

Eternal Flame

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Eternal Flame

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Summary

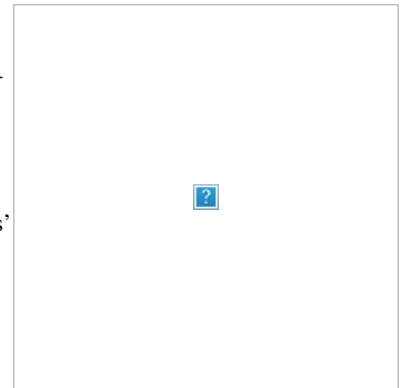
While on a routine exploratory mission, the *Starship Eagle* makes a most valuable find. A well-preserved city built by a now-extinct but mighty space-faring civilization over five hundred thousand years ago.

A sizable science team is dispatched to the surface to attempt to uncover the secrets left behind by the Hyterians but a series of unexplained and disturbing nightmares severely dampen Owens' enthusiasm over the discovery.

While the captain struggles with these strange visions, the crew of *Eagle* quickly discovers that they are not the only ones interested in uncovering the secrets left behind by the former super-civilization.

The race for the most powerful artifact in the galaxy has begun.

The second novel of *The Star Eagle Adventures*.



Notes

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Prologue

Darkness.

Complete and utter darkness.

Not the slightest ray of light, not one spark of hope, not one familiar shape; just total and absolute gloom.

And it was painful.

Depressing. As though it engulfed not just his body but also his soul. This was no ordinary absence of sunlight during the night, this wasn't a room with no windows; this was pure nothingness, the absence of not just light but of anything.

And this nothingness pushed down on him like an immense weight against his shoulders. It felt as if it was going to crush him like a boot would squash an insect. He felt trapped, helpless, doomed. There was nowhere to go and there was no use for words for there was nobody to hear them.

And then something changed.

A voice.

Faint at first, it gained intensity as it began to penetrate the void.

It was a monotone singsong voice that spoke in a language utterly alien to him. And yet he could tell that it was filled with pain and fear. Somebody who had been exposed to this nightmarish world for much longer than he.

He didn't know how long he had been here. But he did not doubt that the darkness would drive any person insane.

He took a few steps toward what he believed to be the source of the voice. Perhaps if he could find whoever was out there, together they could manage a way to escape. But as he moved, his surroundings refused to change.

The voice did.

It became more desperate, more piercing until it resembled nothing but a desperate scream.

Others joined in.

And then he was at the center of it all.

The voices were all around him. So loud now that he could feel the vibrations inside of him. And soon it overcame him as well. He could sense their pain. He could feel it in his bones.

He opened his mouth and the sounds that poured out terrified him. It wasn't his voice and yet it was. It was alien and yet familiar. He had never spoken like this before and yet he knew exactly what he was saying.

It was an extension of the voices around him. It was fear and desperation and agony and it was all because of the darkness surrounding them all.

His own voice became a scream that joined the choir of anguish around him.

And it was going to drive him mad.

Michael Owens awoke with a start.

His eyes opened like saucers, sweat was dripping from his brow and covered his entire body. His breathing was labored.

The bedroom was dark but to his eyes, it was as bright as a sunny summer day. His first urge was for more.

More light.

"Computer," he said but then stopped, startled by the normalcy of his own voice.

A short trilling sound indicated that *Eagle's* computer was awaiting his request.

"Increase illumination to fifteen percent above standard."

Another quick trill and the room lit up as though somebody had pulled the non-existent shades.

Michael threw off the covers and got onto his feet, slightly uneasy. But the bright room gave him strength and comfort he didn't immediately understand. The nightmare, of course, had been much more intense than what he had been used to. It hadn't been the first.

They had come only very recently and they had become more intense and disturbing each time. Perhaps because with each dream he managed to remember more details, managed to remember how terrified he had felt.

He shot a glance out of the window and winced when the dark void of space caused him to recall his twisted nightmare.

He also spotted the planet.

It had all started after the accident, he recalled.

One of the most amazing finds of modern archeology had awoken a new sense of adventure and discovery amongst the crew. And that certainly was a good thing. Times were dire. A short yet bloody war with the Klingons had shattered the peace amongst the powers of the Alpha Quadrant and caused many to question the wisdom of the Federation's policies and alliances.

At the same time another and quite possibly even greater threat was looming in the Gamma Quadrant where many believed the Dominion had set its eyes on a full-scale invasion of the Alpha Quadrant.

Michael welcomed *Eagle's* latest mission of exploration beyond the borders of Federation space. And nobody could have expected to find what they had stumbled across.

But for him, this discovery had brought only pain.

He looked at the planet and immediately realized, no matter how marvelous their discovery, no matter how significant to the archeological community, he would never set foot on that planet again.

Ruined World

“Five hundred thousand years ago they were at the peak of their existence. Socially and technologically more advanced than three-quarters of the now-known galaxy. They had built impressive cities and monuments all over their world while humans hadn’t even discovered fire yet. They used cold fusion to power their vehicles, their plants, and their homes before most races knew about electricity. What we are seeing here is a civilization that traveled the stars eons before the Vulcans, the Andorians, the Bajorans, and possibly even before the Iconians.

This is one of the best-preserved dig sites in the history of exo-archeology and it’s of a race we have only speculated about before. Within the few days we have been here, we have learned more about them than we know about many ancient civilizations we discovered decades ago. The degree of preservation here is almost unprecedented and we can attribute that fact to their masterful skills in engineering.

Let us take a closer look at the inside of one of their buildings.”

Lieutenant Tobias Armstrong’s voice was filled with passion as he spoke about the long-past inhabitants of the ruins that surrounded him.

Ever since *Eagle* had come across this planet only a week prior, he had spent every waking moment on the surface. For him, it was the find of the century. And his enthusiasm had been infectious among the crew.

It was clear to the entire science staff that this was a discovery of great significance. It filled any explorer’s heart with joy and excitement to be the first to find the remains of an advanced civilization, especially when they were in such good condition.

This was by no means an everyday occurrence. Even though it was widely known that highly civilized cultures had traveled the stars long before the present major powers of the galaxy had evolved into sentient species, it was extremely difficult to find preserved testimonies of their achievements. This was due to many factors. Some civilizations had never built structures to last the tests of time, others were involved in so many intergalactic wars that their remains were eventually destroyed. Some had simply been too eager and too disregardful of their power that they had annihilated themselves along with all they had ever created. And then there were those who had mysteriously vanished without leaving behind much to discern their sudden disappearance. Some had coined this phenomenon the Great Filter. An unknown event and catastrophic event that had wiped out advanced spacefaring civilizations at the pinnacle of their existence.

The Hyterians may have been victims of this as well, except that they had managed to leave behind a wealth of evidence of their culture and society. Their home world, the planet *Eagle* had discovered in one of the more remote pockets of space beyond the formal borders of the Federation, contained significant infrastructure that was remarkably well preserved. This didn’t mean that everything was still intact. Far from it, the few remaining sites lay in ruins. But for a skilled archeologist, it was a paradise waiting to be uncovered.

The potential to recreate this world to how it had once been was a challenge easily met by Armstrong and his dedicated staff. Most streets and roadways were still there, many of the larger buildings had partially survived and the layout of the cities was still discernable. Unlocking the secrets of this once-thriving world was only a matter of time. All it would require was patience and hard work.

Armstrong was well aware of this when he led the latest group from *Eagle* into a large, temple-like building. The oval-shaped structure was at least fifty meters high and had a diameter of nearly two hundred meters. Sky-high, golden columns surrounded it and supported the flat roof that miraculously had not yet collapsed. It had no designated entrance and was open to all sides. A few stone steps led up to the elevated structure and four wide-open passages lead into the center of the building from all cardinal points.

The archeologist led the group into one of the passages that narrowed until they stepped into an oval room at the building’s center. This part of the structure had no roof, not because it had come down but because it had been designed this way. The sunlight illuminated the room brightly.

Several science officers were already at work here, painstakingly recording every nook and cranny of the spacious chamber. Countless runes and detailed depictions covered the curved walls.

“This is by far the best preserved and most impressive building we have discovered so far. It must have been of enormous importance to the Hyterians,” said Armstrong.

He stepped into the center of the room and gave his colleagues a minute to appreciate the structure. They quickly fanned out and began to inspect the walls, the stone floor as well as the computer consoles that had been brought in to record and analyze the ancient building.

One of the officers turned to face Armstrong. “You said this culture was technologically advanced. How come we haven’t seen any evidence of this yet? These buildings as well as the streets and monuments seem to indicate a form of architecture heavily dependent on masonry.”

“Excellent question, Ensign. We believe that much of the more advanced technology they used might have vanished over time. It might not have been as durable or it might have been plundered over the centuries. Another explanation might be that this particular site was built long before they acquired more advanced means and decided to leave it untouched.”

