside from the Captain not getting the girl this time, Jim?” McCoy teased.

“You do know Starfleet has a new duty-swapping program,” Kirk replied with a sideways glance at McCoy. “Feel up to a one-week tour in Sanitation, Doctor?”

“Sure thing,” McCoy answered cheerfully. “Right after your annual checkup, Captain, sir.”

“Insubordinate...,” Kirk chuckled as he shook his head. “That wasn’t what I meant.”

“I know, Jim. It’s nice to see love at first sight is still alive and well though. I’d say they were both taken by each other.”

“But is it wise, Bones? Under the circumstances?”

“Who knows? But look at it this way, Jim. Despite his otherwise youthful-looking appearances, that man is older than the two of us combined.”

“You’re saying he’s been around the galaxy and knows what he’s getting into?”

“Exactly. So stop worrying.”

“Can’t. Comes with the extra gold braid.”

“Then wish them the best, for however long it lasts.”

“That I do, Bones. That I already do.”

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“Every new corner of this ship you show me is filled with wonders greater than the one before.”

Forelni was showing Avion around Hydroponics after her latest interview with Dr. Whitme. Having a chance to speak to a living person from the far past was too good of a chance to let slip away. Over the last two days she had spent four hours each day telling the archaeologist about her world.

When the sessions ended, Forelni would show her new areas of the ship and answered as many of her questions as he could. She had a sharp mind and quickly grasped many of the concepts that explained how *Enterprise* could sail the void between planets.

“So much open water,” she cupped some gardenias and inhaled their scent. “All of this life growing so easily.”

“It isn’t like that on Chandera?”

“There is no open water on Chandera,” she replied sadly. “It lies within caverns below the surface. We grow...we grew our food in specific areas, careful not to waste a single drop.

“Standing here,” she continued, looking around. “This seems like paradise to me.”

“You should come with me to Etalya,” Forelni replied. “Our entire world is lush and green, full of life and beauty. And until this very moment I never thought I would find another place to be its equal.”

He gently took her in his arms and kissed her.

\* \* \*

Spock walked onto the bridge and approached the Captain.

“Mr. Spock, welcome back to the bridge,” Kirk greeted with a warm smile. “We haven’t seen much of you these last two days.”

“Captain, we have completed our analysis of the transporter accident,” Spock began, then hesitated.

“So, you know why it happened?”

“Yes, sir, but we have also discovered something else in our scans of the area. Our findings are quite... disturbing.”

\* \* \*

“Are you absolutely certain, Mr. Spock,” Forelni asked after Spock concluded his explanation in the main briefing room.”

“There is no doubt, Commander,” Spock replied. “The surge of radiation that struck the ship during transport of the Queen’s portrait contained temporal elements *Enterprise* has encountered before. This temporal radiation was amplified when Mr. Kyle engaged warp power to preserve the pattern until the wave passed.

“This action,” he continued, “opened a temporal rift in space, connect the portrait of the present to the portrait in the past and the Queen was caught up in the effect and brought forward. The portrait taking her place in her time. That connection between the Queen and her portrait remained open in subspace, causing a rift that is growing in size exponentially every hour.”

Spock paused to let that information sink in once again to those gathered in the room. Kirk regarded his Security Officer and the Queen sadly, knowing what Spock’s discovery would mean for them. McCoy could only look stunned as he considered what would happen if the rift kept growing unchecked.

“Are you sure it will keep growing, Spock?” McCoy asked.

“Positive, Doctor, and eventually it will shatter the very fabric of space.”

“How long, Spock?” Kirk asked softly.

“Given our respective lifespans, Captain, I believe Mr. Forelni and I would live to see the destruction of this galaxy.”

“And there is only one way to stop this cataclysm?” Avion had grown pale, but her voice was still strong.

“Yes. We must time your transport back down to the precise location where your portrait was beamed up, and during another surge matching the characteristics of the one that brought you here. In this, we are fortunate that these surges are cyclical and we can predict when the correct surge is approaching.”

“So, we beam her down, but hold her pattern outside the shield just as before during the surge, then complete the transport to the surface?”

“Exactly, Commander. This should cause the Queen and the portrait to return to their correct times. Once they are back in their proper temporal positions, the breach should seal itself and the threat will be over.”

“Will she survive the attempt?”

“Just as she did with the original incident, Commander, yes, she should. But there is, of course, a

chance the return trip to her time could be fatal. However, if we do not make the attempt the loss of life in the future will be uncountable.”

“How soon, Spock?”

“The sooner we make the attempt, the more likely our chances of success, Captain. I estimate we will be ready to make the attempt in twenty-two hours.”

“Very well,” Kirk said, standing up. “Get started on your calculations and be ready to transport in one day.

“My apologies, your majesty,” Kirk continued. “But it seems we must cut short your visit here.”

“I understand, Captain. I wish I could stay longer,” she looked over at Forelni as she laid her hands upon his. “But I would not trade my time here while it lasted for anything on Chandera.”

Kirk, Spock and McCoy silently withdrew, giving the couple their privacy.

“One day,” Forelni said softly when they were alone. “There was so much I wanted to show you...”

“What you have shown me already, my love, is enough to fill an entire lifetime.”

“Then let us fill this last day with yet another lifetime to remember,” he replied.

\* \* \*

Spock entered in the last set of adjustments on the cargo deck transporter while Scotty ran a final check to make sure all was in order. There was no guarantee they would get a second chance at this. Kirk, McCoy and Dr. Whitme stood nearby, waiting for Forelni and the Queen to arrive. Only a few minutes remained until the next corresponding surge was scheduled to arrive.

“Squeezing out every second that they can,” McCoy remarked.

“Can you blame them?” Kirk replied as the couple entered the cargo deck.

“Captain Kirk,” Avion was dressed once again in her gown and robe from the portrait. “Thank you for your hospitality.”

“It has been our pleasure to have you aboard, Your Majesty.”

“Doctor McCoy, I thank you for your kindness. Dr. Whitme, do not forget my world or my people.”

“I suspect that forgetting either will be quite impossible, Your Majesty,” Whitme replied. “Thank you for sharing your knowledge of Chandera with us.”

Forelni escorted her to the pad, then turned and walked to the transporter console.

“Commander Scott,” he said formally. “I relieve you, sir.”

Scott looked at Forelni with sad understanding.

“Aye, lad, I stand relieved.” Scotty stepped aside, ready to return if his help was needed.

“Thirty seconds to transport, Commander,” Spock reported.

Forelni locked gazes with Avion, flipping off the translator as he said something to her in her native language. She smiled softly, a tear streaking down her cheek as she replied.

“Begin transport...now!”

Forelni manipulated the controls and Avion dissolved in the sparkle of the transporter.

“Raising shields, tying in warp power,” Spock called out. “You may complete the transport cycle...now, Commander.”

Forelni moved the controls the rest of the way down.

“Transport complete. Shields down. Warp power disengaged. The surge has passed, Commander.”

Without a word, Forelni reversed the process, beaming up from the exact location whatever was there on

the surface. The effect coalesced into the original portrait they had attempted to beam up days before.

“It worked,” McCoy exclaimed.

“Spock?” Kirk asked as Forelni slowly walked toward the portrait on the pad.

“Confirmed, Captain. The breach has been sealed. The danger has passed.”

Forelni stared at the portrait, slowly raising a hand to gently touch the painting.

“I’m sure she made it back, Commander,” Kirk said as he took a few steps toward the pad.

“She made it, Captain,” Forelni said, his voice a little unsteady as he turned to look at Kirk. His eyes were bright. Kirk looked to painting and saw where Forelni was touching it.

There, where it had not been before the first attempt to beam the painting aboard, on the left breast of the Queen’s robe was painted the Starfleet Delta. A five-thousand-year-old message to the future that she had made it back home alive.

Forelni grasped the portrait, which had taken more than one person to move around down below, and lifted it up. He carried it over to Dr. Whitme.

“I believe we’ve finally got the last of your cargo up, Doctor. I’ll see to it that it is stored with the rest.”

“Commander,” Whitme replied. “We’ve located three other portraits of the Queen during our excavations. I think our collection has more than enough. I think you should keep this one.”

Forelni swallowed hard, deeply touched by the gesture and struggled to regain his composure.

“Thank you,” he finally managed to get out and then carried the portrait off the deck without another word.

\* \* \*

Forelni had leaned the portrait against a wall in his quarters. He’d have someone come in to rig up a mounting for it on the wall later. He’d set an unopened bottle of Etalyan wine and an empty glass on the table and then sat down and just stared at the painting, lost in thought.

The chime announcing he had a visitor sounded once, then a second time when no answer was given to the first. Forelni decided it was time to rejoin the world of the living, at least long enough to find out who was on the other side of the door.

“Come,” he said, and the doors parted.

“Captain,” he got to his feet, suddenly realizing how much time had passed. “My apologies, sir, I must be late for duty...”

“Stand at ease, Commander,” Kirk waved him back down. “Your duty shift isn’t for another hour yet. Besides, Mr. Arex has volunteered to take your watch and I am ordering you to take the night off.”

“Thank you, sir, but...”

“But nothing, Commander,” Kirk interrupted. “Take the time. The bridge will still be there tomorrow. Besides, you have a lot to process.”

“Thank you, sir,” Forelni repeated. “Please, sit. May I offer you something?”

“In a moment, Commander,” Kirk replied as he claimed a seat. “But first, I have something to offer you.”

Kirk held out a data chip. Forelni took it with a questioning look.

“Orders,” Kirk explained. “The *Enterprise* has been ordered to return to Earth as best possible speed. We are to deliver Lt. Commander Bari Forelni to Space Dock where he will take command of the new Dreadnought, NCC-1964, currently docked there. I believe your orders also include a request for you to submit the name of the ship so they can have it painted on her hull before you arrive.”

Forelni stared at the chip as it were a living thing.

“Over the years I’ve met many women, Captain, fallen in and out of love with them, never met one that I wanted to spend the rest of my life with.

“A week ago this,” he held up the chip as he continued, “was the most important thing in my life. Now, I’ve finally found the one woman I would give everything up for in a heartbeat, even this, and I’ve lost her forever.”

Kirk nodded in understanding. Reaching over to procure a glass for himself, he placed it on the table and lifted up the bottle of wine. He opened it and filled each glass halfway.

“First, we are going to toast to your ship and your Captaincy,” Kirk instructed as he hand Forelni his glass.

“And then?”

“And then I am going to tell you about a woman named Edith Keeler.”

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“Approaching Space Dock, Captain.”

“Thank you, Mr. Sulu,” Kirk replied, casting a glance over at Forelni. The two-week trip back to Earth had been uneventful, giving the Etalyan plenty of time to pack and say his goodbyes. Within two hours he would be leaving for his new command.

For now, Forelni stood on the *Enterprise's* bridge, staring at the viewscreen while waiting for his first up-close look at his command. He was trying to look nonchalant and was fooling nobody.

When the new Dreadnought came into sight, even Kirk felt a pang of jealousy. *Enterprise* was a lovely lady, sleek and elegant. Forelni's ship was a beautiful ship in her own right, but she was also a War Maiden. *Enterprise's* job was to patrol, explore and handle whatever trouble she might encounter. This new ship's job was to patrol for

trouble and show trouble out the door with a firm boot in the backside for good measure.

“That’s a fine lookin’ ship ye have there, lad,” Scotty said from his station.

“Aye, Mr. Scott, that she is.”

“Of course, I would’na trade her for the *Enterprise*, lad,” Scotty added.

“I wouldn’t believe otherwise for a moment, Scotty.”

“Mr. Forelni,” Kirk called out. “I believe you are expected down in the transporter room in thirty minutes.”

“That should give me just enough time to finish packing,” Forelni agreed, turning to the turbolift. He had individually thanked the bridge crew earlier and had bade farewell to the night watch crew, and his Security staff, the night before. But he paused at the lift and took one last look around.

“There are some ships,” he said aloud. “That anyone who boards them leaves a part of themselves behind with it, and they take a little part of those ships with them everywhere they go, no matter how much time they spend aboard them.

“Take good care of her,” he continued as the doors opened behind him, then glanced up at the ceiling. “And you take good care of them.”

He gave the Royal Bow of the Etalyan Court and stepped back into the turbolift, allowing the doors to close.

\* \* \*

The lift doors parted on the main transporter deck and Forelni stepped out. The cargo master had already had Forelni’s belongings transported over to the Dreadnought as soon as they were in range. There were only a few small items to slip into a satchel, a quick tour of his quarters to make sure nothing had been overlooked and then he headed up to the transporter.

He came to an abrupt halt, barely two steps out of the lift. Members of the crew were lining the walls of the corridor. All the way from the turbolift down to the transporter room.

“Attention!” Butler, the new Chief of Security, called out and everyone snapped to attention.

Forelni nodded his head and walked the gauntlet, thanking each of them as he passed.

“Keep them safe, Dan,” he held out his hand to Butler when he reached his replacement. “And thank you for this.”

“My pleasure, sir,” Butler replied, taking the proffered hand. “And good luck.”

Forelni stepped inside, relieved to find only Kirk, Spock, McCoy and Scotty waiting for him.

“Doctor, thank you for everything.”

“It was a pleasure, son. You be careful out there without us looking out for you.”

“I will,” he smiled as he turned to Spock. “I intend to have a rematch for that galactic championship, Commander.”

“I will be honored, Captain,” Spock raised his hand in the Vulcan salute. “Live long and prosper.”

“Peace,” Forelni returned the salute. “And long life, Commander.”

“Captain,” he continued as he faced Kirk. “It has been an honor to serve with you.”

“The honor is mine, Captain,” Kirk shook Forelni’s hand.

Forelni walked up and took his place on the transporter.

“Mr. Scott,” he called out. “*Mar sin leat.*”

“Aye, lad,” Scotty grinned broadly. “Farewell indeed.”

“Captain Kirk,” Forelni said. “Permission to disembark, sir?”

“Permission granted, Captain Forelni. Fair winds and following seas. Energize, Mr. Scott.”

Forelni dissolved in a sparkle of transporter effect.

“Were you ever able to find out what he named his ship, Jim?”

“No, Bones, I wasn’t. We’ll have to wait for three days along with everyone else for the launch when they officially christen her.”

“I hear there’s a betting pool below decks on the name. The *Genoa* is the betting favorite right now.”

“It would seem to be a logical choice.”

“Gentlemen, speculate all you like, but we’ll find out soon enough,” Kirk said. “I suggest you all enjoy the next few days of down time on Earth while you can. After we take part in the launch ceremonies we are shipping back out.”

“Where are we heading, Jim?”

“You’re favorite vacation planet, Bones. The Forever World. It seems Dr. Whitme would like to make use of the information he got from Queen Avion and use the Guardian to fill in the blanks. Forelni put in a good word for the idea and Starfleet approved. We’ll remain in

orbit for a few days until they are done and then return them to Chandera.”

“Sounds fun.” McCoy never dripped sarcasm, he heavily ladled it out.

\* \* \*

“Welcome aboard the '64, Captain,” Paulo Mansi, wearing the command gold with a full Commander's stripes, greeted when Forelni re-formed on the transporter pad of his ship.

“The '64, XO?” Forelni asked his First Officer.

“Well, since you won't tell anyone what her name is, we have to call her something, sir.”

“Then the '64 will have to do until we launch, my friend. Ship status?”

“We continue to load provisions,” Mansi reported. “We nearly have all crew aboard and settled. We'll launch on time.”

“Even if I have to push her out of dock with my bare hands, Capitano,” Bartolo Rinaldi rumbled in his deep baritone.

“Bartolo,” Forelni clapped a hand on his ship's Captain of Engineering. “You old dog. You should be home with your wife and eight children.”

“Because my wife does not want child number nine, Capitano,” Bartolo’s laugh rumbled across the room.

“Well, I am glad you are here with us. My ship is in good hands.”

“Thank you, Capitano, but I should get back to engineering, otherwise I will have to push this ship out of dock.”

Mansi waited until the engineer and the transporter tech had left the room then looked long and hard at his friend and Captain.

“How are you?”

“I’m fine,” Forelni replied, puzzled. “Why do you ask?”

“Doctor McCoy contacted Doctor Lastra who then contacted me about what happened at Chandera.”

“Bucket mouth seems to be a common affliction among the medical profession,” Forelni grouched.

“We are worried about you, my friend. You have known your share of women. I have never known you to have been affected the way this one did you. She must have been very special.”

“She was,” Forelni said softly. “I wish you could have met her.”

“I’ve seen the portrait,” Mani replied.

“It does not do her justice...,” Forelni visibly shook himself and changed the subject. “But she is lost in the past and I have a new lady in my life now. I am already jealous of you, knowing more of her secrets than do I. Come, show me my ship, Paulo.”

\* \* \*

“Starfleet Command,” Forelni toggled a switch on his command chair. “This is NCC-1964. We are on station.”

“Acknowledged, NCC-1964. The bottle is on target. Estimated impact in thirty seconds.”

Launched from Etalya on a warp sled two weeks before, the bottle had been detached from the sled just outside lunar orbit and was tumbling toward its destination: The long grey rectangle covering the name of the new ship on its hull below the NCC-1964.

Once the bottle smashed open, the covering would dissolve to reveal the ship’s name. So far, only Forelni and four others knew that name and all were sworn to secrecy. Dozens of ships, including the *Enterprise*, had formed a v-shaped gauntlet with the Dreadnought making the point of the ‘V’.

The bottle flew true and smashed dead center of the rectangle and the grey melted away.

“Starfleet Command,” Forelni said. “This is the *U.S.S. Avion’s Star*. We are ready to depart.”

“You are cleared for departure, *Avion’s Star*,” the controller answered cheerfully. “Godspeed, Captain.”

\* \* \*

“Well, I’ll be,” McCoy said as the name of the ship was revealed. “I didn’t see that one coming.”

“You should have, Bones,” Kirk replied, handing the Doctor a slip of paper, a betting slip from the ship’s pool on the Dreadnought’s name. McCoy unfolded it and read what was written on it in Kirk’s own hand.

It will incorporate the name *Avion* in some fashion.

“How did you know, Jim,” McCoy asked, shocked.

“You remember that sailing ship I bought on Earth last year?”

“Yeah.”

“I named her the *Edith Keeler*, Bones.”

On the screen, the *Avion’s Star* moved forward on her impulse engines until she was safely away from Earth’s gravity well, then she vanished in the rainbow effect of a ship going to warp.

“A good ship going into harm’s way,” Kirk said as he watched her departure. “Speaking of departure, Mr. Sulu, I believe we are scheduled for our departure as well.”

“Aye, sir, course plotted and laid in. Ready to go to warp on your command.”

“Let’s get going, Mr. Sulu.”

The *Enterprise* created her own rainbow as she headed away from home once more.

\* \* \*

“Captain,” Spock reported as he walked up to Kirk’s command chair. “Mr. Butler reports that Dr. Whitme’s team should be finished with their work down below sometime tomorrow. I believe we should be able to break orbit for Chandera shortly thereafter.”

“Good news, Mr. Spock,” Kirk replied. “The *Armstrong* is scheduled to arrive in the morning to take over keeping an eye on the place.”

Ever since *Enterprise* had discovered the planet, Starfleet had kept a ship in orbit and a security team on site to prevent the Guardian from being misused. Rarely was a ship of the line, like the *Enterprise*, involved but there was always a ship here. *Enterprise* had relieved the *Hercules* upon arrival until the *Armstrong* could arrive to take over the duty.

While the ship patrolled above, the archaeologists studied Chandera’s past with the aid of the Guardian.

Security Chief Butler was down on the surface keeping watch.

“Captain,” Sulu called out. “Multiple contacts approaching the planet. They just dropped out of warp and are heading this way at maximum impulse.”

“Yellow alert,” Kirk responded. “Who do those ships belong to?”

“They appear to be eight vessels similar in configuration to known Orion pirates, Captain,” Spock reported.

“Red Alert,” Kirk ordered. “Raise shields, arm photon torpedoes and ready phasers. Uhura, warn those ships away. Tell them we will open fire if they do not break off.”

“Captain,” Spock called out. “Massive contact, same heading as the Orions. It’s the *Avion Star*.”

“On screen,” Kirk replied.

The Dreadnought had come out of warp much closer, having been in pursuit of the Orions. And she wasn’t waiting to give out warnings, she opened fire, picking off the two ships at the rear of the Orion formation who’d had all of their power shunted to their forward shields.

The lead ship continued its course toward the planet. Three peeled away to engage Forelni's ship while the other two broke toward the *Enterprise*.

"Bring us around and get us between the lead ship and the planet, Sulu," Kirk barked. "Fire phasers and torpedoes at all three ships."

One torpedo found its mark on the lead ship, disabling its engines and dropping its shields, but not before it fired a torpedo of its own. But neither of the Starfleet ships was its target.

The torpedo streaked to the surface before *Enterprise* could do anything about it. A massive time wave erupted from the surface. All of the ships were caught in it, tossed about violently like a skiff caught in the middle of a hurricane.

When the *Enterprise* finally stabilized, the bridge crew picked themselves up off the deck.

"Damage report," Kirk demanded.

"Systems are down around the ship, Captain," Uhura responded. "Engineering reports they are bringing them back online as fast as possible. We have multiple injuries on every deck, no fatalities. Sickbay is responding."

“Thank you, Lieutenant,” Kirk replied. “Status of the Orion ships?”

“They appear to be dead in the water, Captain,” Spock reported, then paused. “I detect no life signs on any of the Orion ships.”

Kirk paused to let that sink in.

“What is the condition of *Avion’s Star*, Spock?”

“They are hailing us now, Captain,” Uhura cut in.

“Put them on screen.”

“What the hell was that, Jim?” Forelni asked, blood trickled down the side of his face from a cut just above his right eyebrow.

“We’re still trying to sort that out ourselves, Bari,” Kirk replied, rubbing his left shoulder which had come out on the wrong end of a collision with the bridge railing. “Why were you chasing the Orions?”

“We got a tip they were smuggling stolen dilithium from Winston’s Planet,” Forelni explained. “As soon as we showed up to confront their twelve-ship convoy, four of them opened fire on us while these eight took off. As soon as we dealt with the first four, we stared after these. Obviously, they were up to something bigger than smuggling.”

“Obviously,” Kirk agreed.

“Captains,” Spock said, and something in his tone froze Kirk’s blood. “Aside from the planet, our ships and the Orions, there is nothing else out there, anywhere.”

“What do you mean, Spock?” Forelni asked.

“Long-range sensors are showing nothing,” Spock answered. “No stars, no background radiation, no communications, nothing.”

Spock called up the long-range cameras on the side of the ship facing away from the planet. There should have been a massive starfield on the screen.

Instead, there was nothing but a vast empty void, devoid of all light.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“The Guardian of Forever?” Forelni asked incredulously.

“It seemed a likely name,” Kirk replied as they made their way through the ruins. They had beamed down, along with Spock and McCoy, to the habitat set up to house the scientific teams researching the site but had found no one there.

“And you can actually use it to travel to any place and time? I can see why Starfleet keeps it under tight wraps and why you didn’t want to say anything until I beamed down.”

“Even the scientists that are allowed down here to study it are thoroughly vetted and sworn to secrecy,” Kirk explained as they rounded the last barrier.

“So how did the Orions find out about it?” Forelni asked.

“Assuming they did in fact know what was here, Captain,” Spock interjected. “They might have simply assumed something of import was here and decided to destroy it. While the trajectory of the Orion missile had been the exact location of the Guardian itself, they may have simply fired at the strongest energy source on the planet.”

“That doesn’t make much sense, Spock,” McCoy chimed in. “Destroying something without actually knowing what that thing actually is.”

“Orions are not known as logical beings, Doctor.”

All four men pulled up sharply as the Guardian came into view. The portal appeared to be frozen, locked on a view of a desert world. Those visible on that world were also frozen in place, as if someone had paused a recording. Scattered around the Guardian lay five members of the science team, including Dr. Whitme, who was struggling to regain his feet. The others were moving, but just barely.

“Dr. Whitme,” Forelni called out, rushing over to the fallen man and helping him to his feet. McCoy quickly scanned him and the others.

“Concussions,” McCoy reported as he pulled out a hypospray and injected each man. “Lots of bumps and assorted bruises but nothing serious.”

“What happened?” Whitme asked, rubbing the back of his head.

“We were hoping you could tell us, Doctor,” Kirk replied.

“We were reviewing the last years of Chandera...,” Whitme began.

“That’s Chandera?” Forelni interrupted, taking a long look at the frozen image. “Before or after Avion came aboard *Enterprise*?”

“We were recording to find out how long the planet had left,” Whitme replied. “But I’m not sure. Certainly within the last five years and after she came to the future, Captain.”

“She just over there,” Forelni said in a heart-breaking soft tone. “Just on the other side...”

“That’s what Mr. Butler said,” Whitme replied. “We saw a quick image of her flash by and he wondered if we could step through and bring her back. I’m not sure if the Guardian would allow us to do that. But before I could say anything we heard this screaming whistle. We turned around and something flashed into the portal. Mr. Butler

was standing right in front of it. I doubt he even had time to try to move out of the way. Then this massive shock wave blasted out of the Guardian and the next thing I remember is see you coming to help me.”

“I am detecting traces of human DNA at the event horizon, Captain,” Spock reported as he aimed his tricorder at the Guardian. “Just a few molecules. Not even enough to confirm identity.”

“But given he was standing there at the time, who else could it be. He was slammed into by a high-speed missile, I doubt he even knew what hit him,” Kirk remarked.

“He was a good officer,” Forelni said. “He had a lot of potential. What a damned shame.”

“I agree,” Kirk replied. “But right now we have a more pressing concern. We need to figure out why we are suddenly all that remains of the universe and how to put it back the way it was.”

“Excuse me?” Whitme asked in confusion.

“Whatever went through the Guardian has changed everything, Doctor,” Forelni replied. “As near as we can tell, those of us on the surface and aboard our two ships in orbit comprise the sum total of existence. Anywhere.”

Whitme paled and Forelni steadied the man so he wouldn't fall back to the ground.

"First things first," Kirk commanded. "Spock, is the Guardian functioning?"

"I..AM...FUNCTIONAL..." the Guardian spoke for the first time. To Kirk's ear it sounded much weaker than the last time he'd spoken with it.

"Are you damaged?" Kirk stepped toward the device.

"REPAIR PROTOCOLS INITIATED...MINIMAL FUNCTIONALITY RESTORED..."

"Guardian," Kirk pressed. "Can you tell us what has happened?"

"NOTHING IS...AS IT SHOULD BE..."

"There's a newsflash," McCoy cracked.

"Hush, Bones. Guardian, did the object that... penetrated...your portal cause everything to vanish?"

"YES."

"Captain," Spock broke in. "The Orion missile obviously carried a warhead designed to inflict massive damage to the target. Even though it struck Chandera in the past, we know that the missile remained anchored to the present by the still open portal."

“So, when the missile detonated the energy was released throughout all time and space?”

“Indeed. I theorize that the effect of the Guardian likely increased the energy exponentially, literally destroying everything over the last five millennia.”

“Then why are we still here, Commander?” Forelni asked.

“The massive waves that erupted from the Guardian shielded us, anchoring us to the planet much the same way as before.”

“And the Orions? They were caught up in that too. Why did they disappear?”

“BECAUSE ... I... MADE IT... SO,” the Guardian answered.

“That’s not the least bit unsettling,” McCoy replied.

“We’ll leave that for later,” Kirk said. “Our first order of business is fixing this. Guardian, can you reverse what has happened?”

“THAT IS BEYOND MY ABILITIES... EVEN AT FULL CAPACITY.”

“Okay,” Kirk blew air out as he thought. “We can’t slingshot because there’s no nearby star to use. So that option is out.”

“Slingshot?” Forelni asked.

“Something we had to do not too long ago,” Kirk replied. “It was classified...”

“Like the Guardian? When we’re done here, we are going to have a long talk about some of these classified items that I really should know about, Jim.”

“Another time, Bari,” Kirk replied. “So, what can we do?”

“If we stop the detonation we stop this from happening,” Forelni said. “If we can’t do that here and now, can we do it on Chandera in the past?”

“Spock?” Kirk tossed the ball into the Vulcan’s court.

“Possibly. We would have a 15-second window in which to hit the warhead with a strong enough pulse to render it inactive when it makes contact with Chandera. Should that fail, we would have a few seconds to sever the warhead with a directed beam from a phaser rifle at a specific point to accomplish the same result.”

“Hit a high-speed missile with a phaser,” McCoy scoffed. “What are the odds of that working?”

“Well,” Forelni jumped in, “as loathe as I am to brag, I am a pretty fair shot with a phaser rifle. I’d be willing to give it a try.”

“You really think you can pull that off?”

“Given the alternative, Doctor, I’d rather die trying than die under a perpetually pitch black sky.”

“Okay, we have a plan,” Kirk cut in. “Just one problem. How do we get there? Guardian, can you get us to Chandra before the missile strikes?”

“YES...BUT MY TARGETING SYSTEM IS NOT FULLY FUNCTIONAL. YOU MAY ARRIVE MANY DAYS EARLY.”

“Better early than late,” Kirk replied.

“BE WARNED. I HAVE THE POWER TO GET YOU THERE. BUT IF YOU FAIL TO PREVENT THE DETONATION, I WILL NOT BE ABLE TO BRING YOU BACK.”

“Potentially a one-way trip,” Kirk said aloud.

“And no other choice but to take it,” Forelni replied. “We should brief our ships, in case we don’t make it back. Some will want to make a go of it here on the surface. Others will want to strike out and see if there is anything else out there.”

“That could be a very long trip, Captain.”

“We Etalyans are long-lived people, Doctor. We can handle making the *Star* a colony ship for an extended voyage.”

The two Captains stepped away to call their respective ships. Forelni filled his First Officer in on what had occurred, what their plan of action was and what they should do if they failed to return.”

“There’s one more thing, Paulo,” Forelni added after making sure Mansi was alone. “Even if we succeed, I may not come back.”

“You’re going to stay there with her, even though there will be less than a handful of years remaining to you?”

“Two years with her? I would trade all three centuries of my lifespan for those two years, Paulo.”

“I wish I could have met her in person, Bari.”

“So do I, my friend. You’ll explain what happened to the King and Queen if we succeed and I don’t return? Tell them... tell them I was happy.”

“I will, my friend. And I will miss you.”

“And I you, my brother. Take good care of my ship.”

“I will. Goodbye, brother.”

“Forelni out,” he snapped the communicator lid shut and returned to the portal just as Kirk was returning from his discussion with Scotty.

“Spock?” Kirk asked.

“The ship will be beaming down the requested materials and clothing for five momentarily.”

“Five?” Kirk asked.

“I can’t pass up this chance to see Chandera as it was, Captain,” Whitme explained. “And I’d rather go there than be stuck here.”

“Very well, Doctor, five it is.”

The materials sparkled into existence and the five men quickly changed into native Chandera clothing. Forelni collected the phaser rifle and slung it over his shoulder while Spock gathered up a duffel bag containing the electronic gear they’d need to deactivate the warhead.

“Guardian, we are ready when you are,” Kirk said as they stepped up to the portal.

“STAND BY.”

The portal winked out, even the lights in the stone arch winked out. A long thirty seconds later the lights winked back on and the portal resolved itself to a view of the capital city of Chandera as it had been five thousand years ago.

“Ready, Captain?” Kirk asked.

“She’s there, Jim. Let’s get going,” Bari replied as he stepped through the portal. The other four quickly

followed. The portal winked out and the lights dimmed before finally blinking out.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The five men stepped onto the desert sands on ancient Chandera, the planet's star directly overhead. Forelni turned to look behind the party and saw nothing but endless sand.

"If we succeed here," Kirk explained, discerning the reason why Forelni was looking behind them, "the Guardian will pull us back. Until then, there's no portal back home for us to walk through."

Forelni nodded and turned back to look ahead. The small town where Avion reigned as Queen lay just ahead. It was exactly as she had described it. While most of the planet was a desert world, there were oases of rock and enough farmable land to grow enough crops to feed a small population. Above ground cisterns captured what water fell during the rainy season, but the primary source of water came from underground caverns.

Most of the town was carved into the rocky outcroppings. The rest appeared to be large tents staked into the sands along the outskirts. A rough barrier had been constructed around the outskirts forcing any visitors to enter through a main gate. The Queen resided in a castle cut into the very top of the outcropping, towering over the town. He could see the sloping steps that led up to the entrance.

“Captains,” Spock called out, looking up from his tricorder. “Using the data from the Guardian, I calculate we have arrived four days, three hours and 41 minutes – local time – prior to the arrival of the Orion missile.”

“Not too bad considering the shape the Guardian was in,” Kirk replied. “At least we’ll have enough time to get set up.”

“Indeed,” Spock agreed. “The missile will strike less than a kilometer from the town ahead. If we can take position at the top of the outcropping we should have a clear field to send the signal to deactivate the warhead. It will also give Captain Forelni seven-point-four seconds to fire the phaser rifle at the warhead should that option be required.”

“Shall we proceed?” Forelni headed toward the town. The Guardian had dropped them within a thousand

yards and no one appeared to have noticed their sudden arrival. Dressed in native attire they looked very much the part of travelers arriving at their destination as they arrived at the entry gate.

“What is your business here?” a burly-looking guard demanded, glowering at them as they approached.

“I am Crown Prince Bari Forelni, of Etalya,” Forelni replied. “We have travelled a great distance to seek audience with your Queen.”

“The Queen does not receive vagabonds,” the man replied dismissively. “I have never heard of this Etalya you claim to come from, desert rat.”

“Nor should she,” Forelni answered evenly, taking one deliberate step toward the guard who did have a couple of inches in height on Forelni. “But she will receive us just as soon as you inform her that I stand at this gate.”

“And why is that?”

In the blink of an eye the guard found himself flat on his back, disarmed and with Forelni’s booted foot planted firmly on his chest.

“Because if you don’t,” Forelni said calmly, giving no indication that he’d exerted himself at all in felling the guard, and nodding his head at a man standing nearby, “I will send that one over there to inform her Majesty that I

am here and that she will need to assign a replacement to your post.”

The fallen guard gave it all of ten seconds of thought and made up his mind.

“You there,” he said to the bystander. “Send word to the Queen that Prince...”

“Bari Forelni of Etalya,” Forelni reminded him when he faltered.

“...has arrived and seeks audience,” the guard finished, adding, when the man remained rooted to the spot, “and be quick about it, man!”

The man turned and bolted down the main road toward Avion’s residence.

“You think you should let him up?” Kirk quietly asked from behind.

“I don’t know,” Forelni answered, looking down. “Is he going to behave himself if I do?”

The guard nodded in defeat. He might as well have been pinned to the ground by a mountain for all the good his attempts to get out from under Forelni’s planted foot had done for him. Forelni considered for a moment, then lifted his foot and stepped back.

“Thank you, m’lord,” the guard mumbled as he regained his feet. Forelni tossed him back the staff weapon

and turned his back on the guard, looking off toward where the messenger had gone. It was as complete a dismissal of the guard as any kind of threat Kirk had ever seen.

“Someone’s as anxious as a cat in a room full of rocking chairs,” McCoy observed. “And as about as even-tempered as a lion with a toothache.”

“Why would anyone have a room full of rocking chairs...”

“Spock, Bones,” Kirk interrupted the old game. “Shut up.”

The messenger must have reached his destination for a sudden flurry of activity erupted near the Queen’s residence. Within a minute a group of five hooded and robed riders burst onto the street and headed straight for the gate. The creatures they rode resembled Earth’s ostriches, only the Chanderan version was bulkier and its plumage was bright red. When the group reached the gate, an older man nudged his mount ahead of the rest.

“I am Briseos,” he announced. “Her Majesty’s Chief Adviser. Who here claims to be Prince Forelni?”

“I do,” Forelni stepped forward, slipping the hood of his robe from off his head.

The old man looked back at the others as one dismounted, the hood hiding the face. Two slender hands reached up and slipped the hood back.

“Bari,” Avion said in shocked disbelief. “Is that truly you?”

“My lady,” he replied with a simple bow.

For a long second no one spoke or moved, all eyes on the reunited lovers. Then, with a squeal of delight, Avion rushed into Forelni’s arms.

“But how,” she asked when they finally broke the kiss. “Why?”

“That is a conversation to be had when there are fewer ears about to hear it,” Forelni replied.

\* \* \* \* \*

“It’s so...fantastic,” Avion struggled to find the right word as they walked along a hall in the residence’s interior. Spock had filled her in on what had occurred in the future and why they’d undertaken the trip back to the past. “All of existence wiped out and it begins here on Chandra.”

“If we don’t stop that missile then all that will remain is a huge black void, one dead world and the crews of two starships,” Forelni replied. “Fantastic is a good word for it. Terrifying is another.”

“This device, this Guardian, can be used to travel anywhere and anywhen?”

“Yes, but we are only supposed to use it to view events in the past, we are not allowed to step through lest we change the past in some terrible way.”

“Is that why you never came here after I left the *Enterprise*?”

“No,” Forelni said, taking her hands in his. “I never used it to come back to the instant you returned to Chandra, because I didn’t know of the Guardian’s existence until less than a day ago.”

“And now that you know?” she asked, suddenly very serious. “Will you come and go? Can I return to your time perhaps?”

“No,” he replied. “As far as I know, when we have completed our mission, only those who came here from the future can return. We cannot take someone from the past back with us, lest we trigger some other cataclysm by changing the past.”

“So, you will leave, and I will never see you again?” her eyes were bright with unshed tears.

“You will see me every day,” he promised. “When the others return, I will remain behind.”

“But you are a Captain now, you sail the stars in your own ship...”

“You never asked me what the name of my ship is. They let me name her.”

“What name did you give your ship?” she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

“*Avion’s Star*,” he answered and then the tears could not be held back any longer.

“You would give all of that up for me?”

“We Forelnis have always followed the calling of our heart,” he said, smiling. “You are the calling of my heart, Avion of Chandera. Wherever you are, that is the only place in the universe I want to be.”

\* \* \* \*

“Are you sure about this, Bari?” Kirk asked days later.

They had taken up station at the highest point of the outcropping. Spock had estimated the missile’s arrival in this time was less than an hour away. They were as ready for it as they could be and now all they could do was await it and stop it. Avion had just been called away on a matter of state.

“I am, Jim. I lost her once. I can’t lose her again. When we are done here and the Guardian opens the way back, I’m not coming with you.”

“There’s less than five years remaining before Chandra’s star burns out,” Kirk replied.

“I know. But I’ll happily trade every year I would have had left in our present for every day we’ll have together here, Jim.”

Try as he might Kirk couldn’t find the words to try to talk him out of it.

“Then, in that case,” Kirk said instead, “we’d better say goodbye now, in case we don’t have time later.”

“It’s been an honor, Jim,” Forelni extended his hand.

“The honor is still mine, Bari,” Kirk shook the proffered hand and clapped Forelni on the shoulder. “I wish you both all the happiness you can find.”

“Thank you, Jim.”

“Son,” McCoy said, having overheard the conversation. “Normally I’d say you need to have your head examined. But I’ve seen the lady and you’d have to have your head examined if you didn’t stay. Good luck to you both.”

“Thank you, Leonard, for both of us.”

“Captains,” Spock looked up from his equipment. “I am detecting a temporal anomaly.”

“Where, Spock?” Kirk asked as Forelni brought the phaser rifle up and checked the settings.

“Six kilometers high and at your one o’clock, Captain Forelni.”

Kirk looked up as Forelni sighted on the spot.

“At the speed that thing will be going, Commander,” Forelni asked. “About a fifty-meter lead on the shot?”

“Aim fifty-point-two meters ahead of the target, Captain.”

“Yeah, piece of cake,” Forelni muttered as the missile suddenly appeared out of the distortion.

“Sending disarming sequence now,” Spock reported.

“Any indication signal received, Spock?”

“Unknown, Captain,” Spock replied. “Captain Forelni...”

“Got it,” Forelni tracked the missile in his sights, keeping his aiming point ahead of the streaking object.

“Fifteen seconds to impact,” Spock called out.

“Bari...” Kirk urged.

Forelni squeezed the triggered without slowing the movement of the rifle. The shot erupted from the rifle and struck the missile, severing it half and sending the remains tumbling along the original track.

“Five seconds to impact,” Spock intoned. They’d either succeeded or they had a few seconds of life remaining.

The debris hammered into the desert sand a mere two hundred meters away. A huge cloud of dust, sand and debris billowed up into the sky and began to fall down on the town. A long silence fell.

“Did we die?” McCoy asked after the silence had stretch into a long minute.

“No, Doctor, we did not,” Spock replied. “The warhead did not detonate.”

“Congratulations Captain, Commander,” Kirk said with a broad smile. “You just saved the universe.”

“Thank you, Captain,” Spock replied.

“Don’t take this the wrong way, Jim,” Forelni said as he powered down the rifle. “But let’s go collect that warhead so you folks can go on back home.”

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

“Any sign of Mr. Butler, Spock?” Forelni asked as he, Spock and Kirk collected the remains of the warhead and the missile. They’d left McCoy and Whitme back in town packing up their gear for the return trip.

“Negative,” Spock reported. “The same small traces of human DNA found at the Guardian. If the missile struck him there should be more evidence of that. And, if he jumped back, he should have arrived with the missile and tumbled to the ground. I detected no sign of a human body when the missile arrived.”

“Spock,” Kirk cut in. “Is he dead or just missing? Could the Guardian have sent him somewhere before the missile passed through?”

“Unknown. Perhaps the Guardian, restored to full function, can locate him when we return.”

Forelni slipped the disabled warhead – Spock’s transmission had in fact deactivated it prior to Forelni’s shot after all – into a pouch and handed it to the Vulcan.

“That’s the last of it,” Forelni remarked, dusting off his hands. “McCoy and Whitme should be all packed up too.”

The three men looked at each other for a few moments.

“Shouldn’t the Guardian be pulling you back?” Forelni asked.

“Indeed,” Spock replied, puzzled. “We have accomplished our mission. There is no further need for us to remain here, unless...”

“Unless something is wrong,” Forelni finished, feeling suddenly uneasy. Then, as if struck by a lightning bolt, Forelni whirled and sprinted for his mount. He couldn’t explain it to the others, even if he’d stayed behind and tried, but suddenly he knew Avion was in danger. He nearly stumbled before boarding the beast when he heard her voice calling his name in his head.

*BARI!!!!!!*

Kirk and Spock, hampered by the bags of debris, took longer to get mounted. Forelni didn’t wait for them, spurring his mount back to the town and to Avion’s

residence. He dashed by the two doctors, ignoring their inquiries as to what was going on and sprinted toward the main hall. How he knew she was there he could not say. But something was aiming him there.

He bolted into the hall, spotting Briseos crumpled to the ground, bleeding from a head wound and vainly trying to rise back to his feet. At the far end of the hall, Avion was cornered by three men. She had been putting up a good fight, but she was outnumbered. Before he could act, one of the men produced a wicked looking blade and plunged it into her chest.

Without thinking, or even bothering to arm himself, Forelni hurled himself at her assassins. He was on them before they could even register his arrival. The first turned, pulling the bloody knife from his victim, but Forelni felled him with a crushing blow to the temple. The second man thrust his blade at Forelni but it struck only air where the Captain had been.

Forelni grabbed the forearm, twisted it hard enough to dislocate the elbow and drove the knife, still clutched in his assailant's hand, through the man's jaw and directly into his brain. The third assassin, seeing his comrades fall to this demon, chose discretion over valor, dropped his blade and fled.

Forelni let him go, kneeling down to gather Avion up in his arms. He used the edge of his desert robe to staunch the flow of blood from her wound. He looked over at Briseos, who had recovered enough to stand back up.

“Get Doctor McCoy,” he commanded. “Now!”

Briseos hurried out, calling for McCoy as he left the hall.

“Bari...,” Avion said weakly. “I’m so cold...”

Keeping the pressure on her wound, he reached over and grabbed her cape and covered her with it, drawing her as close as he could to help keep her warm.

“Hold on, McCoy is on his way. You’re going to be fine.”

He almost believed it.

McCoy ran into the hall, took in the fallen bodies and quickly made his way over to the only one of them that he could aid. The other four men quickly followed, standing a few feet away to observe in silence as McCoy waved his medical scanner over the Queen. He looked at the results for a long time before he raised his eyes to meet Forelni’s. He didn’t need to say a word. Forelni swallowed hard and drop his head.

“I’m sorry, son,” McCoy stood up and rejoined the others.

“Bones?”

“There’s some kind of poison in her system, Jim,” he replied sadly. “If we were back...home... I might be able to do something. But here? No, Jim, there’s not a damned thing I can do.”

“The poison on the blade has no antidote, Doctor,” Briseos pointed out, the misery carrying clearly in his voice. “There was nothing any of us could do once the blade found its target.”