A Vulcan lieutenant stepped forward. “In that case, how do you justify your claim that this race was indeed as advanced as you say?” he said while raising an eyebrow.

“There is clear evidence of their advanced technology even in this very room,” said a female officer who was working by one of the walls with a scanning device in her hand. She turned to face the visitors. Her blond, curly hair flowed naturally down her shoulders and her face radiated such youthfulness that she could have easily been mistaken for a student at the Academy. She had removed her black and gray

jacket and her golden shirt stood out amongst the teal-colored uniforms of most of the others present.

“There is?” said Armstrong. He was obviously as surprised as the others. Probably even more so. He quickly stepped up to the young lieutenant.

DeMara Deen nodded with a smile. “We made some progress interpreting the runes and inscriptions. This city must have been a major spaceport at some time,” she said pointing at the wall she was standing at.

The dark-skinned archeologist looked at the device she was holding and then back at the wall. “So much for our theory that this was an untouched site.”

Commander Eugene Edison, *Eagle*'s first officer, was one of the crew members who had joined Armstrong on his tour of the ruins. He had been quite impressed with what he had seen so far but now his curiosity was piqued. He walked up to the two officers. “A spaceport? Is it possible that these runes contain the locations of other Hyterian colonies?”

“At this point, we can only speculate what they refer to in detail,” said Deen, “But we know from rumors and legends that at its peak the Hyterian civilization spanned dozens of worlds.”

“We need to transfer all this data to the ship's computer as quickly as possible,” said Armstrong without even looking up from the device he was presently working on. “There is much to do. We need to free up additional resources to process all the new information and I'll have to assign more people to work on this. Commander Xylion surely will want to know about this as well.”

Gene smirked at the lieutenant. “What's the rush? I'm sure we'll be here for quite a while. It'll keep your archeological section quite busy, I'd imagine.”

Armstrong looked at the first officer as if the man hadn't quite understood what he had just said. “Not just my section, Commander. The entire science department will have to work on this. We'll have to request additional personnel from other ship departments as well. This is huge.”

Gene nodded, still smiling, “I can see it is.”

Armstrong glanced at Deen and found an encouraging smile on her lips. The archeologist was too busy to reciprocate such a gesture and quickly hurried away, delegating tasks to the newly arrived crewmembers so quickly, some had trouble keeping up.

Gene looked after him. Armstrong was one of the most dedicated science officers he had ever met. He was so involved in what he did that he needed to be slowed down at times for his own good. But perhaps not today.

He finally turned back to Deen who, as *Eagle*'s operations manager, was not part of the science team. But he knew that she had been trained as a scientist and that it had always remained her first love. She had quickly volunteered to stay on the planet after she had been part of the away team that had discovered the ancient ruins.

“You're having fun here as well, I take it?” he said.

“Are you kidding? This is...” she paused, trying to think of the right word.

“Huge?” said Gene. “So I've been told.”

A small playful pouting expression crossed her face and she turned back to the wall to continue her scan. “If you don't like it then why are you down here?”

“I didn't say that I didn't like it. It's an impressive discovery, I understand that. I guess I'm just not quite as euphoric as you science people seem to be.”

“You should be,” she said and took a step to her left to analyze the next segment of the runes.

Gene looked around the room. “Have you seen the captain?”

The young lieutenant stopped her work. “He hasn't been back down here since the incident,” she said still facing the wall.

“It happened right in this room, didn't it?”

She turned and nodded. “Right there,” she said, pointing at the very center of the chamber. “Just before he lost consciousness, he said that he thought that something had stung him.”

“And you couldn't find what it was?”

She shook her head, “Nothing. No insects, no plants, not even a mark on his skin. Whatever it was, it disappeared and left no trace behind,” she said. “He just stood there one moment and collapsed the next,” she added, her voice revealing her true concern for her friend and captain.

She hadn't stopped worrying about him ever since the mysterious incident that so far hadn't affected anyone besides him. The initial reaction to the captain's collapse had been to restrict any further personnel from coming to the planet's surface.

But after two days of intense sensor sweeps of the planet, the flora and fauna, and the atmosphere without finding anything that could explain the incident, Owens had given in to his science officers' request to continue their investigation of the archeological sites.

According to Doctor Ashley Wenera, Owens had made a full recovery and she had found no physiological indications that could have caused him to pass out the way he did. After keeping him confined to sickbay for nearly two days, she'd had no choice but to declare him fit for duty.

"How's he doing?"

She sighed. "I wish I knew. He's been very closed off about the whole thing. It's all this pointless bravado about appearing strong in front of the crew."

"It comes with the job, Dee."

"I'm not surprised you're defending his attitude," she said. "There must be an oath you people take when you attend Command School: Never show weakness in front of a subordinate. As though we're all highly impressionable children."

"If you were responsible for the safety and well-being of hundreds of people, you'd be more appreciative of what it's like to captain a starship."

"Perhaps," she said. "But who'll take responsibility for his wellbeing?"

* * *

As he stepped onto the bridge of his ship, the first thing Captain Michael Owens noticed was the large image of the big blue planet centered on the viewscreen.

A cold shiver ran up his spine.

He quickly turned away to find his chief science officer working at his station at the aft section of the bridge. "Commander, I'm surprised to find you on board. How come you're not on the surface?"

The Vulcan stood from his chair and faced him. "I am coordinating *Eagle's* resources to make our investigation as efficient as possible. I have also discovered Lieutenant Armstrong to be a quite capable archeologist," he said in his usually calm and pragmatic sounding tone of voice. "I will continue to supervise from *Eagle* for the time being unless you request my presence at the dig site."

"No, not at all," he said. He had no interest in interfering with the science officer's approach to his mission. "I just thought you'd be as awestruck by our discovery as the rest of the crew."

The Vulcan raised an eyebrow in response.

"Wrong choice of words," Michael said.

"I am both curious and fascinated by this discovery but this does not change the fact that the most efficient way to assist in the ongoing investigation of the Hyterian sites is by remaining on board and managing our resources remotely."

Michael allowed himself a small smile. He figured that he and Xylion were the only two people on *Eagle* who were not throwing themselves at the chance to visit the ruins on the planet below. Of course, he had been just as eager as the others after the first away team had discovered the ruins. But this had all changed after the incident. It wasn't fear that had kept him away but something else. A feeling he couldn't quite describe. And yes, the nightmares didn't help either.

"Very well, Commander, carry on."

Xylion gave him a short nod and returned to his station.

Michael made his way to his chair at the center of the bridge. He quickly noticed that Xylion was the only senior officer on the bridge. Everyone else was either off duty or visiting the planet. With his blessing, Gene Edison had granted everyone's request for a visit while at the same time making sure that *Eagle* a skeleton crew remained onboard at all times.

Lieutenant Culsten, the helmsman, was sitting at his station and watched his short journey to the captain's chair.

"You're staying aboard as well, Lieutenant?" Michael said as he took his seat.

"My shift ends in fifteen minutes," he said with a smile on his face. "I'm scheduled for a visit in twenty."

"Of course, you are."

Culsten noticed his captain's reluctance and decided not to go into detail about what he had planned to do after his shift. He turned back to his station to finish a system diagnosis he had started earlier.

Michael didn't mind that his crew was fascinated by the discovery on Hyteria. At first, he had encouraged everyone to see it as long as it

didn't interfere with the ongoing survey. Armstrong as well as Xylion had been very reluctant about letting crewmembers wander around amongst the ruins in fear that they would disturb the priceless findings they had made. But after a couple of days, they had agreed to allow visitors if they adhered to their strict guidelines. To Michael's surprise, most of the crew had jumped at the chance to see what was left of the once-mighty civilization. As an explorer at heart, Michael was happy to see that most of his crew shared his passion.

He sometimes feared that Starfleet, an organization that after all had been called to life to explore and discover the mysteries of the galaxy, had lost the ideal behind its original charter. Over the last century or so the Federation had grown so quickly that nowadays Starfleet had its hands full with managing a vast area of space instead of traveling deeper into the unknown.

And then of course there were the threats from such formidable antagonists as the Tzenkethi, the Cardassians, the Talarians, the Borg, and, for the first time in decades, the Klingons were saber-rattling again.

And as if there weren't enough powers out there who disliked the Federation and what it stood for, the Dominion had recently joined that list as well.

Fortunately, Starfleet hadn't given up yet on exploring strange new worlds, like the starships of yesteryear. Exploratory missions had taken a back seat but *Eagle's* latest mission was proof that they still mattered. And sometimes lead to stunning discoveries.

Glancing back toward the planet on the screen, he couldn't quite suppress a small sigh coming over his lips. Stunning discoveries, indeed. And yet due to strange circumstances outside of his control, he was not going to be part of them.

"Sir, we're receiving an incoming signal."

Michael stood from his chair to face the young Vulcan officer manning the tactical station in So'Dan Leva's absence. "From the planet?"