The old man stepped forward and kneeled next to his dying Queen. He pulled a small vial from his pouch, opened it and held it to her mouth.

“It will ease your passing, my lady,” Briseos explained as he poured the contents down her throat. Once emptied, he stood up and withdrew. He kept on walking past the other men and left the hall, tears unashamedly streaming down his face.

“It seems we are never given enough time, my love,” Avion weakly reached up to place her hand on his face.

“So it seems,” he agreed, his voice unsteady. “I will cherish every minute we were given.”

“Go back to your ship and the stars,” her voice grew steadily weaker. “I will be waiting for you out there...”

Her voice trailed off, her eyes slid closed and her hand slipped away. Forelni pulled her close.

“And I will find you,” he whispered. “No matter how far and how long I have to travel. I will find you again.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Chandera custom, regarding the death of a monarch, was somewhat simple. The deceased was wrapped in a ceremonial robe and taken by the priests to a rocky area a few miles from the town. Here, the dead monarch would be laid to rest deep within the caves with all of his or her predecessors on the day of death.

Briseos had returned a few minutes after Avion had died in Forelni’s arms with the priests. They respectfully gathered her up and carried her away. They dressed the wound, cleaned the blood that had seeped past Forelni’s vain bid to stop the bleeding, and dressed her in a white robe. A gossamer veil was wrapped around her face.

She was placed on a litter and carried out to the funeral caverns. Forelni followed a few paces behind. Briseos, Kirk, Spock, McCoy and Whitme followed

another three paces behind him and the residents of the town followed behind them. Chandera's sun was just touching the horizon when they arrived.

"Only the priests can continue from this point," Briseos explained as he stepped forward. "You must say goodbye now."

Forelni, who hadn't spoken a word since they'd taken her out of his arms, nodded and walked up to the litter. He was still wearing the blood-stained robe and her blood was still on his right hand. He leaned over and gently kissed her then stepped back. The priests continued on into the cave opening.

"There is something she would want you to have," Briseos said, slipping a small leather pouch into a pocket of Forelni's robe. "Open it later, my friend, when you have returned home and the pain in your heart has faded."

The old man turned away and led the Chandेरans back toward their homes, leaving the five Federation men alone. Only then did they feel the Guardian start pulling them back to their own time. Forelni didn't fight it.

One instant they were on Chandera and the next they were stepping back through the portal, nearly five thousand years passing in an instant. Kirk looked over and wondered if the look on Forelni's face had been the same

on his when he'd stepped through, moments after he had lost Edith Keeler.

“ALL IS AS IT SHOULD BE!”

The Guardian's voice boomed out, clearly back to full function again. Forelni turned and aimed a murderous look at the Guardian, as if he were contemplating using the phaser rifle to level the thing to the ground. That same feeling had flashed through Kirk back then too. Nothing was as it should be. Not then. Not now. He pulled out his communicator.

“Kirk to *Enterprise*. Status report.”

“*Enterprise* here, sir.” Scotty replied. “Whatever ye did, it worked. Everything is back the way it was.”

Kirk started to reply but was cutoff but the sound of Forelni opening his own communicator.

“Forelni to...,” he paused, unable to say the name. “To the *Star*. Status of the Orion ships?”

“Captain?” Mansi sounded surprised. “Sir, we have life signs on the ships again, but they appear to be very disoriented. Orders?”

“Clear my sky of those ships, Commander,” Forelni said very quietly.

No one in orbit or on the planet spoke, stunned into silence not only by the order but by the ice-cold tone it had been delivered in.

“Sir?” Mansi finally broke the silence. Forelni closed his eyes, drew in a long breath, held it and slowly let it go.

“Belay that order,” he said a little louder.

“Aye, sir,” the relief in Mansi’s voice was clear.

“Disable their weapons and engines,” Forelni continued. “Board those ships and place their crews under heavy restraint. Prepare to take them in tow. Contact Starbase 27 and have them send ships to rendezvous with us at best possible speed to take them off our hands. I want the lunatic in charge of that fleet in my brig by the time I beam up. Forelni out.”

He snapped his communicator shut as Mansi acknowledged the new orders. Kirk walked over and placed an understanding hand on his colleague’s shoulder.

“Where is it, Jim? Where does justice end and vengeance begin?”

“It’s a fine line, Bari, sometimes it can’t even be seen. Especially for Starship Captains. But the good ones can usually find it, especially if they have friends nearby to help.”

Forelni nodded.

“They nearly killed trillions, Jim. Maybe even trillions of trillions.”

“But they didn’t. We stopped them. We saved them all.”

“Tell that to Dan Butler.”

“We’ll find him, if he’s still alive,” Kirk promised. “And if not, the Orions will pay for what they did. The right way, within the letter of the law.”

“Captain Forelni,” Whitme stepped up, offering a data chip. “I recorded the location of her grave site. Now that we know where to look we can find it. We can have it ready for you to pay your respects if you want. You really didn’t get a lot of time to say a proper goodbye.”

Forelni took the chip and nodded his thanks.

“Doctor,” Kirk said. “Perhaps you would like to accompany the Captain? We’re not going to be able to break orbit here until our relief arrives. I can have your belongings transported over from the *Enterprise*.”

“I can be ready in a few minutes.”

“I’ll let my ship know you’re coming, Doctor.”

“It will get better, Bari,” Kirk said as Whitme headed off to pack up his belongings at the shelter. “There will be brighter days ahead.”

“How can that be, Jim, when the only light in the universe that matters is no longer shining?”

Kirk had no answer for that.

“Forelni to the *Star*,” Forelni reopened his communicator. “Dr. Whitme will be joining us. Have VIP quarters prepared. Stand by to beam him up and to receive his belongings from *Enterprise*.”

“Aye, sir,” Mansi replied. “Are you ready to beam up, sir?”

“Get me the hell out of here,” Forelni ordered.

Kirk heard the echo of his own past in that order. He’d said the same thing after his first visit here. He didn’t need to ask McCoy or Spock if he’d looked back then very much like Forelni did now as the Etalyan disappeared in a sparkle of transporter effect. Like a man whose heart had been ripped out of his chest and his soul forever ripped asunder.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

Mansi was alone in the transporter room when Forelni returned to his ship. There could only be one reason why his friend had returned from the past. He saw all the confirmation that he needed in the blood-stained robe and the hand covered in dried blood.

“I am sorry, my friend,” he said simply.

“So am I,” Forelni remained standing on the pad, lost in thought. “Before, she was alive in the past. Now...”

“Come, brother,” Mansi said. “You need rest.”

“I want to speak to the Orion Commander first,” Forelni stepped down from the pad and headed for the door. Mansi followed his Captain and friend, suddenly wondering if the prisoner in the brig was counting down his final minutes of existence.

“Lower the force field, Ensign,” Forelni ordered as he charged into the holding area. The startled woman barely had time to drop the field where the lone occupant resided before Forelni reached it. Without any preamble, he stepped into the cell grabbed the prisoner by the neck and slammed him against the cell wall.

“Captain!” she exclaimed. Mansi waved her off. They’d have to trust that Forelni would not cross the line.

“Why?” Forelni all but roared the question. The Orion, so caught off guard by the attack, put up no resistance. He merely held his silence even as his eyes bulged and he struggled to draw in any breath at all.

“Ensign,” Forelni said when the Orion remained silent, “have engineering meet me at the airlock with a sixty-meter cable.”

“You wouldn’t dare,” the prisoner croaked out.

“Who do you think is going to stop me?” Forelni asked quietly.

The Orion looked over at the other two, who were pointedly not looking into the cell. Forelni let the man squirm a few more seconds.

“Unless you want to find out how long you can breathe vacuum, you will tell me why you fired on the planet.”

The Orion hesitated but ultimately decided that breathing air was preferable to breathing vacuum.

“The Federation was hiding a weapon down there,” he gasped out. “We could not find out what type, nor could we steal it. We cannot trust you to have such a weapon to threaten us with.”

“There is no weapon down there, Orion,” Forelni growled. “Nothing but a scientific research station.”

“With a Starfleet vessel constantly in orbit?”

“Starfleet does more than fight wars,” Forelni replied. “We prefer peaceful scientific exploration when we aren’t dealing with the willfully stupid. You attacked the planet for nothing, pirate, and you killed a fine young officer and friend.”

“What are you going to do with me?”

“By rights I should throw you out the airlock,” Forelni answered. “But Starfleet has rules, even for the likes of you. So, you’re going to Starbase 27 where you will be tried for your crimes. If you are lucky, Orion, you will spend the rest of your life at the Gliese Penal Colony.

“If are not so fortunate,” Forelni continued, hurling the prisoner down onto the cell’s bunk as he turned away. “You will only draw a twenty-year sentence. And I will be waiting for you when you get out.”

Forelni stepped out of the cell and exited the brig. The Ensign raised the security screen with a sigh of relief. Mansi followed his Captain out into the corridor a few seconds later, pausing at a comm panel.

“Doctor Lastra,” Mansi called out as he thumbed the switch. “Meet me at the Captain’s quarters.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Forelni laid the blood-stained desert robe over a chair in his quarters, dimmed the lights, and withdrew a glass and bottle of wine from his own vineyard on Etalya. He sat down heavily on his bunk, quickly filled the glass, drained it almost as swiftly, then refilled it.

He could feel the rage burning within him like a living thing. He’d dispatched the hand that had slain his love and still the rage burned. He could have done the same with the Orion in the brig and he knew it would not have sated the fire at all. With a sinking despair he knew nothing he could do would ever put the conflagration out. Eventually it would consume him, and he couldn’t find it within himself to care about his impending immolation.

His door chime sounded. Someone wanted entrance and all he wanted was for the universe to go away and let him burn to ash. It sounded again, then a third time.

“Enter,” beat out a snarled “be gone” by some impulse even he could not discern. His First Officer and the ship’s Chief Medical Officer cautiously entered. Forelni’s eyes narrowed.

“If this is a social visit,” he growled. “I’m not in the mood.”

“Official business, Captain,” Lastra stated calmly, glancing noticeably at the blood covered hand and the robe. “I received a report that you were injured.”

“The blood isn’t mine, Doctor,” Forelni waved dismissively.

“And the cuts and bruises aren’t either?” Lastra ignored the dismissal and tended to the wounds. Forelni did not see the two white tablets that dropped from the Doctor’s hand into the Captain’s filled glass.

“There, all done,” Lastra stepped back, turning to grab two glasses and set them down by the wine bottle, which he picked up and examined before pouring wine into the glasses. “One of your better vintages, if I recall correctly.”

“Do help yourself,” Forelni said dryly as Lastra handed Mansi a glass and claimed the other for himself before raising it.

“To the Lady Avion,” he toasted.

Touched, Forelni collected his glass as he stood. He raised it and drained it. His officers however made no move to drink. He was about to ask why when a strange feeling swept over him. He looked down at his glass even as it tumbled out of his hand. Realization struck through the fog settling over his head and he shot an accusatory look at the Doctor.

“That was a damned dirty trick...,” he slurred as he pitched forward. Lastra and Mansi kept him from falling all the way to the floor.

“Oof,” Lastra exhaled. “He’s put on a bit more weight since the last time I caught him.”

Mansi got the joke. Lastra had been the Royal Physician in attendance when Forelni was born. They maneuvered the unconscious Captain to his bunk and gently laid him down on it. Mansi slipped off the boots while Lastra grabbed a small bowl and poured a vial of clear liquid into it. Grabbing a small cloth, he dipped it into the bowl and began cleaning off the blood from Forelni’s hand.

“He’ll sleep for at least twenty-four hours,” Lastra remarked. “I’ve listed him as off-duty to recover from injuries received on an away mission. The ship is yours until then, Commander.”

“I’ll check in on him as much as I can.”

“No need,” Lastra replied. “I’ll be here until he wakes up.”

“He might not be so happy to see you.”

“I’ll be fine,” Lastra chuckled. “And so will he. You’ll see.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Forelni rose out of a thick black fog and sailed into a thick white fog. A few seconds later, he realized it was the ceiling of his quarters. He sat up, too quickly, and rode out a wave of vertigo. He grumbled something that sounded like a mixture of at least seven different languages as he waited for the room to stop spinning.

“And a fine good morning to you too.”

Forelni looked over at the source of the voice and saw Lastra sitting in a chair, a data pad in one hand. Forelni mumbled something else even he couldn’t quite make out.

“You should drink some water,” the Doctor advised. “There’s a carafe right there and a nice tall glass to fill with water.”

Forelni grabbed the container, ignored the glass, and drank straight from it until not a drop was left.

“Better?”

“A little,” he admitted, finally back to speaking in Standard.

“Good! Next a shower and when you are done with that breakfast will be waiting for you.”

“I recall that the title Captain is in front of my name, Doctor.”

“Yes, it is. But for the next ninety minutes ‘Captain’ you are off duty by order of the Chief Medical Officer. Shower. Food. Then we’ll see about returning to duty.”

“I should drag you back to Etalya and toss you in the dungeon.”

“You don’t have a dungeon on Etalya.”

“It can be arranged.”

Lastra merely smiled and pointed at the sonic shower. Forelni yielded to the inevitable and hit the showers. When he stepped back out into his quarters ten minutes later, scrubbed, shaved and in a clean command gold and black uniform, he had to admit he was feeling much better. He found Mansi and Lastra seated at the table in front of three trays of food.

“Good morning, Captain,” Mansi greeted.

“Commander,” he replied as he took a seat and claimed one of the trays. “Ship’s status?”

“All green on the boards,” Mansi reported. “We’ll be rendezvousing with the *Cartwright* and the *Callisto* from Starbase 27 in about thirty minutes. They’ll take the Orions off our hands.”

“Good riddance,” the Doctor replied. Forelni couldn’t disagree.

The men ate in silence. Forelni wasn’t in the mood for conversation though he did appreciate their presence. The shared silence was suddenly pierced by the comm.

“Bridge to Commander Mansi.”

“Mansi here,” the Commander replied after standing up and activating the panel on the Captain’s desk.

“The *Cartwright* and the *Callisto* have arrived early, Commander.”

“Very well, I’m on my way up,” Mansi snapped off the comm and shrugged. “The sooner we’re rid of our guests the better I suppose.”

“Especially the Orion commander,” Lastra jibed. “I hear the poor man nearly jumps out of his skin whenever the doors to the brig open.”

“Indeed,” Mansi agreed, grinning.

“If the two of you are quite finished with your comedy routine,” Forelni shot a withering look at his officers. “I believe you have two ships waiting for you,

Commander. And as for you, Doctor, I'm seriously contemplating that dungeon."

"Aye, sir," Mansi chuckled as he headed for the door. Forelni waited until it opened before calling out.

"Paulo."

"Sir?"

"Thank you."

So much was transmitted in those two short words between the old friends. Mansi bowed slightly in acknowledgement and headed out into the corridor. Forelni fell silent, staring at his right hand as if suddenly noticing the blood had been washed away. He looked around his cabin, brows furrowed. Lastra knew what he was looking for.

"I put the robe in a stasis bag," Lastra said. "In the exact condition I found it in. It's in your storage bin under your bunk."

Forelni nodded his thanks. For a reason he could not explain, he could not bear to think of the robe cleaned. Her blood staining the garment was the only physical remnant he had of her. Spotting the pouch Briseos had given him outside her tomb he reached over and grabbed it.

"What is that?"

“Her aide gave it to me, at her funeral. He said she would want me to have it but not to open it until I returned home.”

Forelni opened the pouch and pulled out the only two items within. The first was a crystal vial, capable of holding no more than a pint of liquid. Inside the vial was a purple fluid that seemed both thick and translucent as it shimmered within the crystal container.

“If you are looking for medical advice,” Lastra remarked as Forelni set the vial on the table, “I wouldn’t drink that.”

“I wasn’t planning on it,” Forelni said, as he unfolded the second item, a square of parchment covered on one side with Chanderan writing.

“What does it say?”

“I may be able to speak Chanderan, Doctor, but reading it is beyond me.”

Forelni got up and placed the parchment on his desk and toggled the computer.

“Scan this parchment,” he ordered. “Translate to Standard and print out a hard copy.”

“Working,” the computer intoned.

Lastra studied the vial while they waited. Within two minutes the printout slid from a slot in Forelni’s desk.

He picked it up and began reading. Lastra became alarmed when his Captain turned pale.

“What is it?” Lastra asked. But Forelni merely looked stunned as he handed Lastra the paper to read for himself.

*My Lord,*

*I pray this note and the vial I have prepared have returned with you to your time. I pray that what I have done has not been in vain. I will not pray that you or my Queen will ever forgive me for my treachery, and for the pain I have caused, even if what I have done actually succeeds.*

*My Lady explained to me what the future holds and how soon that terrible future will come about. I know you were willing to trade your life in your own time for the few short years Chandra has to be with her. I hope to trade My Lady's few years here for a long life of happiness with you.*

*I arranged to allow the assassins to strike down my Queen. I provided them with the weapons, but instead of a deadly poison I substituted a substance from knowledge that we are forbidden to use on my world. It simulates death perfectly. My Lady will be buried as is our tradition*

*within a crystal tomb that will forever preserve her in this state. If her tomb survives the coming end, and the many years that will pass until you read this, you will be able to withdraw her body from the tomb after depressing the three red crystals above.*

*Once you have done this pour the entire contents of this vial down her throat. If her tomb survives and has protected her body, this will eradicate the original toxin and revive her. This has never been tried over such a long period of time, so I cannot be certain. But I pray, for both your sakes, that it will work.*

*Be happy together and do not think harshly of me, no matter what happens.*

*Briseos.*

“My God,” Lastra whispered as he finished reading. Forelni had picked up the vial again and was staring at it as if it were a living thing.

“Put me back on active duty,” Forelni said quietly. “Now, Doctor.”

Knowing it was futile to argue or even discuss the matter further, Lastra tapped the computer panel.

“Chief Medical Officer’s log. Effective immediately, Captain Bari Forelni is medically cleared to return to full duty.”

“Forelni to Bridge.”

“Bridge here,” Mansi replied.

“Status of the prisoner transfer, Commander?”

“Just completed, sir.”

“Very well. Set course for Chandera, Commander, maximum warp and depart immediately. Then report to me in my quarters and bring Dr. Whitme along with you.”

He snapped the comm off before his First Officer could reply and stared again at the vial. Lastra saw a mixture of fear and hope in his Captain’s eyes. He was pretty sure that same mixture could be seen in his own.

\* \* \* \* \*

It had been less than a week since he’d stood before this rock and five thousand years all at the same time. Of course, the planet looked nothing like it had then, but he recognized the rock formation, giving him hope that what lay below had survived. Whitme had sent a message ahead, telling his dig teams where to look for the tomb. Time had not been too kind and the entrance had collapsed.

“Good timing, Captain,” Hopalong Ginsberg greeted Forelni, Mansi, Lastra and Whitme when they

beamed down. Most called him Hoppy and nearly everyone asked how he got his first name. Forelni didn't. "We just opened the tunnel up to the tomb."

"Thank you," Forelni replied. "No one has disturbed the tomb itself?"

"No, sir. Once we got it cleared out we headed back up, just as Doctor Whitme ordered."

"Thank you, Hoppy," Whitme replied indicating Ginsberg should make himself scarce.

"No problem," Ginsberg said cheerfully. "Just follow the lights down."

"You want some company?" Mansi asked, placing a hand on his friend's shoulder.

"No, thank you, Paulo. I'll do this alone."

"Then Godspeed, my friend."

"Good luck, Captain," both Lastra and Whitme offered as Forelni disappeared into the tunnel. It was quite a ways down, giving him hope that Briseos' plan might work after all. He estimated he was a good three hundred meters below the surface before he entered her burial chamber.

Cut into the rock was a cloudy white crystal, just large enough to hold a humanoid body. No matter how hard he tried, he could only make out a blurred object

within and a scan with his tricorder could not penetrate it. His heart pounding, he depressed the three red crystals above the crystal casket. They lit up immediately and the larger crystal began to shimmer. He reached in and lifted up Avion's body and pulled her from the crystal, which solidified as he pulled her clear.

They'd set up a field table in the chamber and he laid her on it. She looked exactly like she had that terrible day. Lifting away the veil, she looked as if she were merely sleeping. He gently parted her lips and carefully poured the vial down her throat until the very last drop was drained.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Dammit, Jim, did he at least give a hint as to why we're meeting out here in the middle of nowhere?"

"Bones, you know as much as I do," Kirk sighed, answering the same question for the umpteenth time. "He'll tell us when he gets here."

McCoy harrumphed and bounced on his heels, staring at the bridge view screen as if he could magically make Bari Forelni and his ship appear by will alone. Kirk shared in some of McCoy's impatience, and his curiosity. The message they'd received from the *Star* had been from its First Officer, who asked the *Enterprise* to meet the *Star* at these coordinates. There had been no additional

explanation, nor reply to an inquiry for same. McCoy opened his mouth to ask again just as the *Star* dropped out of warp just within transporter range.

“Message from *Avion’s Star*, Captain,” Uhura reported. “An invitation for the command crew to beam aboard at our earliest convenience. Dress uniform requested, sir.”

“That’s all, Uhura?”

“Message ends, sir.”

“Well, it seems if we want the answer to this mystery we are going to have to take a little trip,” Kirk replied. “Have Mr. Scott meet us in the transporter, Uhura. Mr. Sulu, you have the con until we return. Mr. Spock, Doctor, shall we?”

They beamed aboard, McCoy grumbling about his “damned monkey suit” all the way and were met by Mansi, who was in dress uniform.

“Gentlemen, welcome aboard the *Star*,” he greeted, smiling. “The Captain is waiting for you in Main Rec.”

“Main Rec?” Kirk asked.

“Yes, well, it really was the only place we could hold it after all,” Mansi replied mysteriously.

“Hold what, Commander?”

“That, Captain, my Captain will explain once we get there. This way, gentlemen.”

With a bemused shrug, Kirk followed with his officers in tow. There was quite a party in progress when they arrived. McCoy shot a surprised look at Kirk who could only shake his head in reply as they entered the deck.

“James, Leonard, Spock and Scotty,” Forelni’s voiced carried over the din of the party as he approached. “Welcome, my friends! It’s good to see you! Come!”

Forelni led them toward the center of the deck.

“Bari, would you mind telling us what the hell is going on?”

“Certainly, Jim,” Forelni smiled like the proverbial Cheshire Cat as he stopped near a tall chair and looked down at its occupant. Neither Kirk nor his officers could see who was in it. “This is, shall we say, an Etalyan engagement party. You four are here to help celebrate and to be formally invited to a Royal wedding by the groom himself.”

“And who’s the lucky girl?” McCoy asked, suddenly concerned for the Etalyan Captain’s sanity.

Forelni held out a hand and his was grasped by the hand of the chair’s occupant. He helped her out of the

chair, and when she turned to face them they all saw a ghost.

“Captain,” Avion said, smiling, “gentlemen. It is a great pleasure to see you all once again.”

“As it is for all of us,” Kirk finally managed. “And quite a... surprise I might add. Captain, you didn’t...”

“No, Jim,” Forelni laughed as he cut off the question. “I did not use the portal. I doubt that would have worked anyway.”

“Then how is this possible?” Spock asked.

“That, gentlemen, is a very long story. One best told over my vineyard’s finest wine, of course. But I can tell you this right now, Jim. The universe has never shone as brightly as it is shining right now.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

*Three Years Later...*

You have to admit, Jim, it's a helluva way to end the five-year mission."

"It's still hard to believe it's been five years already, Bones," Kirk shook his head. "They seemed to have flown by."

"When you get a little older, gentlemen," Forelni quipped from his seat in the *Enterprise's* Main Rec, "the years will slow to a crawl."

"And have they been 'crawling' for you, my husband?" Avion needed.

Everyone within earshot chuckled.

"My love," Forelni turned in his seat to look directly at her. "Every day with you is the equivalent of a

century for the rest of the unfortunate souls in the universe and I cherish each and every one of them.”

“Nice save, Captain,” Kirk chipped in.

“A toast,” Forelni grew most serious. “To Captain Kirk, the *Enterprise* and her crew. May this peace mission be the perfect ending to your five-year mission, sir.”

A chorus of “hear, hear” broke out.

“Let’s hope it is uneventful,” Kirk added. “I’d rather not have a repeat of the last trip to Babel.”

“Which is why my ship is tagging along this time,” Forelni replied. “I doubt anyone is going to stir up much trouble with the *Star* around.”

“There would be even less likelihood of ‘trouble’ if you had allowed my ship to accompany this little fleet of yours,” Commander Kor complained.

“Commander,” Forelni answered. “The last time a Klingon ship ventured deep into Federation space on a peace mission all hell broke loose. On Earth and on the Klingon ship too as I recall. Assassinations, attempted assassinations and extensive injuries on both sides, mostly self-inflicted of course.”

“Ah, you’ve read that little book, I see,” Kor smiled.

“Actually, Commander,” Forelni replied. “I was there for most of it and Admiral Kethas epetai-Khemara’s sudden death always puzzled me, until that ‘little book’ came out.”

“You surprise me, Captain,” Kor changed the subject.

“How so, Commander?”

“The man who led the invasion of Klingon space decades ago is now participating in a potential peace conference between our Empires.”

“The Federation is not an empire, Kor,” Kirk gently reminded.

“Semantics, Captain,” Kor waved dismissively. “Tell me, Etalyan, do you truly believe there can be peace between us with all that is happened in the past?”

“The past is the past, Kor,” Forelni replied after a moment. “We can do nothing to undo the injuries we have both inflicted upon each other. The future we can do something about and yes, I believe we can find peace between us. We have to.”

“Have to?” Kor sounded surprised. “Have to find peace? The Klingon way...”

“Is one of honor above all else,” Forelni interrupted with such conviction that it stopped Kor in his tracks.

“There are many paths to honor, Kor. Not all of them require battle and bloodshed.”

“So, the Butcher of Keth’Ak’Tor would be the Prince of Peace?” Kor mocked, surprisingly meek at that and Forelni ignored it.

“The galaxy is big enough for all of us,” Forelni replied ignoring Kor’s gambit to debate the invasion’s biggest casualty loss for the Empire. “We need not destroy ourselves. There is enough for everyone to share and to do so in peace.”

“No Klingon would ever lay down his sword for a plowshare, not for any reason.”

“Only a fool fights in a burning house,” Forelni said softly. “I believe those words were spoken by a Klingon on this very ship.”

“Bah,” Kor waved dismissively. “Kang is a sentimental fool.”

“Who recognized that continuing to fight was not the way to honorable victory over a shared foe,” Forelni countered. “Kang and the Captain here put down their swords and won with honor. If it can be done on the decks of one starship, Kor, it can be done on the worlds of the Federation and the Klingon Empire.”

“You’re worse than those insufferable Organians,” Kor muttered, turning his attention to his tankard of Klingon bloodwine.

Kirk was about to jump in and change the subject when the yellow alert lights and alarm flared to life.

“Bridge to Captain Kirk,” Sulu’s voice called out from a comm speaker in the table. “A Romulan ship is decloaking off out starboard bow and matching speed.”

“Paulo,” Forelni looked across the table at his exec. “Order the *Star* to put herself between that ship and *Enterprise*. Red alert and raise shields only. Do not arm weapons unless the Romulan makes an aggressive move.”

“What ship is it, Sulu?” Kirk asked.

“It’s *Bloodwing*, sir.”

“Ael’s ship!” McCoy exclaimed.

“The same ship connected to *Intrepid II*?” Forelni asked Kirk, who nodded.

“Captain,” Sulu chimed in, “the Romulans are requesting permission for Commander Ael to beam aboard alone.”

“Do you trust her, Jim?” Forelni asked, dubious of the request.

“As far as one can with a Romulan Commander than is as conniving a...,” Kirk paused. “Yes, Bari, I trust her.”

“Paulo,” Forelni shrugged. “Let the *Star* know the Romulan intentions. And tell them if the Romulans do anything other than beam one live Romulan aboard they are to reduce that ship to its component atoms.”

“Behold the Prince of Peace,” Kor chimed in with a wicked grin.

“There’s a big difference between slaughter for the sake of conquest and defense of one’s life and ship, Kor.”

“Gentlemen,” Kirk cut in, “if we could have a cease fire for a few moments? Good. Sulu, give permission for the Romulan Commander to come aboard and have her escorted down here.”

The transport went off without a hitch, Sulu informing the Captain that Ael was aboard and would be joining him in one minute.

“We’re still here and no shots fired,” Kor remarked slyly. “Pity. I would love to see the Prince of Peace at war.”

Forelni ignored Kor’s latest salvo, his focus on a status update from his ship. *Bloodwing* was holding formation and taking no further action under the watchful

guns of the larger Federation vessel. Ael swept into the room and quickly located Kirk.

“Captain,” she greeted, not using his last name since she still could not master it and using Jim in this setting was inappropriate. “You are looking well. As are you Doctor. Mister Spock,” she acknowledged with a bow.

“Ael,” Kirk replied. “This is Captain Forelni, of the *Avion’s Star*, his wife, Avion, Commander Paulo Mansi, the *Star’s* Exec, and I’m sure you’ve met Commander Kor.”

“Once or twice, Captain,” Ael gave a grim smile, which Kor matched.

“May I ask what brings you here, Ael?” Kirk prodded.

“Very urgent business, Captain,” she replied, turning to face Forelni. “War is about to break out between the Romulan and Klingon Empires. It will be a very short war that the Klingons will not survive and it is all your fault, Captain Forelni.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“Okay, Commander,” Forelni said as they entered the briefing room. “Exactly how is it that I am to blame for a war between two Empires I have no control over?”

Kirk, Spock, McCoy, Mansi and Kor claimed their seats and each man gave the Romulan a look that conveyed the same question.

“With all of the Klingon and Federation attention on the upcoming peace talks,” Ael began, “some brilliant Admiral in High Command decided now would be the best time to strike at the Klingon Empire.”

“Such a strike would be foolhardy,” Kor scoffed. “Not to mention being a very brief campaign.”

“It will be brief, Commander,” Ael agreed. “But only because your defenses will not see the Romulan Fleet coming until it is already on top of Qo’noS.”

“Nonsense,” Kor replied. “Even with your ships cloaked we would detect them soon enough to stop that fleet long before then.”

“Not if the sensor net in Sector 14 were jammed,” Ael shot another look at Forelni, who frowned suddenly.

“Even so, no ships could pass into Klingon territory through that minefield of asteroids intact.”

“Not even through the *percorso attraverso l'inferno*?” she asked, not taking her eyes off Forelni.

Mansi shot a look of alarm at his Captain, who was putting on his best poker face.

“The what, Commander?” Kirk asked.

“The “Path Through Hell”, Jim,” Forelni said icily. “And I would very much like to know where the Commander heard that term. Because less than a dozen people know it and two of them are in this room. Neither of them are Romulan and none of the others should be anywhere but on Etalya.”

“There are considerably more than a dozen that know of it now,” she replied evenly, “on Romulus and the bridges of the attack fleet.”

“The information they have was considered top secret, Commander,” Forelni all but growled. “I’ll know how it came to be in your government’s possession, right now. Or, friend of Captain Kirk’s or not, I’ll have your ship carved down into very small pieces.”

“I am told that it was sold to us by a man named, Enrico Antonius,” Ael replied, showing no sign of fear.

“I’ll send the order to have every member of that traitorous family arrested myself...,” Mansi leapt from his seat. Forelni waved him back down.

“There will time enough for that later, Paulo,” Forelni said. “We have more pressing concerns right now.”

“What is this “Path Through Hell”, Captain?” Kirk asked.

“A plan I created for a possible invasion of the Klingon Empire many decades ago, Jim,” Forelni explained with a sigh. “It’s a fatal blind spot in the Klingon’s defenses. But to exploit it, you have to thread a fleet of ships, mostly one at a time, through a tight passage in the asteroid field.

“The main problem,” he continued, “is the asteroids are loaded with ketrinite. You make contact with one with a shielded ship and boom, your ship and a lot of asteroids go up and signals your presence in the field. However, you slip through and you come out right on top of Qo’noS before the Klingons know you’re there. They’d never know what hit them. With the sensor net jammed, no one else would know the Klingon home world had fallen until it was too late.”

“Is that how you pulled off the invasion before?” McCoy asked.

“No, Doctor, we rejected the Path because of the ketrinite risk. We found another way. But the Path would work as long as you and your fleet survive the passage.”

“And evidently the Romulans think they can,” Kirk pointed out. “How soon will they reach the field, Ael?”

“Four days,” she replied. “They’ll send in the smaller ships first, two at a time, then the capital ships will follow.”

“Which gives us six days to plug the path at the other end,” Forelni said. “You can’t run the passage at anything above quarter-impulse.”

“And how do we plug this passage if I can’t send word to Qo’noS?” Kor demanded. “By the time we could send a ship around the jamming the Romulan ships will be in Klingon space.”

Forelni and Kirk exchanged a long look.

“This is what my ship was built for, Jim,” Forelni broke the silence. “And you’ve got a ship full of diplomats to keep safe. Besides, this is my plan being used. It’s my responsibility to deal with this.”

“What is this?” Kor demanded.

“I’m taking the *Star* to the exit of the passage, Kor,” Forelni explained. “I’m going to plug the path so the Romulans cannot exit out the other side and hold that position until *Enterprise* can reach the nearest starbase, offload her passengers and reinforce me with as many ships as can be mustered. We’ll send a probe to get clear of the jamming and warn the Klingons. They can send as many ships as they can as well.”

“The Hot Gates at Thermopylae,” Kirk muttered.

“Except, instead of thousands of Persians smashing against 300 Spartan shields,” Forelni agreed. “It’ll be a few dozen ships smashing against my lone ship.”

“And you think your one ship can stop that many?”

Kor asked.

“Long enough to allow your people to ready a defense. Long enough to give them a chance to survive.”

“You would defend Klingon lives?”

“Yes, Kor, I would and for many reasons. None of which I have time to explain to you right now.”

“You will not go alone,” Ael said. “*Bloodwing* will fight at your ship’s side.”

“No, it won’t,” Forelni said. “Your ship’s main advantage is its maneuverability. In the passage you have no room to move, you’d be a sitting duck and would just be in the way.

“No,” he continued before she could protest. “I have a more important mission for you. You and your ship will take over my ship’s job here and escort *Enterprise* to the starbase. Come to the Path with the fleet. If I have to fall back, I’ll need as many friendly ships waiting for me when we exit. And your ship will have plenty of room to move then.”

“That’s a long time to hold that position,” Kirk pointed out.

“We’ll hold it as long as we can. Just don’t take too long getting there with the cavalry.”

“I’m going with you,” Kor stood up. “You’ll need a Klingon voice to convince my Command that you are in Klingon space legitimately. Unless you are eager to fight off two fleets at the same time.”

“My ship will go with *Enterprise*,” Ael chimed in. “But I too will go with you. I can help you at tactical.”

“You would betray your own people,” Kor asked, astonished.

“They have betrayed the Romulan people with this cowardly attack.”

Forelni took a long look at each of the Commanders before shooting a questioning look at Kirk.

*You trust her?* the look asked.

*Yes,* came the reply.

Forelni reached over and snapped the comm.

“Bridge, communications. Patch me to the bridge of the *Star*.”

“Connected, Captain,” Uhura replied. “Go ahead, sir.”

“This is the Captain, put me on allcall,” he ordered his communications officer. He waited a few seconds and then addressed his crew. “Attention all hands, this is the Captain. For reasons I will explain later, we are going into Klingon space to head off a Romulan invasion fleet and prevent a war that would no doubt engulf the entire quadrant. The Romulans have stolen plans that would aid in this attack, plans that belonged to our government back home on Etalya. I cannot allow something of my own creation to be responsible for the deaths of billions. I must go and I must take the *Star* with me.

“However,” he continued. “I am not oblivious to reality. Many of you have suffered losses at the hands of the Klingons. It would be difficult to put your life at risk for those that had caused you such pain. If any of you cannot bring yourself to join me on this mission I will not hold it against you. You may transfer aboard the *Enterprise* and await being reunited with the *Star* when this mission concludes.”

Forelni paused a beat, letting the information sink in.

“We depart for Klingon space in thirty minutes. You have until then to decide. Forelni out.”

He snapped the comm off and took in a deep breath before slowly letting it out.

“Paulo,” he said. “Beam back to the ship. Get any non-essential personnel, and anyone wanting to transfer, off the ship as quickly as possible. I’ll be beaming aboard shortly.”

Mansi nodded and turned for the door.

“One more thing, Paulo.”

“Sir?” Mansi turned back.

“Have quarters prepared for both Commander Kor and Commander Ael,” Forelni said around one last look at Kirk. “They are to be extended every courtesy due their rank while aboard my ship.”

Mansi fashioned a Spockian raised eyebrow but only said, “Aye, sir” as he left the room.

“The two of you have less than thirty minutes to get whatever you need and get aboard my ship or we leave without you,” Forelni said, cutting off whatever the two Commanders were about to say. They quickly followed Mansi out the door.

“Are you sure about this, Bari?”

“No, Jim, I’m not. But do you have a better idea?”

“I wish I did.”

“The Romulans would be planting their flag on Qo’noS before we’d get there if I wait for you and any reinforcements to arrive. No, this is the only option. Just don’t be too long getting there, Jim.”

“We’ll get there as fast as we can. Good luck, Captain.”

The two men shook hands and Forelni headed for the transporter room, picking up Avion on the way. He briefly considered ordering her to stay on the *Enterprise*. She was an official member of the crew after all. But he knew she’d refuse to stay behind. He headed straight for his bridge as soon as he beamed over.

“Status,” he barked out before the sole of his boot hit the deck.

“All non-essential personnel have been transferred to *Enterprise*,” Mansi reported, yielding the command chair. “Our...guests... are aboard and on their way up to the bridge.”

“Very well,” Forelni replied even as Kor and Ael exited the turbolift. He nodded an acknowledgment to them as they took up station on the far side of the bridge. “How many essential crew transferred?”

“None, Captain,” Mansi answered, a hint of pride in his voice.

“None?” Forelni could not keep the surprise out of his voice.

“None, sir,” Mansi confirmed. “Our course is laid in and we are ready to depart on your order, Captain.”

Forelni sat down in his command chair, touched more than he could express by the loyalty of his crew. He glanced over at his guests. Even Kor looked impressed. Ael gave a slight bow of salute. He reached down and selected the allcall on his armrest panel.

“Attention all hands,” he paused for a second. “You have made me very proud and honored to be your Captain.”

He snapped the allcall off and looked at his exec.

“Let’s get going, Commander. We’ve got a war to stop.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

“Captain,” Uhura reported, “We are being hailed by Admiral Bowman on the *Eagle*.”

“Sensors show the *Eagle* and five other ships are dropping out of warp just ahead of us, Captain,” Spock called out from his station.

“Mr. Sulu, drop us out of warp and bring us to within five kilometers of those ships,” Kirk ordered. “Uhura, let’s not keep the Admiral waiting.”

“Captain,” Bowman greeted as soon as his image appeared on the screen. “Let’s not waste time on the usual pleasantries. Begin transferring all of your diplomats and their staffs about the *Eagle* and the *Calisto* immediately. I am assigning you the *Hampton*, *Lexington*, *Reliant* and *Armstrong*. You will take command of your fleet and, once you have finished evacuating all non-essential personnel, you will immediately depart to rendezvous with *Avion*’s

*Star*. And take the Romulans along with you. I don't have to tell you that ship being in Federation space is making a lot of people at Starfleet Command nervous right now."

"Understood, Admiral," Kirk replied simply. He trusted Ael's crew as much as he did her. But he knew that trust wasn't shared by a vast majority of Starfleet. "We estimate we can be underway in less than an hour."

"Very good, Captain," Bowman acknowledged. "According to my navigator, and the information you obtained, the *Star* will have been engaged with the enemy for at least two days and likely three before you can get there."

"My Science Officer puts it at two-point-two-six days, Admiral."

"Can he hold his position that long? One ship, even a dreadnought, against a fleet of at least two dozen ships?"

"He has the advantage of not having to take them on all at the same time, Admiral," Kirk reminded. "If anyone can pull it off, he can."

"I hope he is as crafty as he was at Kallita, Captain," Bowman said after a long silence. "For his sake and for ours. *Eagle* out."

Kirk nodded in agreement as Bowman's image faded from the screen. He hadn't bothered to add that

Spock had also calculated the odds of Forelni and his ship holding off the entire fleet until relief arrived. The odds, according to Spock, were not in the Etalyan's favor.

“Evac status, Spock?”

“We should have the last of the diplomats off the ship in thirty-eight-point-six-one minutes, Captain.”

“Mr. Chekov...”

“Course plotted and laid in, sir,” the Ensign cut in.

“Ready to go to maximum warp on your order, sir,”

Sulu chimed in.

“Gentlemen,” Kirk replied with a slight smile, “if you are trying to earn a pay raise by anticipating my orders... well, I'll give it due consideration. In the meantime, you have my thanks and stand by to get underway the instant the last transport is complete.

“Uhura,” he turned to communications. “Signal all five ships in our fleet to stand by to go to warp in less than forty minutes.”

As his crew hurried to carry out his orders Kirk stared long and hard at the viewscreen. He couldn't shake the feeling that no matter how quickly they got there, it was going to be too late to make any difference.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Helm, bring us about,” Forelni shouted over the alarms. “Tactical, fire phasers at her nacelles as she passes.”

The *Star* pivoted out of the way of a Romulan phaser burst, no easy feat in the confined passage the ships battled within. Caught off guard by the move, the enemy cruiser’s vulnerable nacelles presented an easy target. At the tactical station, Lieutenant Lin Wicklund, a descendent of one of the few non-Italian families on board Genoa Forelni’s *Seeker* five centuries ago, stabbed down on the phaser controls.

Sixteen forward phaser banks unleashed blue fury. Already weakened by the running battle the Romulan shields could not withstand the assault. Both nacelles were severed and the damaged ship began to drift as it lost power.

“Full power to forward shields!” Forelni ordered, knowing what was coming next.

As had been the case for the first seven ships defeated by the *Star*, the eighth immediately self-destructed. The viewscreen flared blindingly as shockwaves from the destroyed vessel pounded against the *Star*’s shields. The ship rocked violently, bridge lights flickered on and off, but she withstood the punishment.

The ketrinite in some of the smaller asteroids nearby exploded, sending more debris skittering into the passage. Fortunately, none of the larger asteroids exploded. They'd identified and marked four of the largest boulders. The king of the four, tagged as Alpha, would trigger the entire asteroid field if it exploded. They'd been careful to keep the engagements away from Alpha. But one wrong move, one errant shot, and nothing but dust would be left for any relief ships to find when they arrived.

"Good shooting, Ms. Wicklund," Forelni nodded at the tactical station.

"Thank you, Captain," the young woman acknowledged with a grim smile as she studied her board. "Recharging phaser banks. We should be back to full power in thirty minutes."

"Very well," Forelni replied. So far, they hadn't fired a single photon torpedo. He was saving those for when the bigger Romulan ships arrived.

"Casualty reports?" he asked Avion at Communications. She'd just qualified for the position not three months earlier. She had replaced his original Chief Communications Officer after the man had been promoted to a First Officer's slot on another ship.

“Multiple injuries,” she reported as she listened to the incoming reports. “Sickbay reports some serious, but no fatalities yet.”

“Very good,” he replied in relief. How long their luck would hold out in that respect he could not say, but so far, he hadn’t lost a single member of his crew. “Mr. Mansi, ship’s status?”

“Damage control parties are on nearly every deck,” Mansi reported. “They should have everything locked down soon. Engineering reports they’ll hold her in one piece even if they have to go outside and tape it back together.”

“My compliments to the Chief Engineer,” Forelni chuckled. “Tell him we’ll try not to let it come to that.”

Forelni sat back in his command chair. He’d been on the bridge now for over thirty hours straight, the last twelve while fending off eight attacking Romulans, who’d engaged the *Star* in waves of two. He cast a look over at Ael, seated next to Kor in chairs specially rigged on the bridge for them.

“I’d hoped after the first two had been engaged and destroyed,” he said to her wearily, “that they’d call this off after losing the element of surprise. Eight ships destroyed and not one inch of ground gained.”

“It is either die here,” Ael replied simply, “or be executed back home on Romulus.”

“The first eight were sent to soften us up, then?” he mused. “If they hold to the pattern, the next wave hits in three hours and it will be the big ships this time?”

“The *Tnisx*, *Shrevaj* and *Rhea’s Shield*,” she confirmed. “Any two are a match for your fine ship, Captain.”

“You underestimate the *Star*, Commander,” Forelni replied, a little too sternly perhaps. Ael merely smiled and said nothing further.

“Assuming you dispatch these three,” Kor chimed in. “That still leaves over a dozen ships in their fleet. None of them will have battle damage to deal with as you do, Captain.”