He shook his head fractionally. "It is originating point three-four light-years from our current position. It appears to be a starship-based distress signal."

He turned back to look at the viewscreen. "We're well outside Federation shipping lanes and there are less than a handful of colonies out here," he said. "Can you identify the vessel in distress?"

"Negative, the signal does not carry an identification code. However, it is being transmitted on a standard Federation frequency."

"Very well," Michael said. "Owens to Lieutenant Armstrong."

It didn't take long for the archeologist to answer the call. "*This is Armstrong, sir.*"

"Lieutenant, how long would it take you to pack everything up and get back to *Eagle*?"

There was a short pause. "*Hours, sir,*" he said. "*Why? Are we leaving?*" he added unable to hide his concern.

"We're receiving a distress signal and I intend to answer it."

"*Sir, I don't think it would be a good idea for us to just pack up and leave. We have so many people down here and equipment, too. If any way possible, I would prefer to stay behind. I'm certain that goes for most of my people as well.*"

Xylion had stepped into the command area of the bridge. "I support the lieutenant's request, sir. We are now at a stage of our investigation in which our equipment is especially sensitive. If we were to remove it hastily, we might lose valuable data already collected."

"I'm not comfortable leaving my entire science department on this planet," said Michael.

"A full recovery of all available personnel and equipment would require an estimated two hours and twenty-four minutes. We would have to delay our response and may not answer the distress signal in time," said Xylion.

"*Sir, we should be all right to fend for ourselves for a few hours,*" said Armstrong over the open com-link. "*You should go and try to help whoever has sent the distress signal. We'd only slow you down.*"

Michael smirked fully aware that Armstrong wasn't as concerned about the distress signal as he was about leaving his precious find. "Very well, gentlemen, you make a decent point. Commander, have the senior staff and all essential personnel beamed back on board on the double. I want to be on my way in within fifteen minutes."

Xylion nodded and headed directly to the nearest station to carry out the order.

"*Thank you, sir,*" said Armstrong. "*We'll make sure to stay out of trouble while you're gone.*"

"See that you do, Lieutenant. Owens out."

Michael turned to his helmsman. "Mister Culsten, set a course for the coordinates the distress signal originated from. Make for best speed once everyone who should be aboard is back."

"Aye, sir," said the young officer and began to enter the necessary commands into his console.

"Looks like your visit to the ruins will have to wait."

It took *Eagle* one hour to reach XT-490, the source of the distress signal and one of the many solar systems in proximity to Hyteria that had not yet been fully cataloged by Starfleet. Data collected from unmanned probes and long-range sensors was the only information available to *Eagle*'s crew.

"We're approaching XT-490," said Culsten.

Commander Edison, who now sat in his usual seat next to the captain, stood from his chair. "Drop to impulse."

Within seconds *Eagle* slowed to sub-light speeds, coming to a near crawl at the outer edge of the system.

"Sensors," said Michael once the main screen confirmed that they were not racing through space any longer.

"There are two vessels close to the third planet, a gas giant. It seems that one is in pursuit of the other," said DeMara from operations, her fingers dancing over her console.

"Mister Culsten, bring us in closer," said Michael.

"Yes, sir."

Edison turned to Leva at tactical. "Commander, can you analyze the ships?"

The half-Romulan officer checked the readouts on his console. "The ship being fired upon is a Corvallen light freighter. The other is a heavily modified *Theta*-class raider."

Edison turned to face the captain. "Pirates. Possibly mercenaries."

Michael nodded and looked at the viewscreen. "Dee, do we have a visual?"

"I'm on it."

Shortly after the view on the screen changed to show a large green planet with yellow- and orange-colored rings surrounding it. The view shifted a couple of times and magnified until the rings were shown as what they really were; dense rock formations and stellar dust. Soon two ships became apparent, racing in between the rocks. Their artificial shapes and metallic shades made them stand out prominently in between the rings.

They were watching a chase. The smaller vessel tried its best to maneuver in between the much bigger rock fragments while the slightly larger ship followed the other's tail, attempting to get into a position to blow the freighter to pieces. Every once in a while, the raider managed to squeeze off a few rounds of angry, red energy beams. But instead of finding their intended target, most of the discharges were blocked by the many rocks, causing them to explode into thousands of smaller fragments, hurling them in every direction.

It was quite a show to watch. Both ships were taking damage from their hostile environment.

"The freighter has minimal shields and severe hull damage," said Leva. "I believe it is the source of the distress signal, sir."

"It would appear that way, wouldn't it?" said Michael. "Try to hail the attacking ship."

"That's quite some piloting skill," said Culsten while watching the viewscreen with great interest. The freighter was managing to remain just out of its pursuer's reach while also avoiding the dense rock formations surrounding it. It seemed pretty clear that this game of cat-and-mouse could not go on forever.

"You think you could pull that off?" said DeMara with a little smirk.

"They wouldn't even see me, that's how fast I'd be through there."

"The raider is not responding to our hails," said the tactical officer.

"Why doesn't that surprise me?" said Edison, still looking at the screen.

"Mister Culsten, increase speed to intercept. Commander Leva, open a channel, please."

The helmsman did as he was told and *Eagle* accelerated toward the green gas giant.

Leva gave the captain a short nod, letting him know that the other ships could receive him now.

"Attention unidentified raider, this is the Federation starship USS *Eagle*, break off your attack immediately or we will be forced to intervene," he said in his most commanding tone of voice.

"Doesn't look like they're complying," said Edison after almost a minute of silence had passed without a response.

On the viewscreen the raider was still trying to destroy the freighter, ignoring the approaching Starfleet ship that easily dwarfed both ships put together.

“We’re entering into weapon’s range,” said DeMara.

Michael exchanged a quick look with Edison telling him exactly what he wanted. The first officer turned and walked up to the tactical station, “Red alert, shields up,” he said as he joined Leva at the horse-shoe-shaped station.

“Weapons are ready,” said the half-Romulan, moments after the alert klaxon had started blaring throughout the ship, accompanied by flashing red lights.

“Let’s give ’em a warning shot across the bow, maybe that’ll change their minds,” said Michael as he sat back down in his chair.

Eagle’s main phaser bank on top of the saucer section powered up. Super-powered phased energy built up from both ends of the circular array and arced toward each other at high-speed. As soon as they made contact, the combined energy discharge was hurled toward the planet. The crimson-colored, high-energy beam missed the attacking vessel by only a couple of hundred meters. Instead, it struck a rock formation, exploding it instantly.

“They’re not veering off,” said Culsten. “They must be crazy to think that they can outrun us.”

“I wouldn’t be so quick to judge. There might be more to them than meets the eye,” said DeMara while continuing to closely monitor both vessels.

“I think it’s safe to say that this is not going to work,” said Michael. “Mister Leva open fire at will. Avoid hitting the freighter.”

“I’ll do my very best,” the tactical officer said and started operating the weapon controls.

Eagle began to fire phasers more precisely. But it became quickly apparent that this approach was inefficient as well. The target moved too rapidly through the obstacles of the ring for the targeting computer to get a proper lock. At any given time, the line of fire was blocked by space debris. Most of *Eagle*’s fire clean-out missed its target or hit other asteroid fragments.

Michael watched the spectacle with increasing frustration.

“We could always just get in there and join the party,” said DeMara with a smile.

Michael considered her suggestion for a moment. “Do it, Mister Culsten.”

She swung around in her chair. “That was a joke.”

He ignored her and turned to find his tactical officer. “Full power to shields and the navigational deflector.”

Leva nodded.

DeMara turned back to her station.

“Next time maybe keep those ideas to yourself,” whispered Culsten while he steered the ship right into the rings.

She shrugged but her smile was gone.

The first officer left the tactical station to join the captain in the command area. He sat in his chair and slightly leaned over to him. “You do realize that the field is too dense for us to navigate within,” he said with just the smallest indication of concern in his voice.

“Relax Commander, it’s a big ship. A few rocks won’t hurt us,” said Michael.

“Sure scratch the paint though,” said DeMara without looking up from her console.

The green gas giant filled the entire screen now and the ship was about to enter the field of rocks and space particles surrounding it.

“This could get bumpy,” said Culsten.

The helmsman remained right. The ship shook noticeably when it passed into the outer ring. *Eagle* made no attempts to avoid the small rocks and instead dived right through them. The navigational deflector acted like a huge invisible plow, pushing the particles and the smaller asteroids aside. The bigger ones made it through, however, some were crushed by the stronger defensive shields surrounding the ship while a few crashed against the ship’s outer hull, causing the ship’s interior to tremble.

“Lieutenant Culsten, set an intercept course, we’ll chase him around the whole planet if we have to,” said Michael who seemed undisturbed by the turbulent ride.

Within a few seconds, *Eagle* was right on the tail of the attacking vessel. The presumed pirates ceased fire as the much larger Federation ship closed in on them from behind. No doubt the maneuver had caught them by surprise.

Michael smirked.

“What do you have in mind?” said his first officer who noticed the captain’s amusement.

“How about we use our mass to our advantage?” he said while looking at Edison.

The first officer returned his smile knowingly and gave him a short nod. He then turned to the helm. “Mister Culsten, step on it.”

The young lieutenant turned around. “But we’ll hit the…” he interrupted himself when he suddenly understood. “Oh,” he added and then

turned back and did what he was told.

Eagle quickly accelerated, making the journey through the ring even bumpier. The ship drew closer to the vessel directly in front.

Soon *Eagle* was pushing hundreds of small rocks in front of it, shoving them toward the small vessel that didn't even seem to notice the approaching wall of debris and dust.

That quickly changed when it found itself bumped hard from behind. First by the rocks, then by *Eagle's* main deflector. The bridge shook hard when the vessel impacted with the energy plow. The impact was strong enough to make the smaller vessel lose navigational control. It turned sideways and spun around on its own axis and t-boned another rock. After another moment it regained attitude control and promptly shot out of the ring and into open space in a seemingly desperate attempt to avoid any more damage.

"Stay with them," said Michael when he noticed the ship heading away from the gas giant.

Eagle steered clear of the rock field and followed the vessel closely. A dark red light appeared to be pulsating from the rear end of the ship. Even before the *Eagle's* crew could wonder what it was it lashed out at them and struck the ship across the bow.

Michael was almost thrown out of his chair by the resulting shockwave.

"Damage report," barked Edison who was as surprised as the rest of the crew by the force of the attack.

"Shields are down to sixty-five percent," said Leva.

"Told you not to underestimate them," said DeMara with playful smugness.

"Open fire," said Michael after he had readjusted himself in his chair.

Eagle's phasers fired at the small craft. But its size and maneuverability helped it avoid many of the energy blasts. The ones that did hit quickly overwhelmed the small vessel's protective energy shield.

"Their shields are collapsing," said Leva.

"They must have taken a beating in that asteroid field," Edison said.

"They are powering their warp engines," DeMara said.

"Prepare to lay in a pursuit course," said Michael and stood from his chair again. He was not willing to let them get away. Especially now after realizing that the little ship packed quite a punch and presented a serious threat to any other starship in the sector.

"I'm receiving a signal from the freighter, their warp core has become unstable," said the tactical officer.

Michael stared at the screen where he could see the warp nacelles of the raider light up in a bright blue light. It was about to jump out of the system.

Edison stepped up to him, "Sir?"

He sighed and looked away from the screen and at Culsten at the helm. "Take us within transporter range of the freighter."

There was a flash of light and the vessel that only a few seconds ago had been within *Eagle's* striking distance had disappeared.

Michael looked at his first officer with apparent disappointment.

"Win some, lose some," Edison said with a shrug.

"Captain, I believe the message from the freighter was somewhat of an understatement," said DeMara while going over her sensor data.

"What's happening?" said Michael, stepping up to her console.

"Their containment field is about to go critical and expose their core anti-matter any second now."

"On screen," said Edison.

The viewscreen shifted to show the small freighter still within the rings of the gas giant. The ship wasn't moving anymore. It was adrift, listing to one side, and rapidly losing atmosphere from numerous hull breaches. Loose hull plates and bulkheads were threatening to rip off the superstructure.

"Drop shields, lock on to whoever is over there, and beam them aboard," said Michael quickly as he realized the impending disaster.

Only seconds after he had given his order, the ship was completely torn apart by a powerful explosion. Michael had seen quite a few of them in his long career in Starfleet but this one was like no other.

The blazing red fire caused by the ignition of the escaping atmosphere did not lessen.

On the contrary, it became brighter by the second. Soon it filled out the entire viewscreen. He took a step back, surprised by this unusual event.

It reached across space and engulfed the bridge of his ship until it was gone as if it had never existed in the first place.

All that remained was darkness.

Panic gripped his mind, unable to comprehend what had just happened.

He heard voices all around him, alien but inexplicably comforting.

They were familiar and yet he didn't know what they were saying. It was a choir of noises but he knew without a doubt that it resembled a language.

He felt soothed by listening to them. They were talking to him and each other. He opened his mouth to answer them. But when he heard the words coming over his lips, he was shocked to find that they were just like the others. He kept talking without knowing what it was he was saying.

The voices began speaking faster. They carried fear and panic now. Without realizing it, his own voice began to match theirs, and soon after he could feel what they felt.

It was a pain he had felt before and he still didn't understand. A bright light flashed in front of his eyes and consumed him. It was too bright as to illuminate anything and too hot as not to feel it burn his skin.

There was a last, ear-numbing shriek that emanated from his very mouth before Michael Owens lost consciousness.

* * *

Barrington Spooner was a most peculiar man. Blessed with the kind of roguish good looks many women found attractive, with a full mob of black hair, penetrating blue eyes, and an easy, almost mischievous smile, he possessed the uncanny ability to capture people's fascination by doing nothing more than look somebody straight in the eye.

He had been the only person on his ship and his only cargo had been a small metallic container he carried with him like a suitcase. He seemed particularly protective of it and had not let it out of his sight for even a moment.

Spooner had been assigned guest quarters for the duration of his stay on *Eagle*. The very same Gene Edison and Nora Laas entered after Spooner had invited them inside.

He was sitting at a desk, closing the suitcase while the two officers stepped into his room. When he noticed the Bajoran, he quickly stood and strode toward her. "Lieutenant Nora," he said with a wide, beaming smile on his lips. "I was hoping you'd come to see me."

The security chief rolled her eyes. She had met Spooner when he had first beamed aboard and had received him in the transporter room with an armed security team. It was standard procedure when beaming unknown persons onto the ship but Spooner had completely ignored the threat of life and limb he had so barely escaped and focused all his attention on her instead.

"How is my favorite security officer and personal savior today?"

"As I pointed out to you previously Mister Spooner—"

"Spoon will do," he said quickly. "All my friends call me Spoon."

"As I said earlier, *Mister Spooner*, I had very little involvement in your rescue. That credit belongs to the captain and our transporter chief."

"Of course, and I'm eternally thankful for all of their efforts. But I cannot help but remember your mesmerizing eyes greeting me after I had all but resigned myself to a brutal and fiery death just moments earlier. You know what they say about first impressions."

"I'm sure I don't," she said, trying hard not to sound overly annoyed. "This is Commander Gene Edison, our first officer."

Spooner quickly held out his hand. "A pleasure to make your acquaintance, sir. And if you'd be so kind as to extend my gratitude to your captain and crew."

Gene shook the other man's hand. He couldn't quite hide the smile that had formed on his lips while witnessing his exchange with a clearly exasperated Nora Laas. "Welcome aboard. I trust you find your accommodations satisfactory."

Spooner glanced around the spacious quarters. "More than satisfactory, thank you very much. This room itself is larger than my entire ship," he said before he looked back at the first officer. "What you got here? *Excelsior*-class?"

"*Nebula*," said Edison.

"Of course. Oh, and where are my manners? Please have a seat," he said and gestured at the couch. He waited until Nora Laas was seated before he grabbed his chair, turned it around, and placed himself on it with his crossed arms resting on top of the backrest.

“Lieutenant,” he said, with that easy grin. “Do you mind if I call you Laas?”

“I do.”

“Keep it professional, I understand. You know, I’ve always been fascinated with the Bajorans. Such strong and resilient people, such a rich culture. I didn’t know Bajorans were serving in Starfleet.”

“There are a few,” she said in a clipped tone.

“Mister Spooner, we’re very much interested in the circumstances that have brought you all the way out here and what may have made you a target of the people pursuing you,” said Gene, determined to refocus this conversation.

“Ah yes, of course, very unfortunate business that. But I suppose it’s my own damned fault for venturing out this far. Galaxy ain’t a safe place.”

“And what’s your business exactly?” said Nora, immediately inviting those brilliant blue eyes and boyish grin back to her.

“I’m a trader, ma’am. All kinds of things, really. You’d be surprised what you’ll find beyond the borders of the Federation.”

“And I take it you found something that doesn’t entirely belong to you,” she said with a dark smirk of her own.

Spooner looked hurt by the implication. “You’ve got me figured all wrong. You see, most of the things I find don’t belong to anyone anymore. Certainly no one to claim them and there’s no jurisdiction to look after things out here. This is the lawless frontier, the Wild West, the great unknown. Trouble is, with no law, the spoils go to whoever has the biggest gun.”

“Do you know who these people were?” Gene said.

Spooner shook his head. “Haven’t got a clue.”

It didn’t take a telepath to realize that neither Gene nor Nora were entirely convinced by that story.

Nora eyed the suitcase on his desk. “Is that what they were after?”

“What, that?” he said. “Just a few personal belongings I was lucky enough to secure before I lost my ship. My toothbrush, a few knickknacks, that sort of thing.”