“I knew I should have sent you off with that probe to warn your people, Kor,” Forelni grouched, begrudgingly admitting the Klingon had a point.

“I may not think we have a chance of surviving this engagement, Captain,” Kor said. “But I wouldn’t have missed this for anything in the universe. We won’t be around to hear them, but they will be singing songs about this day on Klingon worlds for generations to come.”

“Captain,” the helmsman broke in. “Massive disturbance in the field dead ahead. Three Romulan ships! They are moving the asteroids out of their way, widening the passage!”

“The lunatics!” Kor exclaimed. “They could set off a chain reaction that would kill off their own ships.”

“Death before dishonor,” Forelni said sadly, glancing at Ael who nodded her head. “Time until they get within firing range Mr. D’Amico?”

“At present speed?” he consulted his console. “Fifty minutes at most.”

“Mr. Mansi, confirm the identity of the approaching ships,” Forelni ordered calmly.

“It’s who we thought they’d send,” Mansi reported. “The *Tnisx*, *Shrevaj* and *Rhea’s Shield*.”

Forelni drew in a breath and weighed his options. The alien commanders on his bridge were watching him in silence, likely knowing what thoughts were going through his head.

They couldn’t withdraw, or even fight a strategic retreat back out into Klingon space. Those three ships would keep him occupied while the rest of the fleet poured through the opening and launched their attack on Klingon worlds.

Despite his earlier protest to the contrary, he might be able to dispatch any two of the approaching ships, but the third one would definitely emerge victorious and the result would be the same as if they withdrew.

Relief ships would not arrive for at least a day if not more and he could not hold this position that long, not even long enough for the relief ships to catch the Romulans as they exited the passage.

There was only one option now. It took him all of fifteen seconds to reach it and slowly release that indrawn breath. He looked over at the two commanders, who nodded in understanding and in agreement.

“I require one volunteer to remain on the bridge with me,” he announced. “The rest of you will clear the bridge and retire to the auxiliary bridge in the secondary hull. I want everyone cleared out of the saucer section and moved down into the primary hull, as near Engineering as possible.”

“If anyone here thinks they are getting ahead of me in the volunteer line,” Mansi said as he stepped down to the command chair and shot a look at his Captain, “you can think again. You and your damned slingshots.”

“Very well, Commander,” Forelni smiled. Paulo knew him all too well. It didn’t surprise him that his Exec

already knew what he was planning. “Ms. Wicklund, you will assume command of the auxiliary bridge. If you lose contact with us up here, take command of the ship and carry out these orders.

“My intentions,” he continued, looking around at his crew, “are to tractor two asteroids, Beta and Delta, as close to our ship as possible. Once the Romulan ships are in range we are going to execute a very brief warp jump directly at those ships. When we come out of warp we are going to cut the tractors and send both projectiles in their path. We will then fire a full spread of torpedoes at the ships and the asteroids and see just how much havoc we can create.”

The bridge fell into a shocked silence.

“If any of those ships survive that, and assuming we do the same, we will then latch onto Alpha and send it right at them. Just before impact, we will divert all power from the warp engines to the forward shields and make sure the saucer section is directly between the blast and the primary hull. We will fire all phasers at Alpha and set off every asteroid in this field, destroying every Romulan ship along with it.”

“Do you think your ship can survive that?” Kor asked, even the Klingon was shaken by the plan.

“I don’t know,” Forelni admitted. “But I do know none of them will. The invasion will be stopped and there will be no war. Still glad you stayed on board, Kor?”

“My spirit is prepared to take its place in Sto’Vo’Kor, Captain,” Kor gave a toothy grin. “But I wonder if Sto’Vo’Kor is prepared for you.”

“Let me remain on the bridge with you,” Avion requested, having displaced Mansi at Forelni’s side.

“If I did,” he replied softly. “I could not do what needs to be done. I need you to make sure our people are safe and secure below. Besides, I have twice seen a universe without you in it. It is a cold, lifeless place and I have no wish to see it for a third time.”

“You would ask me to face a universe without you in it?”

“I’m a lot harder to kill off, my love,” Forelni said. “I promise, you haven’t seen the last of me.”

He took her hand and gently kissed it. Everyone else on the bridge suddenly found consoles to study intently, giving the Captain and his Lady a chance to say goodbye.

“Clear the bridge,” Forelni ordered finally. “Ms. Wicklund, command of the ship is yours if the bridge is lost. Rely on the tactical experience of Commanders Ael

and Kor as much as possible. Save my crew and my ship if you can but above all else, no Romulan ship may pass. Understood?”

“Aye, Understood,” she replied. “Captain, I...”

“I’ll see you in Elysium,” he replied. “But before you go, give ’em hell, Kitteh-Dragon.”

Wicklund’s hand involuntarily shot up to the non-regulation tattoo that every member of the crew knew was on her left arm, just below the shoulder. He had seen it once, as he walked through the Rec Deck during a crew exercise session. The creature she’d chosen to adorn her arm with, he remarked at the time, what looked like a cross between a kitten and a dragon. The nickname, ‘Kitteh-Dragon’, had immediately stuck with the rest of the crew.

“Get going people,” Forelni ordered. “We’ve got a lot of work to do.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“The leading Romulan vessel is nearly within range,” Mansi reported from the helm. He checked his course and the duration of the warp jump one final time. He did not need to make any adjustments.

“Very well,” Forelni replied from the Tactical station. He, too, looked over the board one last time. The two asteroids were tethered in place, a third tractor beam

was already set to latch onto Alpha and every light showed green for photon torpedoes and phasers. He tabbed the communications panel.

“Auxiliary Bridge here,” Wicklund replied.

“Crew status?”

“Saucer section is completely clear,” she reported.

“Engineering has reinforced hull integrity down here as much as possible. We’re ready, sir.”

“Very good, Lieutenant, stand by.”

He tabbed off the comm and looked at the approach ships. They were still a good distance away and looked very small. The warp jump would change that perspective in an instant.

“My father always said you enjoyed throwing rocks too much for your own good,” Mansi said suddenly.

Forelni smiled at the reference. During a training session decades ago, when they were but small boys, Forelni had discarded the standard issue weapons they’d been given in exchange for two slingshots and a bag of rocks each. They’d caught their opponents off guard, including the elder Mansi, who’d begrudgingly praised the surprise tactic even as attendants applied ice packs to assorted bumps and cuts.

“The ships are in range,” Mansi reported. “They haven’t spotted us yet.”

“Engage the warp burst, Paulo,” Forelni ordered.

The *Star* leapt forward, dropping out of warp one second after she’d entered. Forelni stabbed down on the tractors, cutting both and allowing inertia to carry the asteroids forward at high speed.

“All stop! Full reverse!” Forelni ordered and the *Star* groaned under the strain of the maneuver as both he and Mansi held on for dear life to keep from being hurled forward. The Romulan ships powered up their weapons, but the asteroids were already too close. Forelni waited as long as he dared then fired every torpedo he had at the target. The Romulan shields withstood the barrage, but the asteroids didn’t. Both exploded with much more intensity that Forelni had expected.

His ship was hammered by the shock waves, the blinding light prevented his eyes and his ship’s sensors from seeing what was happening to the closer enemy ships. Even with the shields drawing power from the warp engines he could feel the wounds his ship was suffering. When the aftermath finally faded, both he and his Exec picked themselves up off the deck.

The *Tnissx*, has been destroyed,” Mansi reported. “The *Shrevaj* is intact but heavily damaged. I don’t think there is any fight left in her.”

“And *Rhea’s Shield*?” Forelni asked.

“Intact and she looks like she was shielded from that by other two ships. She’s ready to fight and coming right for us.”

Forelni stabbed the tractor controls, latching onto Alpha.

“Now, Paulo!”

Mansi’s fingers flew over the helm, bringing the *Star* around sharply, snapping Alpha toward the approaching Romulan just as it passed the asteroid. Forelni cut the tractor and unleashed every bit of power he could put into the phasers even as the Romulan ship opened fire on the *Star*. The phasers struck Alpha full on.

Then there was light.

And the light was not good.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

“Anything on the long-range sensors, Spock,” Kirk asked the same question he’d been asking his Science Officer every five minutes for the past twenty-four hours. He got the same answer back as he’d been given every time.

“Negative, Captain. There is still too much interference for sensors to pick up anything deep within the remains of the field.”

“Uhura,” Kirk turned to Communications. “Anything?”

“No, sir,” she reported sadly. “Nothing on any standard channel and I’m searching all the way down to the lowest bands.”

“Keep searching,” he ordered them both. “Spock, is there any further danger of detonation in there?”

“Based on the readings from the initial explosion we recorded one day ago,” Spock said after a moment, “I estimate every asteroid embedded with ketrinite has exploded. There should be no further danger.

“I assume you intend to take the ship in, Captain,” Spock continued. “It will be difficult to navigate our way through. The passage appears to have been destroyed.”

“We have to be certain the Romulan fleet didn’t make it,” Kirk replied. “And there could be survivors out there waiting for rescue. The rest of the fleet will remain here while we enter and head for where the *Star* was making her stand.”

Before Kirk could order his ship into the field, Chekov called out in alarm.

“Keptin, several Klingon Birds of Prey are dropping out of varp and decloaking off our starboard bow. They hev not raised shields nor powered veapons.”

“We are being hailed by the lead Klingon ship, Captain,” Uhura reported.

“On screen, and stand by to raise shields just in case, Mr. Chekov.”

A familiar Klingon face appeared on the main viewscreen.

“Commander Kang, it’s been some time.”

“Indeed, Kirk, and it appears someone has been fighting in a burning house.”

“We noticed that ourselves. I’m about to enter the field to look for survivors. Would you care to accompany my ship?”

“I and my fleet will remain right here in case any Romulans decide to slither out from under one of those rocks,” Kang replied. “But you are on a fool’s errand, Kirk. I doubt any ship in there is anything more than a handful of dust. Whatever triggered that chain reaction ended the Romulan invasion before it began.”

“You may be right, Commander, but I want to make sure.”

“As you wish, Captain, but if you get into trouble in there, don’t expect me to come save you.”

The screen darkened before returning to a visual of the field, dead rocks tumbling in space, occasionally bumping into one another.

“Mr. Chekov, plot a course to the last known position of the *Star* and put full power to the deflectors. Stand by to tractor any asteroid we can’t avoid out of our way.

“Sulu, take us in, one-quarter impulse,” he added as he sat back in his command chair. “Uhura, signal our ships to hold position here until we return.”

“Sir,” Uhura replied. “*Bloodwing* is asking permission to join us.”

“Tell them one ship in there is enough,” Kirk answered. “Besides, if the *Star* did survive they might decide to shoot a Romulan ship before identifying which one it is.”

McCoy slid up beside the Captain as the *Enterprise* slipped into the field.

“What did cause the explosion, Jim?”

“Three possibilities, Bones,” Kirk replied, never taking his eyes off the screen. “An errant shot. Or a damaged ship, out of control, slamming into the wrong asteroid and triggering the chain reaction.”

“And the third?”

“Bari couldn’t hold the passage,” Kirk replied, “and he couldn’t retreat. So he did the only thing he could to stop the invasion.”

“My God,” McCoy whispered. “One ship, hundreds of crew...”

“In exchange for the millions who would have died in the war that would have happened if the Romulans had

broken through?” Kirk finished. “Yes, he’d make that call. So would I, Bones, if the *Enterprise* had been in there instead.”

A hush fell over the bridge as the ship carefully picked her way through. They were clearing a path in with the tractors, making the return trip out easier, but so far all they were finding was rocks and dust.

“Captain,” Spock called out minutes later. “Sensors are picking up debris ahead. Analysis indicates it is from Romulan ships.” He paused. “Many Romulan ships.”

“Any life signs, Spock?”

“None, Captain. So far, none of the debris is any larger than a meter in diameter.”

“Any sign of the *Star*?”

“Not yet, but none of the debris is from a Federation vessel. It could be we simply aren’t close enough to where the ship was yet.”

A large, mostly intact boulder appeared on the screen. Sulu maneuvered the ship around the tumbling rock and as they passed it they found what they had been searching for. She was listing at least twenty degrees to her port, the saucer section was heavily damaged. One nacelle was completely dark and the other was flickering and

venting gas, but against all odds, *Avion's Star* was still intact.

“Spock?”

“Picking up life signs in the secondary hull, Captain, but I cannot get an accurate count. No life signs in the saucer section although interference is making accurate readings impossible.”

“Uhura, any contact?”

“Still nothing, sir, not even a distress signal...,” she paused, leaning intently over her board. “Captain, I have a very weak signal in a lower frequency!”

“Can you put it on screen?”

“Stand by...there, that should do it.”

A grainy picture took form on the screen. Kirk spotted *Avion*, *Ael* and *Kor*, all looking a little worse for wear but alive, standing behind a young woman in a red uniform. And they were clearly on the auxiliary bridge.

“*Enterprise*,” Lieutenant Wicklund said. “Can you read us?”

“We can, Lieutenant,” Kirk replied. “I can’t tell you how happy we are to find you alive.”

“If you’d shown up about an hour later, we probably wouldn’t be, Captain,” she answered. “We’ve been lucky in that we’ve only had some injuries and no

casualties aside from two missing crew, but we're in pretty bad shape right now. We can't get the escape pods operating to abandon ship, the transporters are out and the shuttle bay is inoperable."

"Spock, start beaming that crew aboard," Kirk ordered before turning back to the screen. "We'll start beaming your crew off the ship now. Where is Captain Forelni?"

"He and Commander Mansi remained on the bridge during the final battle," she reported. "The saucer section is heavily damaged and we can't reach the bridge. We've tried calling up there but we've received no response."

"Captain," Spock reported, "Sensors show the bridge is mostly intact and still retains life support. I am getting vague life signs...but only enough for one."

"Understood," Kirk replied, catching Avion's look of anguish. "Lieutenant, get your people organized and off that ship. We'll beam a rescue party to your bridge, Kirk out."

"Spock," he continued, rising, "get that ship evacuated. Have a rescue party meet me in the Main Transporter Room with a medic equipped with a field kit. Bones, I believe your services will be needed too."

\* \* \* \* \*

Kirk, McCoy, three volunteers from Security – the entire department had volunteered when they’d heard who was in need of aid – and one medic beamed onto the bridge of the *Star*.

It looked like they’d beamed straight into hell.

The bridge was flooded with red emergency lights and flashing alarms. The command chair had been ripped from its mooring and had smashed into the communications console. The ceiling had partially collapsed and Kirk did not care for the bulge forming near the dome.

They found Mansi first. McCoy leaned over to make certain but there was little doubt the man was dead, pinned between a fallen beam and the floor. McCoy closed the dead man’s eyes and shook his head.

“Captain!” one of the red shirts called out, carefully lifting a piece of debris and setting it aside. “Doctor, come quick!”

They found Forelni sprawled on the deck, dried blood - from a wound in his scalp - covering half his face. His left arm was clearly broken. McCoy waved his scanner over the Captain.

“Nasty head wound, he’s got a concussion and a whale of a headache,” McCoy read off the results. “That

arm will need to be set soon. Assorted bruises and lacerations...he's as stubborn as a mule and has the nine lives of a dozen cats, Jim. He'll live."

McCoy pressed a hypo into Forelni's neck and was rewarded with fluttering eyelids and eyes that focused first on the doctor.

"I missed Elysium and ended up in Sto'Vo'Kor," he quipped weakly.

"You'll do," McCoy chuckled and then put a hand on Forelni's chest as he started to sit up. "Go slow, Captain, you're not as indestructible as you think."

Forelni slowly eased to a sitting position and looked around the bridge before settling on Kirk.

"Who won?" he asked.

"You did."

"And I should see the other guy?"

"If there was anything left of him to see, yes," Kirk agreed.

"My crew?" Forelni asked.

"We've just about got them all off," Kirk replied. "So far, mostly just bumps and bruises and only a handful of serious injuries with one casualty."

“My ship?” he inquired, looking up at the growing bulge in the ceiling and levered himself to his feet with some help from McCoy.

“She’s barely holding together, Bari,” Kirk answered. “I’m sorry.”

“Aw, hell...,” Forelni spotted Mansi’s body. He’d seen enough dead men to know who the one casualty was. He carefully made his way down, letting his left arm hang limply. With his one good arm he reached down and gathered up his friend, lifting him up and draping him over his good shoulder.

“Sir, let me help you...,”

“It’s okay, Ensign,” Forelni said gently. “This is my burden to bear. May I have your communicator?”

The man nodded and handed over the device.

“You need to get your party back to your ship, Jim,” Forelni said as he turned. “As soon as you are over, you can beam us over too. The Captain is the last one off the ship after all.”

“Kirk to *Enterprise*,” Kirk nodded as he flipped open his communicator. “Evacuation status, Mr. Spock?”

“The last of the crew has been beamed over, Captain. Standing by to evacuate the bridge.”

“Lock on to our team, Spock, and beam us aboard now. Then beam Captain Forelni and Commander Mansi aboard.”

“Understood, energizing now.”

The *Enterprise* party dissolved in the transporter effect. Forelni took one last look around his bridge.

“You did just fine, dear lady. You did just fine,” he whispered as the transporter beam locked in on his communicator and beamed the last two of the *Star’s* children away to safety.

\* \* \* \* \*

A handful of the *Star’s* crew were waiting when Forelni appeared on the transporter pad. They rushed forward and gently claimed their fallen Exec. Avion was right behind them, claiming her place next to her injured husband.

“I told you I am not so easy to kill,” Forelni tried to quip, but it sounded flat even to him as he watched his friend’s body being borne to Sickbay’s morgue.

“Ms. Wicklund,” he spotted his tactical officer and slipped back into command mode. “Crew status.”

“One casualty, sir, three serious injuries being tended to in Sickbay right now,” she reported. “Everyone else is alive and reporting minor injuries only.”

“Very good, Lieutenant, I could not have asked for a better outcome. Thank you.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Bartolo,” he turned to his Chief Engineer. “Ship status.”

“Not good, Captain,” he replied heavily. “We barely kept her together until help arrived. She’s too torn up to tow either.”

“Understood,” Forelni placed his right hand on the man’s shoulder in sympathy of their shared pain. “She lived a brief life, but it was a life well lived.”

“Aye, sir, that it was.”

“Jim, how long will you need to get the *Enterprise* clear of the blast radius?”

Knowing what was going to come next, Kirk snapped the intercom on.

“Kirk to Bridge, set course to get us out of the asteroid field at best possible speed. What is our estimated transit time to rendezvous with the rest of our fleet?”

“At least twenty minutes, Captain,” Spock replied.

“Very well. Stand by to execute. In the meantime, tie this intercom in with the computer on *Avion’s Star*.”

“Understood,” a pause broken only by the tapping of several keys. “Course laid in. Tie-in established.”

Kirk stepped away as Forelni stepped up to the console.

“Computer, this is Captain Bari Forelni. Verify.”

“Identity verified.”

“Record the death of Commander Paulo Mani, First Officer, into the ship’s log.”

“Recorded.”

“Record a field promotion for Lieutenant Lin Wicklund, tactical officer, to Lieutenant Commander, First Officer of the *Avion’s Star*. Then transmit the ship’s log to the *Enterprise*.”

“Recorded. Transmitting log.”

“Sir?” she asked in shock.

“Paulo would have made you his exec had he gotten the commission instead of me.” Forelni explained. “I’m only sorry your tenure will be a short one.”

“It’s okay, sir, I understand.”

“Computer, set auto-destruct sequence for three-zero minutes and initiate auto-destruct.”

“Working. Auto-destruct set for three-zero minutes. Awaiting command codes.”

“Computer, this is Captain Bari Forelni. Destruct sequence one. Code one, one-A.”

“Captain’s code entered.”

“Computer,” Wicklund stepped forward, swallowing hard. “This is First Officer Lin Wicklund. Destruct sequence two. Code one, one-A, two-B.”

“First Officer’s code entered.”

“Computer,” Rinaldi stepped up. “This is Chief Engineer Bartolo Rinaldi. Destruct sequence three. Code one-B, two-B, three.”

"Destruct sequence completed and engaged. Awaiting final code for three-zero minute countdown."

Forelmi reclaimed his place at the console.

“Computer. Code zero, zero, zero,” and here his voice broke as he signed his ship’s death warrant. “Destruct... zero.”

"Destruct sequence is activated."

Forelmi turned to Kirk.

“Permission to watch from the bridge, Jim?”

“Permission granted,” Kirk replied. “Spock, get us out of here.”

\* \* \* \* \*

The *Enterprise* rejoined the Federation and Klingon fleets outside the field and all of the ships backed a little further away just to be on the safe side.

The *Star* was on the screen at high magnification. Spock had cut off the countdown from the dying ship and only reported on her remaining time once.

“Thirty seconds, Captains,” he said.

Wicklund and Rinaldi were standing on the upper deck near the unoccupied engineering station. Forelmi, with Avion still glued to his side as if she intended to remain there for all eternity, was standing near the screen, just in front of and between Sulu and Chekov’s stations.

“All hands,” Kirk stabbed the allcall button on his armrest, “and crew of the *Star*. Stand at attention! Mr. Spock, sound passing honors, please.”

A long, mournful blast of a bosun’s whistle sounded on the overhead speakers as the crews from both ships rose to their feet as one.

Forelmi counted the last ten seconds down in his head, each second a new stab to his heart until he reached zero. His ship was consumed in a blaze of white fire as the antimatter in her warp core detonated. He waited until the fire died out before turning to face the bridge.

“Thank you,” he said simply and, all his reserves spent, pitched forward. Kirk and Avion barely kept him from hitting the deck.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

“It’s good to see you up and around, Captain,” Kirk greeted Forelni as the latter walked out onto the bridge of the *Enterprise*.

“Thank you, Captain,” Forelni replied with a little smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. “I’ll try not to need to be carried off the bridge like the last time.”

“I think, under the circumstances, no one is holding it against you,” Kirk said. He looked at the younger, *well he might be pushing two hundred years of age, but he still looked younger*, man. He looked drawn around the eyes and some of that perpetual gleam in them was missing, too.

Not that Kirk was surprised. The man had sacrificed his ship to stop what would have resulted in a galactic war and lost his first officer and best friend as well. Kirk cast a glance at his own Exec and wondered

what his face would look like if he ever lost both Spock and his ship at the same time.

*I hope I never find that out,* he thought.

“Just don’t go pushing yourself too hard, Captain,” McCoy drawled from beside Kirk’s chair. “I’m still not convinced three days is enough rest and recovery time.”