Nora’s doubt-filled eyes regarded him suspiciously.

That large grin was back on his face. “You ain’t buying this at all, are you?”

“Would you?” she said.

He shrugged. “Nah. But it was worth a try. Starfleet officers tend to be a gullible lot. You’re clearly not. But you have to forgive a trader for keeping some secrets. You wouldn’t want to part a poor man from his livelihood now, would you?”

“You don’t strike me as a poor man, Mister Spooner,” said Gene.

“I get by,” he said with a shrug before he looked back at Nora. “But I tell you what, if you really want to find out more about my trade, I’d be willing to discuss it with you, Lieutenant. Say over dinner. Tonight?”

The look in her eyes already made it clear what she thought of that idea. “I have other plans.”

“Shame.”

Gene stood. “I think this is all for now, Mister Spooner.”

Nora quickly followed suit and the trader left his chair as well. “I suppose this is the part where you tell me not to leave town,” he said with a wide grin. “Seeing that we’re on a starship in the middle of nowhere, that shouldn’t be much of an issue.”

“We may have some more questions for you later,” said Gene.

“*Mi casa es su casa*. Quite literally in fact. But if it isn’t too much trouble, I would appreciate it if you could drop me off at the nearest spaceport. Staying in one place for too long is anathema to my kind of business.”

“We’ll see what we can do,” he said and then left Spooner’s quarters with Nora in tow.

“Can you believe the audacity?” she said. “Where does he get off thinking that I’d have dinner with him?”

He smirked. “He seems to like you.”

“Oh, please. He’s obviously just looking for an edge. For his next play.”

“I don’t find the idea that he may be attracted to you all that preposterous.”

She stopped and looked at him. “Really?”

“Sure,” he said as he turned to face her. “What’s there not to like? And while he may not be the most forthcoming person I’ve ever met;

he was certainly dead right on one thing.”

“And what’s that?”

“You do have very nice eyes.”

That left her speechless.

“I have to go check on the captain. Please make sure you have a security guard posted on Mister Spooner. I think we can both agree that he warrants us keeping close tabs on him while he’s on board. And it may be a good idea to run a background check on him to see if he has a criminal record.”

She nodded.

He smiled at her before heading down the corridor, leaving the security chief behind.

She was glad he didn’t turn around again. He would have found her blushing.

* * *

“How much longer do you think this will take, Doctor?”

Michael was lying on one of the biobeds in *Eagle*’s sickbay. He had woken up there about twenty minutes earlier after he had lost consciousness on the bridge. Doctor Ashley Wenera had been running tests on him ever since.

“I believe you’re trivializing the gravity of your condition,” said Wenera who was working at a computer screen. Her back turned to her patient.

“Or perhaps you’re reading too much into it,” he said and sat up on the bed, unable to bear lying down any longer.

She turned around. “You collapsed on the bridge. I don’t see how anyone could read too much into that,” she said, not expecting an answer.

And Michael didn’t have one to give. He realized that she was absolutely right. Something like that could not and should not happen while he was on duty and especially not during a crisis. Fortunately, he had collapsed long after there had been any real threat to *Eagle* but that didn’t make it any less disturbing. Perhaps even more distressing were the signals he was sending his crew. That he was weak, unreliable, and unable to perform his duties. Confidence, he understood, was an enormously important factor in imbuing loyalty among the people that took their orders from him, who looked upon him for strength and leadership.

DeMara Deen entered sickbay and walked straight up to his bed. “You’re awake.”

“Yeah,” he said lamely.

“How’re you feeling?” she said, unable to hide the deep concern in her voice.

“As I’ve been trying to tell the good doctor here, I’m fine,” he said and tried to stand but was quickly held back by DeMara putting a hand on his shoulder.

“Michael, you collapsed on the bridge for no apparent reason,” she said sternly, sounding more like a concerned mother than a twenty-something Starfleet officer. “You’re definitely not fine.”

He looked her straight in the eye. “Then please, by all means, you tell me what’s wrong with me,” he said. When she had nothing to offer in response, he aimed his glance at Wenera. “Or how about you, Doctor?”

“I wish I could,” she said, her tone hinting at the defeat she felt by that admission. “I’ve run every scan I can think of and they’ve all come up negative.”

“There you have it,” he said and aimed a mildly annoyed glance at the Tenarian. “Now, if you wouldn’t mind removing your hands from your captain.”

She begrudgingly did. “Just because the doctor can’t find anything doesn’t mean you are all right.”

“If she can’t find anything, she can’t cure anything. Therefore, my continued presence in sickbay would be rather pointless, don’t you think?”

Before she could offer a counterpoint, the doors to sickbay opened once more, this time to allow the first officer to step inside. “Sir, how’re you feeling?”

“Fantastic,” he said with a slight hint of sarcasm. “I especially appreciate the great concern my crew has for my wellbeing. It’s very

comforting.” He swung his legs over the edge of the bed and stood.

Edison shot a puzzled look, first at Deen and then at Wenera. “Should he be back on his feet?”

Michael gave the doctor a pointed look as well.

But *Eagle’s* chief medical officer avoided eye contact.

“Doctor, is there any palpable medical evidence that would justify that I stay here any longer?” he said in a tone that demanded an answer.

Ashley Wenera looked up. “Besides you losing consciousness for no reason?” she said. “No, I suppose not,” she added more quietly. “But I would prefer if you’d stayed in sickbay for another couple of days for observation. There are still a few more tests I could—”

“And I’d prefer living in a peaceful galaxy without war, suffering, or pirates roaming the cosmos,” Michael shot back. “Sadly that’s not the reality we live in, is it?” he added with a crooked little smile.

“I don’t know, Michael, she has a decent point. You shouldn’t take this lightly. We don’t know what happened and until we do, we won’t know if it will happen again,” said DeMara.

“I agree, sir,” said Edison. “Don’t try to be cavalier with your own health. We can keep things going without you for a bit longer while the doctor runs a few more tests to get to the bottom of this.”

Michael looked at the faces of the three officers who had apparently decided to gang up on him. “Nice try, people. But I won’t stand for this kind of power grab on my ship. It’s coming pretty close to mutiny.”

But the joke found no audience and the faces around him remained mostly dour.

He took a deep breath. “Doctor, you have my blood work and all the scans and test you were able to take. Keep looking over everything you’ve got, remotely monitor my bio readings if you have to and if you think you figured it out, I’ll come down here for treatment the moment you call. Scout’s promise.”

“Lieutenant Commander Xylion to Captain Owens.”

Michael glanced at the ceiling. “This is Owens, go ahead.”

“Sir, we are approaching Hyteria, and your presence is required on the bridge,” said the Vulcan with a faint yet apparent hint of urgency in his voice.

“Understood, I’m on my way,” said Michael and then turned to the other officers surrounding him. “I believe that settles it. I’ll be on the bridge.” He didn’t wait for a chance for anyone else to raise another objection and headed straight for the exit.

Edison followed him closely.

Wenera turned to Deen. “Keep an eye on him, will you?”

“More like both of them,” she said with a determined nod then turned to follow the others to the bridge.

* * *

“Report,” said Michael once he had stepped out of the turbolift and had set foot onto the bridge. He headed straight for the central command area. On the viewscreen, he recognized the familiar planet of Hyteria slowly increasing in size.

Xylion stood to vacate the captain’s chair and turned to face him. “We have entered the Hyterian system but we have been unable to establish communications with the away teams.”

“Possible explanation?” said Edison who had been just a step behind the captain.

“The two most likely reasons for lack of communications are that they are either unable to answer or that they are no longer on the planet.”

Michael shook his head. “Impossible. They have to be down there.” He turned to his first officer. “Commander, take an away team and find my science department.”

Edison nodded. “Commander Xylion, you’re with me,” he said looking at the Vulcan.

The science officer nodded and followed Edison to the turbolift.

“Lieutenant Nora, report to transporter room three,” he said while entering the lift. Once the Vulcan had stepped into it as well, the doors

closed and it set in motion.

* * *

What the away team found when they materialized on the surface of Hyteria was a picture of utter destruction.

What had once been one of the best-preserved archeological sites in recent history, had been turned into not much more than rubble. There wasn't much left to show for the majestic civilization that had built a city that had withstood the test of time. Not a single building, monument, or statue remained. It was, in fact, difficult to still find two stones on top of each other.

Gene was left speechless.

It hadn't been much more than three hours that he had walked this city and visited many amazingly well-preserved buildings that had been older than most structures he had ever laid eyes upon.

Xylion was the first one to speak after a remarkable time of silence had passed. "It would appear that the site has been attacked," he said with an unusually irritated voice. As *Eagle's* chief science officer, the discovery of the ancient city and the prospect of investigating it had been a tremendous opportunity. One which even for a Vulcan, with their long life spans, was a rare and precious occasion. Finding it destroyed now was no doubt an immense disappointment to him, no matter how well he understood to hide his feelings.

"Do you read any life signs?" said Gene, his thoughts quickly refocusing on the many crewmembers who had been working at the site.

"Negative," said Xylion after checking his tricorder readouts.

"Sir," said Nora who had stepped a few meters away from her fellow officers, "I'm picking up faint signatures, three hundred meters northeast from here. I can't say what they are with certainty."

Gene turned around to face her. "Let's check it out." He looked at the two security crewmen who had been transported to the surface with them, "McIntyre, Ten'ur, search the area, see if you can find any survivors."

The two crewmen acknowledged with a nod and spread out.

A short time later Gene, Xylion, and Nora located the source of the signals. They originated from a cave only a short walk away from what had once been the outskirts of the ancient city.

The first officer cautiously entered the dark cavern, closely followed by Nora who had already drawn her phaser, preparing for any eventually. After only a few steps they noticed artificial lighting coming from deeper within.

Gene felt a sense of palpable relief when he stepped into the large main cave and found several Starfleet officers waiting for him. They had set up lamps to illuminate the cavern but besides that, there was little sign of their equipment. Their uniforms and faces were dirty and some of them looked shell-shocked.

Most of them were sitting on the ground or leaning against the cave walls. Apparently similarly relieved to have been found they quickly stood when they noticed the familiar away team approach.

A visibly shaken Armstrong jumped to his feet when Gene and the others came closer.

"What happened here, Lieutenant?" Gene said.

"They destroyed it, they destroyed everything."

"Who did?" asked Nora Laas.

But Toby Armstrong didn't appear to be in a state to answer that question. Instead, he looked at them with empty, haunted eyes.

A young female ensign stepped up and joined in. "We were attacked, sir," she said, sounding exhausted herself. It was apparent that these people had feared for their lives until very recently. "They came out of nowhere and attacked us without any provocation," she said as if she still couldn't believe what had happened.

"Who were they? Did you recognize them?" said Nora again, trying to sound as calm as possible.

"Romulans."

Nora looked at Gene, "Romulans? That doesn't make any sense. Why would they attack an archeological site in a remote area of space? We're many light-years from their territory."

"Lieutenant Armstrong, are any of your people injured? Have you suffered any casualties?" said Gene, trying to make eye contact with the chief archeologist.

“They just destroyed it like it was nothing. Who would do such a thing? It was a priceless testimonial to history. And now it’s gone. All gone,” he said with such desperation in his voice, one might have thought his life’s work had been destroyed.

“Lieutenant, do you have anyone who needs medical attention?” said Gene again this time in a more insistent tone.

But Armstrong couldn’t quite grasp the question.

He gave up and looked at the ensign.

She shook her head. “Everyone’s accounted for, sir. They gave us ten minutes to abandon the city before they opened fire from orbit,” she said and then gestured at Armstrong. “He wouldn’t even leave. We had to drag him in here.”

Xylion stepped forward, “Ensign, what exactly did the Romulans do?”

The young officer took a breath; she seemed to be unable to think of words right away.

Gene gave her a sympathetic smile, letting her know to take her time.

“They ... they landed an armed detail on the surface and took all our equipment. I believe they did some scans of their own before they told us to find cover or be killed by the bombardment,” she said after a few seconds.

Xylion turned to the first officer, “Commander, I believe we should return to the ship and analyze whatever data we were able to obtain from our investigation of the ruins. Apparently, the Romulans have a great interest in the Hyterian civilization and did not intend for others to find the reason for their curiosity.”

“You think there was more to this site than we first thought?”

“The Romulans very rarely concern themselves with archeological findings in unclaimed territory. It seems logical to assume that they are aware of something that we are not,” he said. “There isn’t anything left here for us to do,” he added, this time hiding his disappointment with a perfectly unemotional tone in his voice.

Gene turned to Armstrong, “Lieutenant?”

“There is nothing left,” he said after a few seconds and then averted his glance once more.

“Very well, prepare your people to return to *Eagle*. Inform the section leaders that I expect a full report on the events that have transpired here,” he said. “Once everyone had some time to recover.”

* * *

It was an odd feeling.

He had been unconscious for over an hour and yet his body demanded more rest. But after the incident on the bridge, Michael had found it difficult to justify retiring to his quarters. He needed to reassure his crew that he was still fully capable to perform his duties as the ship’s master and commander.

He had settled for his ready room instead, close enough to the bridge to let people know that he was keeping an eye on everything and at the same time having just enough privacy to allow for a short nap.

He also found some time to contemplate recent events.

Most of the science team that had returned from the surface had started working on the material they had gathered previously despite the ordeal they had been through. Michael admired their passion and was extremely anxious to find out what the Romulans could have been looking for.

He was still upset with himself that he had decided to leave the away teams unprotected while *Eagle* had left to answer the distress signal. Thankfully, the Romulans hadn’t been interested in harming any of his people but the fact that they had been left exposed was disturbing enough. Not to mention that it was an embarrassment to him that the Romulans had pushed them aside so easily and taken and destroyed their discovery.

Truth be told, Michael wanted some payback for what they had done but he knew that it was a futile hope. Here, outside Federation territory and unclaimed space, the rules did not apply. This meant that those with the strongest hand came out on top and this time they had been on the losing end. He was determined not to be shown up again.

His thoughts were interrupted when his first officer called him back to the bridge.

He was on his feet within seconds and not a moment later stepped out of the ready room.

On the bridge, he walked up the ramp and toward the science station where Edison was standing behind Xylion, who was diligently at work at his station.

“You found something?” he said as he approached.

“I believe so. Commander Xylion made an interesting discovery.”

Michael stepped closer so he could look at the screen. It showed a detailed chart of the Hyterian star system.

“A scan of the surrounding space revealed a small but localized concentration of sirillium,” said the Vulcan while pointing at highlighted areas on the map.

“If I remember right, sirillium is a fairly rare element,” said Michael.

Edison nodded. “It is. And based on the decay rate, we don’t think it was here until a few hours ago.”

“Go on.”

“The most common occurrence of sirillium is in class-17 nebulae. There are no such nebulae in close distance to Hyteria,” said the science officer.

“You believe the Romulan ship brought it with it into this system?” said Michael.

“Precisely.”

“Then all we have to do is find one of those nebulae and we’ll know where they have been before they came here.”

Edison smirked. “One step ahead of you, sir.”

Xylion’s hands danced over his console and the image on the screen quickly zoomed out of the solar system to show a map of the entire sector. A small blue cloud flashed and the screen zoomed back in to center on it, revealing a nebula and a solar system close by.

“According to the density and decay rate—“

“That’s where they’ve been before they came here,” said Michael, interrupting the Vulcan.

Xylion nodded. “We believe so. Based on my calculations, the Romulan vessel traveled to this location from the Dentura system. It contains only one planet that can support life.”

“Then that’s where we’re going. Good job, Commander,” Michael said and turned to the front of the bridge. “Helm, set a course for the Dentura system. Warp five.”

“Aye, sir,” said Culsten. “Course set, ETA three hours and twelve minutes.”

Welcome to the Jungle

“He said what?”

Louise Hopkins was off duty and sat at a table in *Eagle's* foremost area to relax, The Nest, the ship's main lounge, located at the most forward part of deck ten. For the last few minutes, she had been chatting to her longtime friend, security chief Nora Laas, about the latest ship events and other trivial matters until the conversation had shifted toward Commander Edison.

Louise and Laas had been at the Academy together. Even though Louise was two years younger, the two had quickly become fast friends despite their many differences.

In fact, one could argue that the two women were polar opposites. Louise was a shy and reserved engineer who rarely spoke her mind, and only ever seemed truly comfortable when she was in the familiar environs of her engine room, solving technical challenges. An engineering wunderkind, Louise had started to learn warp field theory before graduating from high school.

Nora Laas on the other hand was a fighter to the last bone in her body. Raised on a war-torn world and losing both her parents before she was ten years old, she was outgoing, emotional, and stubborn. Her idea of solving a problem usually involved picking up a weapon. Not because she enjoyed it but because she had long since been convinced of its effectiveness.

The Bajoran nodded and took another sip from her drink after she had told Louise about Edison's comments that had caught her so much off guard. The truth was that she had been unable to stop thinking about them. She had been burning to tell somebody she trusted but she had found it difficult to open up, even to her best friend.

“It was obvious.”

She gave her a quizzical look in response.

“That he likes you.”

Laas coughed, choking on her drink. “You're kidding, right?”

She shook her head. “Not at all. I could tell that there was something in the air between the two of you ever since you first met him. And don't even try to deny it. I've seen how you look at him when you think nobody else is watching. You like him, too,” she said, pointing an accusing finger at her.

Laas looked down, trying to avoid her insistent glance.