“Nothing to fear, Doctor,” Forelni answered. “Your partner in crime has been making sure I get plenty of rest. She is going to make a formidable Queen in this century.”

“Captain, incoming message from Starbase 16,” Uhura cut in. “It’s Admiral Bowman, sir.”

“On screen,” Kirk ordered as he stood up and straightened his tunic just before Bowman appeared on the view screen.

“Admiral Bowman, what can we do for you, sir?”

“Captain Kirk,” Bowman replied, then noticed Forelni off to the side. “Captain Forelni, you just saved Kirk from being a messenger. We have you at eight hours out until you arrive here, Kirk.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Upon arrival you will not dock, I repeat, you will not dock at Starbase 16. You will instead approach to within transporter range. Only yourself, Mr. Spock,

Captain Forelni and his Executive Officer will be allowed to beam off the ship.

“When you arrive,” Bowman continued, “you will be escorted to my office here. I will have further orders for you at that time. Is this understood?”

“Understood, sir,” Kirk replied after a shared glance with Forelni. “May I ask why...”

“You may not, Captain,” Bowman cut him off. “Bowman out.”

The screen switched to an exterior view of Starbase 16 even though Bowman had signed off.

“Uhura, is the Admiral still transmitting?” Kirk asked, noticing Forelni staring intently at the screen.

“Only this image, Captain, but he is still transmitting.”

“Bari,” Kirk asked quietly, “what is it?”

“Mr. Spock,” Forelni replied, still peering at the screen. “That ship docked at the Starbase, lower left quadrant, can you magnify it?”

“Stand by, Captain,” the Vulcan replied.

“Bari?” Kirk repeated.

“That’s an Etalyan ship, Jim,” Forelni replied softly. “It’s a diplomatic ship at that. If Etalya had sent a

ship for me and my crew, they would have sent my old ship, the *Sicilia*, for us.”

“So why are they sending a smaller diplomatic ship?”

“That depends on which ship that is, Jim.” He replied and Kirk didn’t care at all for the undertone of worry in Forelni’s reply.

“It is the Etalyan Diplomatic Cruiser, the *Maestrone*, commanded by...”

“Enrico Antonius,” Forelni finished with a pained look.

“Isn’t that the same man...?” Kirk asked.

“...that sold secret information to the Romulans according to your friend, Commander Ael?” Forelni confirmed. “Yes, the very same man and his presence here is very...interesting.”

\* \* \* \* \*

The four officers beamed aboard the Starbase as ordered within minutes of *Enterprise’s* arrival. They were met by Bowman’s aide, Janeski, and five men. Four wore uniforms of Etalyan Security forces. The fifth man stood behind them, wearing a garish cloak over tunic and trousers. His lip was curled in a disdainful sneer.

“Captains, Commanders,” Janeski quickly stepped forward, as if trying to head off a confrontation before it could begin. “We will escort you to Admiral Bowman’s office...”

“But first,” the sneering man cut in without stepping out from behind the security team. “There is one official matter to perform. “Capelli, you have a duty to perform.”

The leader of the security team swallowed hard but took a step forward.

“Signore,” he began formally. “I have been dispatched by the Council, and his Highness the King, to take you into custody and escort you back to Etalya to answer to the charge of treason against the people of Etalya and their government.”

Forelmi stepped forward and placed his hands on the man’s shoulders.

“Stepano Capelli,” Forelmi said. “And a commander now, I see. It has been a long time since you first began serving as a palace guard. How are you? Your wife, Ermida? And little Arturo? I suppose he is not so little anymore.”

“Not at all, sire,” Capelli smiled and relaxed. “My family is fine and thank you for asking. It is most kind of you.”

“I am glad to hear of it,” Forelni replied. “And do not concern yourself overmuch about what you are being ordered to do here. But all I would ask is this, before you officially place me under arrest, I am obligated to report to my commanding officer regarding the recent events involving my ship. After I have done this, I will happily accompany you back to Etalya.”

“Thank you, sire,” Capelli replied, obviously relieved. “We must, of course, accompany you to the Admiral’s office.”

“Of course,” Forelni said before turning to Janeski. “Shall we?”

“Now wait a minute...” the fifth man bellowed.

“Enrico Antonius!” Forelni’s voice nearly shook the entire starbase. “Do not be in such a hurry, Councilor. Until the Council votes and the King renders his judgment, I am still the Crown Prince. Charged and under arrest or not, I can still have your head mounted as a masthead for the *Maestrone* for the trip home.”

Antonius shrank visibly and took a full step back before simply nodding his head.

“So that’s what a Royal threat sounds like,” Kirk whispered as an aside to Wicklund.

“No, sir,” the exec replied as quietly. “That was what a Royal warning sounds like.”

The brief walk to Bowman’s office was made in silence. As the door to the Admiral’s private office opened the four Starfleet officers entered with Forelni bringing up the rear. He paused in the doorway and turned back slightly.

“This is a Starfleet matter with certain...security issues, Stepano,” he said. “I am afraid the five of you will have to remain out here. As soon as I have finished, I will rejoin you.”

“Now see here,” Antonius started up but Capelli shut him down.

“Signore!” Stepano came to Prince’s defence. “The Crown Prince has given his word that he will accompany us back to Etalya when he is finished here. He has never broken his word to me. We will wait out here. All five of us, Signore.”

“Grazie, Stepano,” Forelni nodded his head then stepped into the office to allow the door to slide shut.

“That man is quite...’charming’ isn’t he?” Bowman asked, inviting the officers to be seated.

“That man,” Forelni growled, “is an as...,” Forelni caught himself. “He is an annoyance I should have dealt with years ago.”

“He’s the same man that Commander Ael accused of selling the invasion plans of yours to the Romulans?” Bowman asked.

“The same, yes,” Forelni confirmed. “Sadly, while I believe the Commander, her word alone will not be evidence enough to charge the man.”

“He seems eager to clap you in irons,” Bowman noted. “I owe you an apology, Captain. Unfortunately, I was not able to give you any advance warning, at least overtly. Starfleet ordered full cooperation with the Etalyan authorities, who were standing in my office when I called.”

“It wasn’t hard to figure out why the *Maestrале* was here,” Forelni replied. “Especially when I saw it on the screen.”

“I’m always forgetting to cut my transmissions,” Bowman explained, all innocence. “I keep leaving my Captains with views of the Starbase.”

“Quite alright, Admiral,” Forelni said with a grateful nod.

“No, Captain, it isn’t,” Bowman replied irritably. “You prevented a war between the Romulans and the

Klingons that likely would eventually have involved the Federation. It seems like there are those in the Federation, as well as on Etalya, who wish you had not done so.”

“There are always such to be found wherever you look, Admiral.”

“Yes, and in this case, they want your head,” Bowman replied. “Captain, I suspect they are willing to let your home planet deal with the issue. If you are found guilty there, they will throw the book at you.”

“Exiled from Etalya and Starfleet?” Kirk asked.

“That seems to be the idea,” Forelni replied. “Don’t look so glum, gentlemen. I’ve been in worse spots.”

“You’ve never been in one while fighting those who are supposed to be allies,” Wicklund chimed in. “The Council would not have sent Antonius without the King’s consent.”

“You raise an uncomfortable point,” Forelni conceded. “My father might only be playing politics, appeasing that half of the Council for whatever reason. When I get to Etalya, I’ll find out. Speaking of which, Admiral, my crew has enjoyed the *Enterprise’s* hospitality, but I wouldn’t want to wear out our welcome.”

“They are going to enjoy it a little longer, Captain,” Bowman replied. “I’m ordering the *Enterprise* to transport

your crew to Etalya where they will be granted thirty days survivor's leave."

"Survivor's leave is usually reserved for personnel stranded on a planet for an extended period," Spock pointed out.

"I'm making an exception in this case, Commander," Bowman replied. "Kirk, I want you to remain on Etalya until this matter is cleared up. Show the flag a little and make sure the Etalyan's know what this man has done for them and for the Federation. In the meantime, I intend to make sure Starfleet knows it as well."

"Looks like you're stuck with me a little longer, Jim," Forelni quipped, standing up. "Hopefully we can clear this up and I can show you my world. And since I have a superior ride home..."

Forelni walked out of the office, followed by everyone else curious to see what he was up to.

"Stepano," he called out. "It seems the *Enterprise* is taking my crew home and they have room for four more. You and your men gather up whatever you need from the *Maestrle* and meet me on the *Enterprise*."

"We're supposed to..."

“Keep an eye on me, yes, but Ms. Wicklund is more than capable of making sure I don’t steal a smuggler’s scow and make a break for it.”

“Aren’t you forgetting there’s a fifth person coming along?” Antonius chimed in as he stepped toward Forelni.

“Not all, Enrico,” Forelni replied. “You’re simply not invited.”

Forelni decked him, laying the man out cold. One of the Etalyan security men checked on him.

“He’s still breathing, but he’s going to have a very sore jaw,” he reported.

“I’m getting old, Stepano,” Forelni remarked with a sad shake of his head. “I used to be able to hit much harder than that.”

“Time is the enemy of us all, sire,” Capelli grinned.

“Admiral Bowman,” Forelni turned. “It seems Councilor Antonius has slipped on a bar of soap and has a very serious concussion. I suspect he’ll be laid up in your sickbay here for at least two or three days before he’ll be released to return to Etalya on the *Maestrale*.”

“Three days at least,” Bowman agreed. “My Chief Medical Officer might even make it four. Hadn’t you better get going and put your head start to good use?”

“Aye, sir,” Forelni said, gathering the other five Etalyans up in his wake as he left.

“Kirk,” Bowman said, “a moment if you please?”

“I’ll catch up with you on the ship, Spock.”

Bowman waited until they were alone.

“It may seem like certain brass wants it believed that Starfleet wants Forelni to go down,” Bowman said. “But I don’t believe it is the case. I am going to work very hard to make sure Starfleet comes down fully on his side. I want you to do whatever it takes to make sure Etalya does too. We need more Captains like that man, not fewer.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

“It has been far too long, my Prince,” the Chamberlain greeted Forelni as he finished materializing in the palace courtyard. “All Etalya rejoices in your return and yours as well, Lady Avion.”

“Giuseppe,” Forelni replied in surprise. “You finally convinced your father to retire? I was certain we would have to carry him straight to his grave before he’d step down.”

“A year ago,” the Chamberlain replied. “And my mother gave him no choice in the matter.”

“Of course,” Forelni said. “I should have known a higher authority would step in. These gentlemen with me are Captain Kirk, Commander Spock and Doctor McCoy. They are my colleagues in Starfleet. They are also my friends.”

“We will arrange guest quarters for them in your dimora, sire,” the Chamberlain reported. “An honor guard is standing by to receive Paulo Mansi and stand watch until you are ready to take him home to his father in New Lucca.”

“Your father trained you well,” Forelni placed a grateful hand on the Chamberlain’s shoulder. “As for all Etalya rejoicing, I’m not sure that is entirely true given the reception waiting for me at Starbase 16.”

“Perhaps it was a bit of an exaggeration. I should have said all Etalya outside the Council.”

“The Council has always been split,” Forelni shrugged.

“Not this time, sire,” the Chamberlain replied with a sad shake of his head.

“What was the vote?”

“It was unanimous. Even the King voted with them to order you to be escorted back to Etalya to face charges.”

Even Forelni was taken aback by that news.

“That is definitely not a good sign,” he muttered.

“I have been instructed to escort you to the King and Queen upon your arrival,” the Chamberlain replied apologetically. “Alone.”

“I will take our guests to the dimora,” Avion offered. “You can join us there afterwards.”

“Thank you, my love,” he whispered to her quietly with a quick kiss on her cheek before addressing the others. “Gentlemen, I will see you after I have visited the lion’s den.”

Forelni put a brave face on it as he walked off with the Chamberlain, but the fact that his father and the other half of the council had voted in unison with the rest had him very concerned.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Your Majesties,” the Chamberlain announced as he opened the doors to the King’s private reception hall. The Royal couple was seated on elevated thrones at the far end. “May I present...”

“We recognize who is standing next to you,” the King cut off the customary formality, flustering the Chamberlain briefly. “We await your explanation for your treasonous actions, Capitano.”

*Not Prince, not son,* Bari thought with a side glance at the Chamberlain, *but Capitano.*

“I am unaware of any such action on my part, father,” he replied coolly.

“You will address us as ‘Your Majesty’, Capitano,” the King’s tone was frigid.

“Very well, *Your Majesty*,” Bari put a little too much emphasis on the title, his temper starting to get the better of him. “Perhaps you would enlighten your humble servant as to what actions *Your Majesty* considers treasonous?”

“Impertinence will not help your case, Capitano.”

“Your Majesties, please...” the Chamberlain tried to reduce the temperature in the room. He may as well have thrown a bucket of flammables on it for all the good he accomplished.

“You will stay out of this, sir!” the King rumbled.

“Careful, Giuseppe,” Bari tossed in. “He’ll be charging you with treason next.”

“You will keep a civil tongue, Capitano!”

“Then come to the point, old man,” Bari stepped forward, almost face-to-face with his father now, “or end this nonsense and tell me what you consider treason!”

“You defended the Klingons!” the Queen shouted, standing up so quickly that her chair nearly toppled over.

“From an invasion by the Romulans that would have triggered a war so vast that billions would have died,” Bari answered. “It cost me my ship and my best friend.

And I would do it again if I were given the chance to go back and make the decision anew.”

“You value Klingon life so much then?” the King glowered.

“I value *life*, father, and the good name of Etalya. Has it escaped your notice what route the Romulans used for their invasion? The same route, the same plan down to the very second, as the plan I devised decades ago? The plan that was sealed, considered top secret and should never have left this planet? Yet somehow managed to land in the hands of the Romulans? How do you think that happened?”

“I have no idea,” the King waved a dismissive hand.

“There is only one way,” Bari retorted. “Only one family would dare do this.”

“You have always been overly harsh with the Antoniuses.”

“And you have always been far too lenient with them,” Bari accused, and the King bristled at the accusation.

“Your brother would not side with the Klingons over an Etalyan family,” the Queen accused. The Chamberlain closed his eyes and hung his head. She may

as well have ignited a nuclear device in the room, it would have caused less damage than reopening a decades-old wound.

“My brother,” Bari’s voice was so quiet, even the Chamberlain strained to hear him. “who allowed you and Gianna to travel into a dangerous area with no escort? Who got both of you kidnapped? Who got my sister, your own daughter, killed? That is who you want deciding the fate of billions? A bumbling idiot who was so busy trying to prove himself that he left chaos and calamity in his wake?”

“You do yourself no credit speaking ill of him now,” the King chided. “You must admit you have placed the crown in many difficult positions over the years.”

“With good reason and with just cause,” Bari protested.

“Perhaps,” the King did not sound convinced. “Sometimes, I wish he were...”

The King visibly caught himself and turned away suddenly.

“You wish he were *what*, father,” Bari demanded.

“Nothing, it was nothing.”

“It was *not* nothing!” Bari grabbed the King’s arm and spun him back around. “Finish it, old man, you wish he were *what*?”

“We wish your brother had prevailed the day you murdered him,” the Queen burst out suddenly.

Bari looked at his mother in shock then turned to ask his father if those had been the unspoken words. But he didn't have to ask. Confirmation was written all over the King's face.

Bari turned loose his grip on the arm and stumbled back three steps. The Chamberlain moved over but Bari held up a hand to wave him off.

“I will take my friend home to his father tomorrow,” Bari said, his tone flat but somehow still conveying the hurt from what had just transpired. “This is my right as his Capitano, and I will do so as his Prince. When I return, I will present my sword to the Council and take my leave of Etalya for as long as the two of you live. My condolences, *Majesties*, for all the decades that you've suffered without child.”

With that he turned away and walked, back straight and head high, to the doors and left. The Chamberlain faced the King and Queen and bowed.

“You are wrong, Majesties,” he said firmly. “He deserved better from you.”

“Remember your place,” the King snapped. “Your father would not have addressed us so.”

“When he was Chamberlain, sire, he would not have needed to.”

With that, the Chamberlain bowed again, turned and followed the Prince out the door.

\* \* \* \* \*

“It was horrible, my lady,” the Chamberlain said, standing on the terrace overlooking the courtyard as the sun started to rise over the horizon the next morning. Down below, Paulo Mansi’s draped coffin sat upon a cart. Forelni, in the traditional hooded black robe a Capitano wore when bringing the body of one of his men home, approached the cart. “I will forever be haunted by what I witnessed.”

“How is he this morning?” Kirk asked, looking down at the heart wrenching scene.

“Inconsolable,” Avion reported. “Almost unapproachable. He walked the gardens all last night. I don’t think he spoke more than three words aloud. His father would have been kinder if he’d driven a stake through his heart rather than speak those cruel words to him.”

“Do you really think he’s going to abdicate?” McCoy asked.

“Yes, I do,” she replied. “Even though he knows it will also likely end his career in Starfleet as well.”

“I don’t suppose he’s indicated what he plans to do afterwards?” Kirk asked.

“I doubt he’s thought that far ahead just yet,” she answered. “Right now, he’s focused on doing his final duty for Paulo. I worry, though, what will happen on his way back?”

“What do you mean?” Kirk was puzzled.

“Once he buries Paulo,” she gave Kirk a concerned look. “He’ll have nothing else to do but think about what he’ll do next.”

“And given his track record...” Kirk started.

“Anything is liable to happen when he walks back into the Great Hall in three days,” she finished.

\* \* \* \* \*

The eight-mile trek from the Palace to New Lucca was mercifully downhill. Forelni pushed the cart along at an even pace and arrived at the village at midday. As was the custom, many lined the route, tossing white flowers on the road in front of the cart as it passed. Once in the village proper, each resident stepped up and placed a red flower on and around the casket.

Forelni stopped in front of the house belonging to Paulo's father, Orlando. He stepped up to the door, knocked twice and stepped back. He drew his sword and waited until the door opened and the older Mansi stepped out. Forelni dropped to one knee and offered his sword to the older man.

"I have brought your son home," Forelni said, as custom demanded and waited for the verdict from the former weapons master.

Mansi reached down and took the sword in one hand and with the other, lifted up the kneeling man before him.

"Thank you for bringing my son home, my Prince, and you have no need to offer your sword, or your life, to me."

"I would give anything I have to trade places with him," Forelni replied.

"And he would say the same thing if your places were reversed," Mansi chided. "He did his duty as did you. Come inside now. Let us mourn him as a father and a brother should," he waved to a small group of men clustered at the side of the house. "Take my son and prepare him for tomorrow. I will join you soon."

The men quickly took possession of the cart and moved it toward one of the outer buildings while the old man led Forelni inside. There were many memories of better times waiting to greet him when he walked in. He sat down at a table he'd eaten many meals at, haunted by the ghost of the man no longer seated on the other side.

Mansi let the silence go long enough to bring a pot of tea and two cups from the kitchen. Paulo's mother had died years before, but her touches were everywhere to be seen, including the tea pot and cups.

"You appear to be one of the few people left on Etalya not wanting to take my head," Forelni said as Mansi poured the tea. "And no one has more right to it than you."

"My son lived a soldier's life," Mansi replied, placing the cup in front of Forelni. "As do you. Dying in the line of duty comes with the job. He knew that and so do you."

"You're being a lot more understanding about this than most everyone else," Forelni replied.

"Because I got a letter from him," Mansi replied. "He sent it to me right before you headed off to stop the Romulans. He explained everything including how the Romulans got the plans from us. He also said he was never prouder of you than he was when you decided to put your

ship in between the Romulans and the Klingons to prevent a war that would spread across the quadrant.

“And so am I,” Mansi added. “I am proud of both of you and I have never been so more than I am right now.”

Deeply touched, Forelni was struck speechless and took a sip of tea to gather himself.

“I wish the same could be said of the King, the Queen and the Council,” he said after a few moments, then related the confrontation from the night before.

“The fools,” Mansi snorted angrily. “The King should know better. You’re not seriously considering going off into exile?”

“What choice do I have? Besides, there’s not much reason for me to remain here.”

“Oh, you think that, do you?” Mansi spared his old pupil a glare as he stood up. “I’m going to see to my son now. You can relieve me at midnight. In the meantime, you are going to sit right here and listen to your people. Then let us see if you can tell me you have no reason to remain here.”

The old man left the house and within minutes a parade of people from the village filed inside, one at a time, to tell their Prince what had been happening on

Etalya in the last few years while he'd been away and what they thought of their Prince. As they day wore on they were joined by people from nearby cities and villages with similar stories of the Council losing touch with the people they were supposed to represent. A Council more concerned with fattening themselves with profit and power and ignoring the needs and concerns of the people.

By the time the last story had been told it was time for him to take his place at Paulo's side, standing the last night watch before his body was consecrated to the ground and his spirit was free to move on in peace. Orlando opened the door to the outer house where Paulo's casket was lying in state.

"You'll have my answer in the morning," Forelni said as he stepped inside.

The elder Mansi said nothing in return as he walked out and closed the door behind him.

\* \* \* \* \*

As was the custom of an Etalyan burial, at sunrise six pall bearers walked to the building where the deceased reposed and knocked three times on the door before opening it and entering the building. Within minutes they re-emerged, carrying the casket out toward the cemetery.

Orlando Mansi stood outside, along with everyone in the village, and watched the procession exit. Everyone, save the elder Mansi, gasped when Forelni stepped outside and walked up to the old man. He was dressed in the official dress uniform of a Royal Prince and his sword was drawn.

“Today, we bury your son and my brother,” Forelni said to Mansi and there was fire in his eyes and his tone that hadn’t been there the day before.

“And tomorrow?” Mansi asked.

“Tomorrow?” Forelni replied. “Tomorrow we return to the Palace and remind the Council that they serve the people and not the other way around.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

“He should face a full trial for his crimes!” Enrico Antonius thundered in the Great Hall. The King, Queen and the full Council had gathered, waiting for the Crown Prince to return.

“Isn’t it enough that he has accepted exile, Antonius?” Frederico Camponelli, the oldest member of the Council, asked. “Do we really need a lengthy public trial, which at best would end with the same sentence of exile? Or is your aim revenge for a sore jaw instead of justice?”

“I seek only justice for the people,” Antonius answered haughtily over the chuckles that spread across the room. Word of the incident at Starbase 16 had clearly spread.

“Of course,” Camponelli replied knowingly.

“The Crown has accepted his offer to waive trial and accept exile,” the King said. “For the good of Etalya, this is what we will do.”