“You really should act on it. I don't know much about these things but I know that once you like somebody and that somebody likes you back, it would be stupid to just ignore it.”

“That's easy to say,” she said still not looking at her.

“And easy to do as well,” she said quickly. “He's not a bad-looking man, not at all bad-looking,” Louise said. Her eyes had drifted toward the large windows behind her. Staring at the stars racing past the ship, letting her mind wander.

Laas shot her a dark look, not appreciating the thoughts she seemed to be contemplating.

Louise didn't notice the evil eyes resting on her. She had spotted somebody else that had captured her attention. “Talking about a handsome man.”

Laas turned her head to see Barrington Spooner approaching. He was accompanied by Lif Culsten. She instinctively rolled her eyes.

“Those were some impressive maneuvers you pulled off in that planetary ring. You evaded those pirates for over an hour.”

Culsten and Spooner were deeply involved in their conversation when they stepped up to the table. But it was Culsten who appeared to do most of the talking. The other man was patiently answering all of the young lieutenant's questions and it seemed obvious that he not only enjoyed being in the spotlight, he was quite used to it.

“Perhaps if we have some time I can show you a few tricks later,” he said and stopped at the table, noticing the two women who occupied it. “Lieutenant Nora, it's always a pleasure meeting you,” he said with a smile.

Laas did her best to ignore him.

“Who is your lovely friend, if I may be so bold to ask?” he continued, making eye contact with Louise.

She blushed slightly.

“Oh yes, Lou meet Mister Barrington Spooner. Spooner this is our chief engineer Louise Hopkins,” she said quickly without looking at either one of them.

“Charmed,” he said, gently taking her hand off the table and giving it a soft kiss.

Louise didn't find words right away. Another thing Spooner was apparently used to. His overly polite and old-fashioned manners especially toward women had an undeniable effect.

"It's nice meeting you, Mister Spooner," she finally managed to say.

"Would you mind if we joined you? I couldn't think of any better company," he said with a wide smile on his face.

Culsten sat down in one of the empty chairs. "Of course, they don't, why would they?"

Spooner took the only other empty seat, right between the two women.

Laas' icy stare was now directed at the helmsman.

Culsten noticed it. "What?"

The chief engineer turned to Spooner. "I heard your encounter with those pirates cost you your ship. I'm sorry about that."

Spooner shrugged. "They come they go. I'm just glad you showed up in time otherwise I would've lost much more than that old rust bucket."

"Yes, we almost squashed that little pirate ship, didn't we?" said Culsten and laughed.

"Their firepower was no laughing matter," said the chief engineer. "Did you know these people?"

He shook his head. "Never seen 'em before," he said, while at the same time, his attention wandered to the entrance of the Nest.

DeMara Deen had just entered and was walking across the room, heading for a table where some friends of hers were sitting.

Spooner wasn't even subtle about looking at the blonde-haired beauty.

"That's Lieutenant Deen," said Culsten with a smile, quite aware of the effect she had on people, especially those who had never met her before. "She's Tenarian."

"You don't say," he said, his eyes still fixed on Deen as she strode toward the other table.

"I've heard of Tenarians but I've never actually encountered one. I didn't realize they ever left their home world. They say they are amongst the most beautiful humanoid creatures in the known galaxy. I can see why. The sirens of old Odysseus don't seem to have anything on her."

"Yeah, if you look at her for too long, you'll go mad," said Lif Culsten with a chuckle.

"Senior officers report to your stations."

The three officers at the table stood up.

"It was nice to meet you, Mister Spooner," said Louise. She didn't feel slighted by Spooner being distracted by Deen. If anything, she was amused by it.

He stood up as well and faced the chief engineer. "It was my pleasure, Lieutenant. I can only hope our paths will cross again."

"We can only hope," she said with a smile.

Spooner turned to Laas. "And something tells me that we will meet again with certainty."

"I can hardly wait," she said under her breath and then left with the other officers.

Once they had left, Spooner sat back down in his chair. He noticed that the ship had dropped out of warp and was now approaching a planet. He turned around and then sighed when he realized that DeMara Deen had left as well.

After a moment, he stood again and promptly left the Nest.

* * *

Michael was heading toward the bridge when Spooner intercepted him at a corridor junction.

"Captain, I was wondering if I could ask for a favor?"

"Mister Spooner, I presume?" he said without breaking stride.

He nodded and fell into step beside him. "That's me, sir."

“Very well,” he said. “What is it I can help you with?”

“This planet you’re heading for, am I right in assuming that you intend to go down there?”

Michael nodded but kept his pace. “Most likely.”

“Perhaps it would be possible for me to join the team you’re going to send to the surface.”

“We don’t normally take civilians on away missions. This isn’t a cruise ship, Mister Spooner.”

“I’m very well aware of that, sir.”

They reached the turbolift and stopped for the closed doors.

Spooner turned to look at the captain. “Your first officer has informed me that it might take weeks until we reach another spaceport. I’m just asking to get a little bit of fresh air. Staying on a starship for too long makes me feel queasy. Especially if it’s not my own.”

Michael sighed. He understood the frustration of being an involuntary passenger but he could also sense that Spooner was not entirely honest. There had to be more to his intentions than he led on. It wasn’t that he was worried so much as he was curious to find out what exactly this enigmatic man’s game really was.

“I’ll discuss it with my senior officers,” he said after a few seconds.

Spooner's face lit up. “Thank you, Captain. I very much appreciate this.”

“But let me make something very clear to you. While you’re on an away team, you will follow every order that is given to you and you will not deviate from them in any way. There might be dangers down there we cannot anticipate and we’ll be responsible for your safety.”

“I guess that means no weapon then, huh?”

The doors to the lift opened, Michael stepped inside and then turned to face Spooner once more. “Correct.”

Spooner nodded. “That’s fine with me. And I will follow every rule there is. They won’t even know I’m there.”

“Good.”

The doors closed shut.

Moments later Michael exited the lift and entered the bridge. He noticed that all his officers were already present. He walked up to the science station where Edison and the security chief were assembled around Xylion.

“What do we have?”

Edison turned to the captain. “We entered orbit around Dentura I. We’re now pretty certain that the Romulans were here.”

Michael approached the science station to take a closer look at the screen. “What’s down there?”

Xylion replied. “It is a class-M world with a predominantly tropical climate. It has never been visited by a Federation starship but long-range scans indicate a pre-industrialized civilization of mostly hunters and gatherers on the surface.” The Vulcan operated a few panels on the console. “Our sensors confirm a population of about five hundred thousand humanoids scattered throughout the southern hemisphere.”

“Did you find anything that could explain why the Romulans were interested in this world?” said Michael.

“There appear to be structures of unknown origin on the surface.”

“Any chance they’ve been built by the inhabitants?” said Edison.

“Unlikely,” Xylion said. “The native population exhibits a stage of development similar to that of humans during Earth’s Stone Age while the structures appear to feature advanced architectural features that are presumably beyond the native population’s means at this stage of their development.” The Vulcan looked up at the captain. “There is not much more I can determine from here, Captain. I suggest we transport to the surface for a more comprehensive investigation.”

Michael nodded and turned to his first officer. “Commander, assemble an away team and take a closer look. Don’t have to tell you to make sure you avoid the locals.”

Edison gave him a firm nod and then glanced at Nora and then Xylion who stood up from his chair. Edison turned and headed for the lift with the security officer and the Vulcan closely behind him, Deen followed as well.

“Edison to Lieutenant Armstrong, report to transporter room two for an away mission.”

“Commander, one more thing,” said Michael just before he had reached the exit.

He stopped and turned.

“Mister Spooner has requested to join you for this mission.”

Nora quickly stepped forward. "Captain, you must be joking."

"I'm not entirely sure why he wants to go but I think we should grant his request—"

The Bajoran interrupted. "Sir, I strongly object to having a civilian—"

Michael raised his hand and Nora stopped herself. "Something tells me that this man knows much more than he's letting on. And the only way to find out what he knows might be to allow him to join you. Just make sure you keep an eye on him."

"How about a leash?"

Edison smirked "This is going to be interesting," he said, exchanged one last look with Michael, and then stepped into the lift car followed by Nora, Xylion, and Deen.

* * *

"If he doesn't show up within the next minute, we're leaving without him," said Nora and gave Gene Edison a determined look. "I don't care what you say."

Gene, Nora, Xylion, Armstrong, and Deen had been waiting in the transporter room for the last five minutes for Barrington Spooner to arrive. Nora had been the first to grow impatient and had already suggested leaving him behind twice.

"He's just going to be a problem down there anyway," she said.

"He can't be all that bad," said Deen while she was checking her equipment.

The Bajoran looked at her as if she had lost her mind. A sinister grin formed on her lips when she remembered the way Spooner had looked at her in the ship's lounge earlier. "Oh, you'll see."

"I take it you don't like him very much?" she said.