Seated in the gallery overlooking the scene, McCoy shot a look over at Kirk who merely shrugged.

“Spock,” Kirk asked quietly, “what are the odds he can remain in Starfleet after this?”

“I would say the probability of that happening given what Admiral Bowman told us approaches zero, Captain,” Spock replied. “Captain Forelni’s only chance to remain in Starfleet was tied to the official response from his government.”

“Jim, we can’t let this happen,” McCoy said.

“We may not be able to do anything about it, Bones,” Kirk replied glumly.

Below, the doors parted and Avion walked in, escorted by the Chamberlain.

“Your Majesties,” he intoned loudly. “Members of the Council, her majesty, Princess Avion.”

“So, the coward sends his woman to do his dirty work?” Antonius sneered.

Avion looked at him, smiled sweetly as she stepped up to him and reminded everyone that she was once a warrior Queen. Antonius never saw the right cross that

landed flush on his jaw and sent him sprawling onto his backside.

“Perhaps you should stick to fighting practice dummies, Councilor,” Camponelli needled. “You at least have a chance at defeating them.”

The room erupted in laughter.

“I apologize for my colleague, Lady Avion,” Camponelli said smoothly. “His lack of manners is a shameful indictment of his heritage. Pray tell us, what brings you here this morning?”

“I came bearing a message from the Crown Prince,” she favored the older man with a grateful nod and stepped away from Antonius, who remained on the ground rubbing his jaw. “He will be here in a few minutes and he is not coming alone.”

She indicated a large screen on the wall. The Chamberlain touched a button on his dais and the screen flared to life. Less than a mile from the Great Hall a great crowd of people, on foot, was approaching. At the head of the crowd was Bari Forelni, in full dress uniform with Orlando Mansi at his side. The older man was attired in his old Weapons Master uniform.

“There must be tens...hundreds of thousands with him,” Camponelli whispered in shock and awe.

“What is the meaning of this display?” the King demanded.

“He will tell you when he arrives, Majesty,” she replied coolly.

With the doors still open, those in the Hall could hear the approaching crowd shouting one word in full throat:

“Bari! Bari! Bari!”

A slight vibration grew to a rumble in the floor as hundreds of thousands of feet marched to surround the Hall.

“Kirk to *Enterprise*,” Kirk said as he opened his communicator. “Scotty, put the ship on yellow alert.”

“Aye, sir,” Scotty replied. “We see it. Tell the lad to give them a flourish for me, sir, and we’ll be ready when needed.”

Kirk snapped the communicator closed and shook his head. Spock’s eyebrow seemed to be glued in the raised position. McCoy was grinning from ear-to-ear and asking about popcorn.

\* \* \* \* \*

Forelni marched into the Hall, sword still out, with Mansi in tow. The crowd outside instantly fell quiet.

“Your Majesties, members of the Council,” the Chamberlain announced with a broad grin on his own face. “His Most Royal Majesty, Crown Prince Bari Forelni.”

Bari swept into the room, clapping the Chamberlain quickly on the shoulder before approaching Avion. He glanced over at the fallen Antonius and favored her with a smile. She executed a formal curtsy in return as he took her hand and kissed it. He turned to face the Council and to a man, and the Queen as well, they all had apprehensive looks on their faces.

“I must say,” Bari cast a meaningful look down at Antonius before looking back at the Council. “I do approve of the Council’s new seating arrangements.”

Antonius’s face flushed red as the Hall erupted in laughter. He started to rise and found himself staring at the business end of the Prince’s sword.

“I do not recall giving you permission to rise, dog,” he said, his tone implying Antonius would never make it to his feet if he tried.

“I am a member of the Council...” Antonius raged against gritted teeth.

“And I am still the Crown Prince,” Bari replied easily. “Your head is mine if I so much as desire to see it hang somewhere else besides the center of your shoulders.”

The man's eyes widened but he wisely held his tongue. Ealyan law and the Prince's temper could easily make the threat a reality and nothing would be done to the Prince. Antonius sat back down and made no further move.

"Good boy," Bari replied with a cold smile.

"Perhaps the 'Crown Prince' would like to get on with the business at hand?" the King stood from his chair. "We can also allow the Councilor to take his seat where he belongs, can we not?"

"We might quibble about his proper place in this room, *Father*," everyone heard the extra emphasis on the last word for what it was. "But there is a matter more urgent that I bring to the Council than whipping a curr dog. Run along, boy!"

He flipped the sword slightly and slapped the side of Antonius' face with the flat of the blade. Enraged by the insult, the man thought to say something, reconsidered and retreated to the safety of his seat.

"I was under the impression you were here to present your sword to the Council and accept exile," the King said. "Do you intend to strike each of us with it instead?"

"Yes, I do," Bari replied and waited for the gasps from the assembled audience to die down. "But first I bring

news of a grave threat to Etalya. Her citizens are in jeopardy and action must be taken to ensure their continued well-being and safety. This is our primary responsibility, as members of the Royal Family and for the Council as a whole.”

“We are aware of our duties,” the King replied. “What is the nature of this ‘threat’ to our people?”

“It is you,” Bari replied, looking at his father first and then his mother. “And you. And every member of this Council.”

Not a sound was heard in the Hall.

“Each and every one of you has forgotten your duty to our people,” he charged.

“How dare you make such a claim against us!” Councilor Bugatti rose to his feet. “You, who has gallivanted around the galaxy more than you’ve spent time on this planet in the last century!”

“Oh, you are mistaken, Giovanni,” Bari replied easily. “I include myself in this charge and freely admit my guilt. I have forgotten my duty to my people, left their welfare in the hands of others. Incapable hands at that.

“That ends today,” he continued. “Right here and now. I have brought with me our people, gathered from every corner of our world. I have heard their grievances. I

have heard how you have not heard them. How you treat the people as your servants. How you all have forgotten that you serve the people. You will be reminded today.”

“Are you threatening us with revolution?” the King asked in outrage.

“No, Father,” Bari shook his head. “I am reminding you what Genoa’s original intent was, that he never wanted our family to become a monarchy that lasted until the end of time. We will make Etalya the republic of the people that he wanted it to become when he fled Earth all those centuries ago.

“Under the laws of Etlaya,” Bari continued, “established shortly after our forefathers first arrived here, I charge the King with malfeasance and declare him unworthy of his crown.”

“You would challenge me for the throne?”

“I am challenging you for the throne, yes. But as you are old and decrepit, I do not expect you to face me in a combat you would surely lose. I will allow you to choose a champion to represent you.

“Who knows?” Bari continued, looking right at Antonius as he spoke. “Perhaps the King would be so grateful to his champion, should he prevail, that the King

would name him successor to the throne. Who here has the courage to fight for his King?”

“Majesty,” Antonius shot out of his recently reclaimed seat and turned to the King. “Give me the honor to defend Etalya from this traitor!”

The King shot a worried glance at the man, clearly not liking this turn of events.

“The challenge has been made, Father,” Bari prodded. “A champion has stepped forward. Accept the challenge or relinquish your crown. Those are your only two options under the law.”

“My champion will meet you with my blade in his hands,” the King drew his sword and handed it to the young Councilor who eagerly accepted it and walked toward the Prince.

“For the good of Etalya I will rid her of your presence, traitor,” he snarled and lunged.

“I was not the one who sold Etalya’s secrets to the Romulans,” Bari replied as he stepped aside. “There is only one traitor on this floor, Antonius, and I will rid our world of his presence right now.”

In one incredibly fast, fluid motion Bari thrust his sword out, pulled it back and swung the blade in a sharp arc. Antonius stood frozen, eyes and mouth wide open as

Bari reached down and took up a corner of the man's robe and wiped his blade with it.

Bari walked toward the King, slapping Antonius' chest hard with the flat of his blade. A red stain formed on his chest and the man's head tumbled forward and fell to the granite floor. The body fell backward, the King's blade still clutched in the dead hand.

"That wasn't a fight," McCoy whispered. "That was an execution."

Kirk nodded in agreement and watched the scene unfold below as Bari stepped up to his father. The Hall was gripped in shocked silence. The King looked pale, as if he feared his head would join the fallen Councilor's soon.

"Your champion has failed," Bari said evenly. "Your throne and your crown are forfeit."

"Son...." The King finally managed to get out but Bari was having none of it.

"You will address us as 'Your Majesty'," Bari replied coldly, a harsh reminder of the pain inflicted from their last conversation and a brutal verbal slap that clearly rocked the King, who bowed his head, and took one step down. Bari relived his father of his crown and looked over at his mother.

“Those no longer belong to you either, woman,” he said.

The Queen rose slowly, removed her crown and handed it over before joining her husband. Bari beckoned to Avion who walked over. Bari placed the Queen’s crown on her head and the King’s upon his own.

“Members of the Council,” he looked down at the remaining members. “Who is your King and Queen?”

“All hail, King Bari and Queen Avion,” Camponelli intoned, a little shakily. “Long may they reign.”

The Etalyans in the Hall and outside quickly followed suit, although the people outside did so with more vigor. Bari held up a hand to quiet them down.

“I only apologize that your reign here will be short,” he whispered as an aside to Avion.

“I have been a Queen long enough,” she replied with a smile. “I prefer my role at your side no matter where that may be.”

Bari gave her a slight bow of the head and then turned to his people.

“Commander Stepano Capelli,” he called out. “I require you and your men to perform a service.”

“My King has but to order it and it will be done,” Capelli replied as he stepped out onto the floor.

“Councilor Antonius has paid for his crime of selling state secrets to the Romulans,” Bari said. “Etalya has always sought to be a force for peace. We never wanted to be the instigator of war. Antonius would have made us such and for that he has paid dearly.

“The Council is guilty of putting their own self-interests above those of the people,” he continued. “For that crime against the people’s trust, I hereby disband the Council, as is my right as King. Your men will escort them to their homes.”

“You dare!” Councilor Nicoli thundered.

“You would prefer that I have you thrown to the crowd outside, Giovanni?” Bari asked. “I assure you, having heard what they think of you, I am being more lenient with you than they will be.”

Nicoli blanched and shook his head, no. Capelli’s men rounded up the Councilors and hustled them out of the building.

“Stepano,” Bari continued. “You will take these two to the island retreat. There they will remain in exile for the rest of their days.”

“So, you will become an Emperor then?” the King asked mockingly. “So much for Genoa’s Republic.”

“You misunderstand, sir,” Bari replied, then looked over at Mansi. “Summon the others.”

Mansi bowed and exited the room. A minute later he returned with two men and two women.

“These five,” Bari introduced, “represent the Council of Five. They represent each of the five regions of Etalya. The Council will eventually be increased to include each of the worlds in our system so that every Etalyan will have an equal voice in our government again.

“As for the crown,” he continued, removing his crown and placing it on the throne. Taking up his sword he raised it high and drove it point first through the crown and the chair it rested on. “No one will ever again sit on this throne or wear the crown of King or Queen of Etalya. We are a Republic now, just as Genoa wanted.”

Avion removed her crown and placed it on the hilt of Bari’s blade, then took his hand. The couple walked away and exited the Hall into the Palace, with Capelli and his men escorting the former King and Queen with them.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Do you ever do anything like a simple, ordinary person?” McCoy asked as Forelni poured the Doctor a glass of wine. The *Enterprise* officers had joined the

Forelni's at their dimora. Not far away, the Palace was still dealing with the aftermath of the day's events.

"That sounds incredibly boring, Doctor," Avion replied.

"I can see why you married her," McCoy quipped.

"You think it will hold up?" Kirk asked with a nod in the direction of the Palace.

"I know the five people I chose, Jim," Forelni replied. "They will make it work and they will not forget the people like their predecessors did."

"Sure you aren't going to miss being King?" McCoy asked.

"Never wanted the crown in the first place, Leonard," Forelni replied. "I prefer the stars over a crown."

"Speaking of," Kirk said. "You think this will be enough to get Starfleet to fall in line? There's still a few people up the line who aren't happy with you."

"Maybe he can charge into Starfleet Command and read the CIC the riot act like he did here?" McCoy quipped.

"If I have to, Leonard, if I have to."

"I'd give a month's pay to see you do that to Nogura," Kirk replied.

"I might need to retrieve my sword," Forelni joked.

“I doubt Starfleet would look upon such an action as anything but mutiny, Captain,” Spock offered.

“Leave it to a Vulcan to spoil the fun,” McCoy cracked.

Before Spock could reply, the hum of a transporter grew and two forms took shape on the grass nearby. One was Admiral Bowman, the other was...

“Commander Kor?” Forelni said in surprise as he rose from his chair.

“Never expected to see a Klingon standing on Etalya, did you, Forelni?” Kor smiled his best wolf’s smile.

“No, I never did,” Forelni admitted. “But as I no longer run things here I can’t guarantee how long you’ll remain standing.”

“I cleared his arrival here with your current government,” Bowman stepped in as Kor laughed. “As long as he remains on the grounds of your estate, there shouldn’t be any issue.”

“See, Jim, they’re already doing fine without me,” Forelni looked over his shoulder at Kirk briefly. “To what do I owe the pleasure of your company gentlemen? I’d offer you both some wine, but I doubt your sensitive palate could handle such sturdy stock, Kor.”

The Klingon laughed again.

“We are here,” Bowman headed off any further byplay. “For several reasons. The first is to inform you that Starfleet Command has officially cleared you of all charges and a commendation has been entered into your service record as well as those of your entire crew for your actions on the Romulan-Klingon border in preventing the outbreak of war.”

“Thank you, Admiral, I will pass that along to my crew.”

“The second is to inform you that Command has accepted your recommendation for Lt. Commander Liz Wicklund for command of a ship. She will be receiving her new assignment shortly as will the rest of your crew. You will receive your new assignment as well, Captain, as soon as you have dealt with the final reason why we are here. Commander?”

Bowman stepped aside.

“The Empire does not forget its debts, Captain,” Kor said. “And it owes you a great debt indeed. It also owes you an apology for a great dishonor, one that should have been righted many years ago.”

“And what is this dishonor?”

“Decades ago, your sister was kidnapped by one of our Captains.”

“And murdered by that same Captain at the behest of your Emperor,” Forelni reminded him.

“No, she was not,” Kor replied, and there was no smile on his face now. “The murder was staged and she was sent to K’Jatak to be held hostage. She has been there ever since, and she still lives. The Planetary Governor was ordered to return her after your stand against the Romulans, but he is refusing.

“I have been ordered to escort you to K’Jatak where you can retrieve her,” Kor continued. “And as for the Governor, he is yours to do with as you will.”

“The *Enterprise* has been granted safe passage, with Kor aboard,” Bowman added, “to K’Jatak and back. Retrieve your sister, Captain, and return here. I will be waiting for your return.”

“Jim?” Bari asked.

“Kirk to *Enterprise*,” the Captain ordered as he pulled out his communicator and Bowman stepped away. “Six to beam up and stand by to break orbit as soon as we’re aboard.”

\* \* \* \* \*

K’Jakat was an ugly world, not too far into Klingon space across from the border with Etalyan space. It didn’t look much better on the ground than it had in space. Kor,

Kirk, McCoy and Avion had beamed down with Forelni just outside the Governor's house. Scans showed one Etalyan life sign in a rear building.

Kor led the group up the door and kicked it in without preamble. A heavy-set Klingon rushed out into the room.

"Here now..." the Klingon spluttered before Kor backhanded the man and relieved him of his disruptor.

"You will be silent if you wish to live another hour longer," Kor commanded. "You were ordered to release the Etalyan hostage you are keeping here. You refused. This one," he pointed at Forelni, "is here to take her home. You will take us to her now!"

Kor reached down and hauled the Klingon to his feet, giving him a hard shove in the direction of the rear door. They followed him out to the rear building. The opening of the door revealed it to be a barn of some sort of creature, the odor that assaulted their nostrils spoke ill of whatever it was.

Forelni stepped inside first, ignoring the smell as best he could. The majority of the interior was a muddy pit. Several specimens of some type of slug slithered through the mud. A chain was connected to a center post and it led to a pile of rags on a mat in the far corner. At the sound of

his entrance, the pile shifted and a dirty face peered out from the rags, before it disappeared and the pile tried to compress itself into an even smaller pile. It had been a brief glance, but enough for him.

“Gianna,” he said softly, and he leaned down and place a gentle hand on her. “It’s me, Bari. Gianna?”

He spoke to her in their native tongue and the pile flinched. The face slowly reappeared, a puzzled look on it.

“Bari?” she finally said as McCoy quietly approached and started to scan her. She flinched again and started to retreat but Bari stopped her.

“He is a friend, Gianna, a healer. He is here to help you.”

“It’s her, Captain,” McCoy confirmed. “She’s not in the best of health living like this, but it’s nothing we can’t deal with on the ship. She’ll need a lot of time and care back home.”

“She’ll have as much as she needs of both, Doctor,” Bari replied as Avion approached and knelt next to her sister-in-law.

“Gianna,” Forelni said. “This is your sister-in-law, Avion.”

“Hello, sister,” Avion said, placing a gentle hand on the exposed face. McCoy managed a hypo spray or two

without causing any issues. “I am glad we have finally met. We’re taking you home to mother and father. They will be happy to see you again.”

“Mother, father,” Gianna replied slowly, as if trying to remember the faces that went with the names. “And Francesco? And Paulo?”

Forelni dipped his head and closed his eyes in pain at a sudden memory. He’d often teased Paulo about asking for his sister’s hand before someone else beat him to it. He’d never realized that she might have reciprocated those feelings until now.

“I will take you to them when we get home,” he promised, avoiding having to break the news to her now. His eyes fell on the now exposed collar around her neck with the chain connected to it. He looked over at the Klingons. “Where is the key?”

The Governor clamped his mouth shut, then opened it when Kor throttled him.

“The key, *p’taq*,” Kor snarled, “or I will gut you right here and feed your carcass to the sligs!”

“Behind the door,” the Klingon croaked. Kirk retrieved the key and took it to Forelni, who removed the collar and stood up.

“What shall I do with this one, friend,” Kor asked. “It might be cruel to the sligs to make them digest this...”

“I have a better idea,” Forelni replied as he walked over and clamped the collar around the Governor’s neck then shoved him toward the pit.

“Ha!” Kor barked in approval. “Kai Forelni, the *klin* is strong within you indeed! A fitting punishment for this one. I must remain here until my ship arrives. I will need to install a new Governor. Your ship will be safe to return to Federation space, Kirk.

“As for you Forelni.” Kor continued. “There is no way to know how long this peace between our people will hold. No matter how long or short that time may be, you and I will remain brothers.”

Kor held out his hand and Forelni clasped it in the Klingon fashion.

“Thank you, Commander,” he said then turned and gently gathered up his sister in his arms. The medication McCoy had given her had made her sleepy. He looked at Kirk. “I think our business here is done, Jim.”

“Kirk to *Enterprise*, five to beam up and head us back to Etalya as soon as we’re back aboard, Spock.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Once the *Enterprise* was in orbit of Etalya, Bowman beamed aboard just as Forelni, carrying his still-weak sister, Avion and Kirk entered the Transporter Room.

“Excellent timing,” Bowman said as he stepped down from the pad. “I’ve been recalled to Starbase 16 on urgent business. I have your orders Captain.”

Bowman handed over a chip, which Forelni took and then handed another to Avion.

“In two weeks you both will report to me at Starbase 16,” Bowman said. “Where you, Commodore Forelni, will take command of the *Freedom*. As she is also in need of a communications officer, Lieutenant Forelni will also report aboard the *Freedom* in that capacity.”

“Congratulations, sir,” Kirk said smiling.

“You can knock that off right now, mister,” Forelni said with a grin. “and thank you. Admiral, the *Freedom*?”

“The newest ship of the newest class?” Bowman replied. “Yes, that *Freedom*, Commodore. Try to keep this one intact a little longer than the last one, if you please?”

“Aye, sir, I’ll try to do that.”

“In the meantime, I believe your parents are waiting below. Captain Kirk, your ship has been granted shore leave for here on Etalya. If you would be so kind as to

return the Commodore and the Lieutenant to me at Starbase 16 in two weeks?"

"Delighted, Admiral," Kirk replied.

"Good," Bowman stepped back up on the pad.

"Energize."

The Admiral disappeared in the transporter effect.

The three Etalyans stepped up on the pad.

"Thank you, Jim," Forelni said.

"We'll see you downside, Bari. You can buy me a bottle of your best wine then."

"A bottle? A case is more like it," he replied, then looked over at Kyle. "Send us home, Mr. Kyle."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

“Happy Anniversary, my love,” Commander Avion Forelni greeted her husband, one hand resting on her swollen abdomen. The twins were very active this morning.

“Anniversary,” Forelni replied, smoothing down his tunic and adjusting his rank insignia of Commodore. They’d been trying for the last ten years to make him an Admiral and he’d dodged every such attempt. “Our wedding anniversary was two months ago. The anniversary of the day we first met isn’t for another five months...”

“The anniversary of your taking command of the *Freedom*,” she said with some exasperation. “Twenty-three years ago? Remember?”

“Twenty-three years today?” he’d honestly forgotten the day. “It doesn’t seem that long does it?”

“No, it doesn’t,” she agreed.

“Well, I wonder if my second-in-command would begrudge me a day off to celebrate,” he remarked. “Seeing as how she’s the one that brought it to my attention.”

“I think something can be arranged,” she smiled, then winced and rubbed her belly.

“The boys arguing again?” he asked sympathetically.

“I have a feeling these two are going to be a handful growing up. We might have to child-proof the ship.”

“You’re still two months from delivering them,” he replied.

“Yes, but what does that have to do with...?”

“Time enough,” he said as he sat down beside her, “for both of us to turn in our retirement papers and return to Etalya before they are born.”

She looked at him in stunned silence.

“I’m 192 years old, Avion,” he explained. “The majority of my first two centuries of life has been spent in space. Maybe I’m ready to spend my final century at home, with my wife and watching my children grow up.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’ve given Starfleet thirty good years,” he replied. “Besides, if we don’t go home we’re going to have to find

a cabin for Gianna on the ship. I fear she's going to be one of *those* aunts to our boys."

Gianna's recovery from her ordeal in captivity had been long and difficult. But she had recovered and was sending daily messages looking for updates on the twin's progress. Her time on K'Jatak had robbed her of ever having a child of her own. Forelni knew she was going to spoil his sons and he was perfectly happy with that.

Gianna had also played a pivotal role in healing the wound between her brother and her parents, another recovery that had been long and difficult, but at least there was no longer a relationship of anger and hate between them.

"Given how active they've been of late," Avion admitted. "I could use the help."

"Then as soon as our watch is over today, I will start filing the papers with Command," Forelni replied. "A month from now we will be plain, simple Mr. and Mrs. Forelni on Etalya."

"Can you ever be just plain and simple?" she leaned forward and stole a kiss in between kicks from the twins.

"I've heard it can be done," Forelni replied. "How hard can it be really?"

\* \* \* \* \*

“Commodore, Commander,” Lt. Commander Vanessa Landry, the ship’s science officer and third-in-command greeted them as they walked onto the *Freedom’s* bridge. She sat up from the command chair and took her usual seat to the Commodore’s left.

“Good morning, Commander,” Forelni replied as he claimed his chair and Avion settled into the seat to his right. “A quiet watch I hope?”

“Aye, sir,” she replied. “Not even Doctor Everett is complaining about something.”

Cheryl Everett, the ship’s Chief Medical Officer, had been in Starfleet even longer than Forelni. She could be overly direct and sometimes gruff, but aside from Leonard McCoy, he wouldn’t want anyone else in Sickbay than her.

“May I wish the Commodore a Happy Anniversary?” Landry offered.

“He forgot until I reminded him,” Avion tossed in sweetly.

“Again?” Landry replied with a “tsk, tsk” added on for good measure.

“If the two of you are quite finished?” he grouched.

“Commodore,” Lt. Brennen Hankins called out from communications. “Priority message from the *Enterprise-B*, sir!”

“She’s still supposed to be in Space Dock,” Forelni replied, surprised. “What is the message?”

“They are answering a distress call, but request any ship come to their aid. They report they left Space Dock on a publicity cruise and are not fully operational. They have several VIPs aboard...including Captain Kirk. They include coordinates.”

“Leave it to Jim to get into trouble on a milk run,” Forelni sighed. “Send the coordinates to Mr. Ratliff. Maximum warp to that location, if you please, Manni.”

“Aye, sir,” Ratliff replied. “Course laid in.”

“Tom?”

“Ready for jump to Warp Eight on the Commodore’s command,” Lt. Knighton replied from the helm.

“The word is given, Mr. Knighton and get us to Warp Nine as soon as possible. Mr. Hankins, when our Chief Engineer calls, tell Mr. Libis that he’s just going to have to deal with it. And try to find out what’s going on out there.”

“Aye, sirs,” rang out across the bridge.

“An inauspicious start to retirement,” Avion quipped.

“Look at it this way,” he replied. “We’ll be closer to Earth and I can file the papers in person.”

She smiled, then winced. Then gasped and grabbed at her belly with both hands.

“Avion!” he got out of his chair and held her. “What’s wrong?”

All she could do was shake her head, breathing hard against the pain.

“Medical emergency!” he heard Landry calling out. “Dr. Everett to the bridge immediately!”

\* \* \* \* \*

They’d kicked him out of Sickbay when she’d been rushed inside. Now, all he could do was pace the outer office and get updates from the bridge. The messages from the *Enterprise-B* had been chaotic, matching the Commodore’s thoughts.

The doors parted and Everett stepped out.

“The boys are coming early,” she said point blank. “Something kicked her metabolism into overdrive. I have no idea what other than its likely connected to whatever was in that concoction they gave her in the past.”

“Only a week ago you said everything was progressing normally,” Forelni accused.

“I know what I said, Commodore,” she snapped. “And it was true then just as what I am telling you is true now. Your sons are coming early. We’re going to have to surgically remove them if they are going to survive.”

“And Avion?”

“I’m sorry, Bari,” she replied in softer tone. “She will not survive the birth. Whatever this is, it will kill her. There’s nothing we can do. Not even stasis will stop this.

“We need to hurry, to save the twins,” she continued. “You need to go inside and say goodbye to her now before we put her under for the surgery. She’s heavily sedated as it is.”

He stepped inside and approached her bedside. She looked at him as if he were shrouded in fog. He took her hand and she finally focused on him.

“I want the boys to be named Paulo and Marco,” she whispered.

“I can’t think of any two better than those,” his voice was shaking.

“You’ll have to face the universe without me once again, my love,” she replied. “But it will be better for you this time. You’ll have the boys with you now.”

“You’ll be with us,” he said. “I promise.”

“You never were a good liar with me, my love,” she smiled. “I love you.”

“And I, you,” he answered as her eyes slid closed.

“Commodore, we have to begin now,” he heard Everett say. Felt hands guiding him away from his dying wife’s bedside and back out to the outer room. He sat heavily on a chair.

“Bridge to Commodore Forelni,” Landry’s voice called over the speaker. It sounded urgent.

*Go away, he cried out silently in his mind, leave me be! The devil take the entire universe this time for all that it matters to me now!*

Landry repeated the call. He rose to his feet and toggled the com on the Doctor’s desk.

“Go ahead Bridge,” he replied flatly.

“We’ve rendezvoused with the *Enterprise-B*, Commodore...you need to see this.”

\* \* \* \* \*

He walked onto the bridge of his ship, not because he wanted to be there but because the commander of a ship didn’t have the luxury of grieving. His ship needed him on the bridge. Needed him to be the “Commander” and so here he was.

“Commodore,” Landry greeted him. “Whatever the *Enterprise-B* encountered, it has moved on. She looks like she’s in bad shape. We’re having trouble raising her.”

“Have teams standing by to beam over if they need help,” he ordered, looking at the damaged ship on the screen.

“Aye, sir,” she replied, then looked at him again. “The Commander?”

“In surgery,” was all he could manage before he changed the subject. “Enlarge that area of damage near the deflector shield on the starboard side.”

The image on the view screen zoomed in on the area, a gaping hole in the lower sections of the hull.

“Magnify,” Forelni ordered.

It zoomed in once more, showing three Starfleet officers gazing out from behind raised force fields. He easily recognized Scotty and Chekov. The third man bore the insignia of Captain and had to be Harriman. Seeing the looks on Scotty and Chekov’s faces filled Forelni with a sudden dread.

“Mr. Hankins?”

“Still unable to establish communications,” Hankins reported. “I doubt they can send or receive right now.”

“Keep trying to raise them,” he ordered heading for the turbo lift. “I’m beaming aboard. I’ll take a communicator with me. Search the area for any survivors, maybe some made it to escape pods. And tell Sickbay to stand by in case they need help with casualties.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Forelni was on the bridge when Harriman, Scotty and Chekov returned. Demora Sulu had been left in command when Harriman had left and she’d filled him on all that had transpired while they’d waited.

“Commodore, are we glad to see you,” Harriman said.

“I can imagine, Captain,” Forelni replied in an icy tone, before looking at Scotty. “Jim?”

“He’s gone, sir,” Scotty replied sadly. “He sacrificed himself to save the ship.”

“That sounds like him,” Forelni replied. “My ship is sending repair parties aboard. We’re beaming the worst of your casualties to our sickbay.”

“Thank you, Commodore,” Harman said. “I don’t know what we would have done without him, sir.”

“I’ve been informed, Captain, that you left Space Dock with a ship that was not space worthy. Is this true?”

No photon torpedoes? The majority of your systems below optimum and without a proper crew?”

“Yes, sir.” Harriman swallowed hard.

“Would you care to explain to me why, mister?”

“Commodore...” Scotty stepped forward, sensing the firestorm about to fall on Harriman.

“Captain Harriman is fully capable of answering the question, Mr. Scott.”

“Aye, sir,” Scotty took a step back.

“Well, mister?”

“We were only supposed to take a quick tour of the system and head straight back,” Harriman replied. “When the distress call came in we were the only ship within range. If we hadn’t responded, everyone aboard that refugee ship would have died.”

“Why didn’t you wait until your ship was fully ready?” Forelni asked.

“Sir, I had orders from Starfleet...”

“Was it a priority mission?” Forelni cut him off. “At the time you departed was any planet, any ship, even a single life in danger?”

“No, sir.”

“Then you should have told Starfleet no, Captain,” Forelni replied harshly. “As the Captain of a ship of the

line, especially *the* ship of the line, your first duty is to your crew, your ship and everyone aboard her. You had the right, and the duty, to wait until your ship was ready before you left on some PR stunt!”

“Sir, we weren’t expecting...”

“Damn you, sir!” Forelni thundered. “Every time we leave port, every second we are in space, we should expect the unexpected! It’s our job and it’s our duty to make sure our ship and our crew are fully ready to face it. How many of your crew won’t be returning to Space Dock because you sailed with a ship that was not ready?”

Harriman could only shake his head.

“Communications restored,” a dark-skinned Lieutenant called out. “Incoming message from the *Freedom*, Commodore. Audio only at this time, sir.”

“On speaker,” Forelni ordered. “Go ahead, *Freedom*.”

“We’ve finished our scans of the area, sir,” Landry reported. “No additional survivors or bodies located. Sickbay has taken on two dozen severe injuries from *Enterprise*. Dr. Everett has asked me to relay that you have two healthy sons, sir.”

“And Commander Forelni?” he asked quietly.

“She never regained consciousness, sir. I’m sorry.”

Forelni stood in the center of the bridge and waited for some reaction to hit him. Rage, anger, anguish, a throat-tearing roar of grief, something. *Why just an empty nothingness*, he wondered, *is there nothing of me but a hollow shell now that she is gone?*

“Lad...,” he heard Scotty say, the sorrow clear in the old man’s voice. He shook his head.

“Stand by for me to beam back,” he ordered. “And have Security meet me in the Transporter Room.”

“Aye, sir,” she answered.

“Captain Harriman, you are relieved of your command,” he continued as he turned to Harriman. “You will accompany me aboard the *Freedom* where you will await a hearing on whether or not you should face court martial upon our return to Earth. Mr. Chekov, you will assume command of the *Enterprise-B* and get her home at best possible speed. The *Freedom* will escort you back in case you need a tow or any other assistance.”

“Aye, sir,” Chekov replied quietly. Harriman merely stood stock still.

“Mr. Scott, once Engineering no longer requires your assistance here I would like you to join me on the *Freedom*.”

“Aye, sir,” Scotty answered, knowing better than to try to say anything at this point. When a Starship Commander’s blood was boiling, the wise officer was the one who kept his mouth shut until the danger had passed.

\* \* \* \* \*

Harriman was escorted into the main briefing room of the *Freedom* several hours later. The two ships were literally limping along at Warp One, owing to the beating the *Enterprise-B* had taken during the rescue. Forelni, Landry and Scotty were seated on one side of the table. Harriman walked up to the table and stood at attention.

“Mr. Harriman,” Forelni began. “We have reviewed the full record, including your statements to me on the bridge of your ship. Do you have anything to add?”

“No, sir,” Harriman said firmly.

“My initial inclination,” Forelni replied, “is to throw the book at you, mister. Not only recommend that you face a full court martial but that you should be busted all the way back to Ensign and assigned to sanitation duty on a Starbase out in the middle of nowhere.”

Forelni ignored the looks from both Landry and Scotty and rose from his seat.

“But I also reviewed your service record,” he continued. “You’re young, had a spotless record before

taking your first command and you're only a few months older than Kirk was when he took command of the *Enterprise*. While I doubt he would have taken his ship out in the condition you did, had he found himself in similar circumstances, he would have gone to the aid of the refugee ship."

Forelni walked up and stood right beside Harriman.

"What I am about to do may seem like a kindness," he said. "But do not take it that way. You will spend the rest of your career as the man who got Jim Kirk killed. That will hang around your neck like an albatross. Even if you have a flawless career the rest of the way, that will always be the first thing anyone in Starfleet will say: 'There goes the man that got Jim Kirk killed.' Do you think you can live with that?"

"I don't know, sir." Harriman answered honestly.

"Neither do I," Forelni replied evenly. "I suppose we're both going to find out. You are returned to your command, with immediate effect. A reprimand will appear in your service record but I will not be recommending any further disciplinary action against you. You are dismissed, Captain."

“Aye, sir. Thank you, sir,” Harriman replied in relief and wasted little time making his exit lest the Commodore change his mind.

“I’d have bet my last credit you were going to throw the book at him,” Scotty said as he rose from his own seat.

“I almost did.”

“What changed your mind, if you don’t mind my asking?”

“He’s young, he’s a good officer and he won’t make that mistake again,” Forelni replied with a sigh. “Or maybe I’m just getting too damn soft in my old age.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Admiral Bowman, rumored to be in line to be the new Commander-in-Chief, Starfleet, was waiting for them when they finally limped into Space Dock and requested to beam aboard directly to the bridge.

“That’s an unusual request,” Forelni remarked as he stood to greet the Admiral.

“Bowman’s always been a little different,” Scotty replied as the Admiral materialized.

“Admiral, welcome aboard the *Freedom*,” Forelni greeted.

“Thank you, Commodore,” Bowman replied. “I must say I was surprised by your report regarding Harriman.”

“Seems to be the consensus on the ship as well, sir,” Forelni replied dryly.

“Well, I suppose one has to concede your final point about Harriman being unduly pressured to launch what was a low-priority mission,” Bowman conceded. “We’re instituting changes to make sure such an occurrence never repeats itself. But that is not why I am here.

“First, my condolences on the loss of your wife, Commodore,” Bowman offered. “She was a fine officer and a great lady.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“I understand you were considering filing your retirement papers before all of this happened?”

*Now how did he find out about that?* Forelni wondered.

“I have and I likely will while we are in Space Dock, sir,” he admitted.

“You will cold file that for now, Commodore,” Bowman said simply, handing over a chip which Forelni eyed suspiciously. “The Federation Council has authorized

building a shipyard in orbit around Etalya. They are going to produce the new *SAR*-Class vessels.

“I believe the *SARs* are of your design, Commodore?” Bowman continued. “Since they were your idea, it seems only fitting that you should oversee building them. Just as it is only fitting that they be approved after this incident.”

“The *SARs*?” Scotty asked.

“Search and rescue, Scotty,” Forelni replied. “Bigger than a dreadnought and designed to power, and even shoot, their way through anything to get to where they are going. They can rescue multiple ships in distress, even evac a small planet or a moon if needed. The plan I submitted five years ago called for at least a dozen to be placed strategically throughout Federation space.”

“That is precisely what has been approved,” Bowman confirmed. “Oh, you’re also promoted to Admiral and this time you don’t get to say no.”

“May I select my own command staff?”

“Of course.”

“Scotty,” Forelni turned to face the old engineer. “I could use you to get the place up and running and get the first ship off the assembly line.”

“I was heading for retirement myself, Com... Admiral.”

“Give me a year, just to get up and running and then I’ll file the paperwork for you myself,” Forelni promised. “I’ll even arrange to have a ship take you wherever you want to go, even if I have to drag the *Sicilia* out of mothballs and fly you there myself.”

“Alright, lad,” Scotty relented. “I’ll give you a year.”

“In that case,” Bowman produced another chip and presented it to Landry. “You are ordered to escort Admiral Forelni and Captain Scott to Etalya. Once they have disembarked, you will assume command of the *Freedom*, Captain Landry, and proceed to your next assignment, which you will find on that chip. I assume you approve of that promotion, Admiral?”

“Wholeheartedly, sir, and thank you.”

“Well then, I had better get off your ship so you can get underway,” Bowman took a step back and signaled for transport. “May success follow your flag, Admiral Forelni.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

“There she is, Scotty,” Forelni said, admiring the massive *SAR-Class* ship that hung in orbit above Etalya. “The *Mercy*. The first of her kind and my flagship.”

“Aye, lad,” Scotty beamed with pride, having helped build the vessel after the shipyard went operational. “She’s a fine looking ship at that.”

“Are you sure I can’t convince you to hang around another year?”

“Nay, lad, I won’t deny this year here hasn’t been a joy,” Scotty replied. “But I’ve got my bags packed for the Norpin Colony and the *Jenolan* will be passing this way in the morning.”

“Fair enough, Scotty,” Forelni relented. “But the place will never be the same without you.”

“Thank you, sir,” Scotty replied. “Admiral, it’ll be a few days before they start in on the next ship. You

haven't taken a single day of leave since we arrived. Maybe you should head planeside and see your lads?"

"I don't know, Scotty, there's a lot of things I still have to do before we start on the next ship. We'll see if I can squeeze in a day off."

Scotty didn't press the matter but he knew for a fact that Forelni hadn't been down to the surface at all since they'd arrived and hadn't seen his sons since then either. He wasn't even sure when the last time Forelni had spent even a second with his sons if ever at all. With a sigh, he let the matter drop, knowing that pushing would only make the Admiral dig in more.

"Message from the *Jenolan*, Admiral," Communications called out. "They are arriving early. ETA is two hours."

"Acknowledged," Forelni replied. "Well, Scotty, it looks like I'm going to have to give you the bum's rush for a goodbye instead of a proper send off."

"No problem, Admiral, I just get to start my retirement a day early."

"Thank you, Scotty, for everything you've done here. Enjoy your retirement. You've earned it."

\* \* \* \* \*

The tenth ship of the *SAR*-Class cleared the assembly line as the shipyard marked its fifth anniversary. The class had already made its mark in Starfleet, led by the *Mercy*. A trio of Romulan Warbirds had ambushed a Starfleet cruiser. When the *Mercy* arrived she put herself between the stricken Federation ship and her attackers.

While her crew evacuated every person aboard the heavily damaged ship, the bridge directed her weapons against the Warbirds and she quickly wiped up the sector with them. Forelni allowed all three to limp back into Romulan space but all three were badly damaged and in no shape to defend themselves if he'd decided to reduce them to their component atoms.

Although he didn't dwell on it, a full five years had passed and he'd not yet laid eyes on either of his twin sons. But down on the surface, someone had noticed his paternal absence and she'd had just about enough of it.

\* \* \* \* \*

"How long do you plan on hiding up here, brother?" Gianna Forelni accused as she stormed into his shipyard office.

"And a good morning to you too, sister," he returned, taken aback by her tone. "From what am I hiding, pray tell?"

“Your sons,” she returned. “Do you even know that today is their fifth birthday?”

“Of course I do,” he replied, guiltily remembering only then that it was in fact the day in question.

“Were you planning on visiting them today?”

“I am very busy right now...”

“Yes, very busy. Just like you’ve been every day since their birth! How many times have you seen them in their life?”

Forelni struggled to think of the last time he’d seen them. He struggled to think when had been the first time for that matter. *Surely I’ve seen them*, he reasoned, *I just don’t have it marked on a calendar.*

“You haven’t seen them at all, have you?” her temper was a rival to her brother’s, especially when it came to the twins. She’d almost become more mother to them than aunt. “Have you even held them once, Bari?”

Again he searched his memory but could not find the one he sought. *All hell was breaking loose when they were born*, he protested internally, *then there was the new shipyard and the ships...*

*Had he ever held them, even once?*

“You haven’t, have you? Not even once!”

Forelni remained silent, not wanting to face the allegation, or his sister for that matter.

“Why is that, brother?” she continued mercilessly, even as he turned away from her. “Do you hate your sons?”

“That’s foolish,” he protested. “Why would I hate my sons?”

“Because they killed Avion,” Gianna replied simply. “That’s the reason why you’ve never held them, refuse to lay eyes on them. Because they killed the woman you loved. And because you can’t deal with her loss you take it out on them. Coward!”

“You have no idea what you are talking about, sister,” he snapped.

“Yes I do,” she replied calmly. “Our parents blamed you for Francesco’s death and my apparent death and hated you for it. Here you are doing the same to your sons. You are no better than mother and father.”

She spun around and left the room. Forelni opened his mouth to shout denial but only silence came out.

*Was she right?* The inability to deny the charge was damning.

\* \* \* \* \*

The island Forelni had sent his parents into exile on nearly thirty years before was a pleasant place. The exile itself was not strictly enforced and they wanted for nothing. The new government Forelni had established, and Genoa had originally intended, was flourishing.

When Gianna had been returned she lived on the island and remained there with them. She had taken on the role of mother to the twins and, as was their routine, was playing with them on the outer lawn while their grandmother sat and watched. The boys were identical twins yet somehow Gianna alone could always tell them apart.

*Will I ever be able to do so?* Forelni asked himself as he watched the boys playing from behind the concealment of a wicker fence. He'd stewed in his office for an hour after Gianna's departure before deciding to beam down unannounced. He was reluctant to step out for reasons even he could not fathom.

*Would they know who I am? Would they want to know?*

"They're fine boys," the King remarked as he walked up from behind. "In a way they remind me a lot of you and Francesco before you two grew apart."

“Hopefully they’ll fare better than we did,” Forelni replied sadly.

“That remains to be seen,” the King remarked. “They ask about their father from time to time. Your sister tells them that you are off on a grand mission and will come home and see them as soon as he can.

“For now, they accept that,” he continued. “Eventually they will stop accepting. Then they’ll stop asking.”

Forelni held his silence, watching the boys tumble around in the grass as Gianna played referee.

*“You blame them for her death!”* he kept hearing Gianna’s charge over and over. Nor could he deny it. He’d never admitted it before, never allowed the thought to form. But he’d realized that was exactly what he’d done for the last five years. As if divining his son’s thoughts, the King stepped closer and placed a hand on his son’s shoulder.

“I made a terrible mistake with you, my son,” the King admitted. “I drove you away and we’ve never drawn as close as we once were since. We may never do so and that I truly regret.

“You’re driving your sons away now,” he continued. “Do not make that mistake with them like I did

with you. You have time to fix it before it becomes unfixable.”

Forelni remained rooted to the spot, staring at the boys but hearing a voice in his head that he'd not heard for five years.

*“It will be better for you this time. You will have the boys with you.”*

She wouldn't have blamed them. She wouldn't want him too either. She'd probably kick him in the backside for what he'd been doing these last five years, and rightly so for that matter.

He stepped out from his hiding spot and walked out onto the grass. Gianna spotted him first just seconds before the boys. He stopped his approach and waited for the verdict. *Would they recognize their father and what would their reaction be?*

For a moment that seemed to last an eternity, no one moved or said a word.

“Papa!” both boys yelled out happily in unison and charged toward their father. Forelni moved quickly toward them before scooping both of his sons into his arms for the very first time. Gianna placed a hand over her mouth and tears rolled down her face as the boys peppered their father with questions.

“What did you do in space?”

“Are you back for good?”

“Can we go to space too?”

He had no idea which son asked which question. He vowed he would learn that first. But with his own tears running unashamedly down his cheeks he gave them an answer.

“Yes, you can go into space,” he promised. “You’re going to move up to the shipyard with me and whenever I take my ship out you will go with me out among the stars, my sons.

“It is our calling.”

*This marks the end of Part Two. The Star Trek: The Original Series saga of: The Calling.*