"I wouldn't say I don't like him. He's just the most outrageous, the most unbelievable, the most shameless—"

As if he had been waiting for his cue, Spooner entered the room. "Why thank you, Lieutenant, I take that as a compliment."

"You're late," she said quickly and stepped on the transporter platform.

Armstrong and Xylion followed her lead.

Gene's amused little smile quickly disappeared once he turned to Spooner. "Usually when I say 'report to the transporter room' that means right away and not 'at your earliest convenience'. You might not be a Starfleet officer but you better start following orders if you want to be part of my away team," he said in a tone that left little doubt of his authority.

"I'm truly sorry for the delay, Commander. I was held up by your most charming doctor. She insisted that I be subjected to some medical scans. Not the most unpleasant experience, I might add," he said with a boyish smirk.

"I'm sure you had a great time," said Nora trying hard not to picture him flirting with Wenera.

Gene opened his palm and presented Spooner with a Starfleet combadge. "Wear this."

Spooner took it and quickly attached it to his aqua-colored shirt. It was then that he noticed that Deen was in the transporter room as well. She had not yet walked over to the platform. For a few seconds, he simply stared at her as though he was reconsidering what he was about to do.

"You don't have the slightest idea what immense pleasure it gives me to meet you, Lieutenant Deen," he said as he stepped closer to her and held out his hand, his voice cracking ever so slightly.

Deen mirrored his smile and shook his hand.

"I'm Captain Barrington Spooner, but please call me Spoon," he said.

"It's nice to meet you too, Spoon. I've heard quite a bit about you."

"Exaggerations mostly, I'm sure."

Gene, who by now had also stepped on the platform, suggestively cleared his throat. "Any time now, folks."

Deen quickly joined the others and so did Spooner.

Gene gave the always exultant transporter chief Chow the all-clear and within moments their molecules were taken apart and fired at incredible speeds toward the surface of the planet below.

The away team rematerialized at the center of a small clearing, surrounded by a lush rainforest. Even though the woods appeared to be quite thick here, there seemed to be several paths that led deeper into it, likely used by the indigenous population. Scans from orbit had shown that over forty percent of the planet was covered by large natural forests. The average temperature and humidity were high and there were a great number of animal species that called this massive ecosystem home.

Xylion opened his tricorder and began a rudimentary investigation of the area. "The closest settlement is about twelve kilometers to the east."

Gene took a couple of steps toward the dense vegetation. "Still, we need to be careful. We mustn't be seen by the inhabitants of this world," he said and then turned to face the others. "Mister Armstrong, what about those structures?"

The lieutenant activated his scanning device. "The largest one I can detect is located about three and a half kilometers southwest."

The first officer pointed in that direction. There was a narrow path leading into the forest. "Lead the way."

Armstrong entered the forest and the others followed closely.

The path quickly widened and it became obvious that it had existed for a long time. At certain points, it was wide enough for vehicles to make use of it, and from markings on the ground, it looked as if they once had.

Their lush surroundings were a sight to behold. Vegetation and animal life were extremely rich, equal to or perhaps even surpassing Earth's tropical rain forests. The most immense trees, many of which were a good ten meters wide and hundreds of meters tall, were scattered at some distance from each other but their massive treetops created an almost seamless green canopy high above. The bright sun that shined through the leaves drowned the forest into emerald colors, interwoven with white rays of light.

Below the mammoth trees, the jungle was packed with smaller ones of varied sizes, creating a dense woodland that would have been near impossible to navigate had it not been for the path the away team found itself on.

High grasses, mosses, the occasional boulder, as well as other vegetation twice as high as a grown man further filled out the thick jungle. Small streams of water intersected the away team's path more than once and there a sound of what had to be a large waterfall was coming from somewhere in the vicinity.

Numerous seen and unseen birds added their varied voices to the sound of the environment. Reindeer-sized mammals watched the six trespassers with curiosity from the distance but quickly hopped away when they threatened to come too close. It was impossible to even count or distinguish the sheer number of insects and bugs inhabiting the forest. Many of which were anything but shy to approach and surround the away team. Mostly to their discomfort.

Nora futilely tried to wave away a small swarm of blue-colored flies that had been following her for the last few minutes. "And the doctor is sure that these things don't bite?"

"It is impossible to determine the exact habits of indigenous creatures without closer study," said the Vulcan who was walking behind the security chief. "A thorough decontamination will be necessary once we return to *Eagle*."

Gene stepped over a large stone just to find himself walking right into a puddle of water. "I think what the doctor meant to say was that there are no immediate biological threats from the ecosystem," he said and quickly stepped on the drier path again.

"Great," said Nora who had finally managed to escape the blue flies. They were quickly replaced by a smaller sort of mosquitoes that seemed to be attracted to the sweat on her face.

Deen had been using her tricorder to record as much about the local flora and fauna as possible. Just like with archeology, she was fascinated by exobiology. She had been well-educated in many sciences from an early age.

Spooner walked up beside her. "I couldn't help but notice that you seem very young. Is that another Tenarian characteristic? I mean besides your beauty."

She looked up and smiled at him. "I'm twenty-one."

"Amazing," he said with honest surprise. "So it's true what they say. Your people mature a lot faster than average humanoids."

She nodded.

He seemed so distracted by her smile, he almost tripped over a large root that stuck out from the ground.

"You must excuse me, I've never seen a Tenarian before. The beauty of your people is like a myth and I find now that it was wildly understated."

She didn't blush at his complementary words but never the less seemed flattered and acknowledge him with a short nod. She was used to the way people reacted to her. It hadn't always been easy, especially when she had left her home world and lived among other humanoids for the first time.

"Most of my people do not travel away from our world. At least not for long."

“Why would you want to leave paradise?” he said.

She nodded again. “But that has never stopped us to welcome visitors.”

“I’ll make a note to drop by at the earliest possible opportunity.”

“You’d love it.”

“Oh, there isn’t a doubt in my mind.”

Nora wasn’t happy about the friendly conversation taking place a few meters behind her. She didn’t know what they were talking about but she didn’t appreciate the idea that Spooner could actually charm Deen off her feet. The Bajoran adored Deen but she knew that her greatest flaw was that everyone adored her and that for some reason, she could not bring herself to dislike anybody. A quality she found most unsettling.

She walked up next to Edison. “Aren’t you going to do something about that?”

He gave her a quizzical look. Then he noticed her gesturing at Spooner and Deen behind them

He took a quick look and then smiled. He didn’t like Spooner that much either but if nothing else, his old-fashioned ways and his attempts to get by on mostly his charms tended to amuse him. “What do you want me to do, Laas? Separate them like children?” he said. “Relax, he’s harmless,” he added when he realized that Nora was not satisfied.

She sighed and increased her pace, deciding it was best to put as much distance as possible to the man she found so offending. She quickly passed Armstrong and replaced him as the spearhead of the away team.

“Sir, I am picking up humanoid life signs three hundred meters ahead,” said the Vulcan after several uneventful minutes had passed.

“Let’s approach with caution,” Gene told his officers.

Soon after the away team discovered the source of the life sign readings. They had climbed up a small ridge that overlooked a lake below. A river streamed into it from one side and a waterfall dropped down on the other.

By the lake were three humanoid aliens. They were dressed in simple animal hides. They had dark skin and were remarkably tall. The smallest of them stood at least two meters in height. They had colorful markings that covered their bare arms and legs. It was difficult to determine if those markings had been painted on or if they were part of their skin. The two men and one woman sat by the lake and seemed to be involved in a conversation. Only a few meters away lay two dead deer.

“Most interesting,” said Xylion who was lying on the ridge next to the others. “It would appear that they are resting after a successful hunt.”

“Yes, and look at how only the female is talking while the males are listening. She might be the leader,” said Deen observing them closely. “It could hint at a matriarchal society.”

“The female is positioned centrally while the males are seemingly in competition to win her favor,” said the science officer.

“A mating ritual?” said Deen.

Xylion nodded shortly. “It is not unusual in primitive societies for hunting and mating to be interconnected.”

Both men stood and each of them picked up one of the animal carcasses and presented them to the woman who seemed to inspect both offerings with great care.

“I wonder if she’s going to mate with both of them,” said Spooner.

Xylion turned to the civilian. “Entirely possible. Many cultures, even advanced ones, prefer more than one sexual partner.”

A smile formed on Spooner’s lips. “I just hope they leave the dead deer out of it.”

Nora shook her head and began climbing down the ridge. “You’re a sick man, Mister Spooner.”

“As much as I would love to stay here and observe the natives, it’s not what we came here to do,” said Gene and started to crawl back down as well. “Besides, if they’re really going to mate, I do not believe they would like us to watch.”

Deen and Xylion who both seemed extremely interested in the proceedings, for scientific reasons, managed to tear themselves away from the scene below and followed the first officer, so did Armstrong.

“Mister Spooner, are you coming?” said Gene with a hint of impatience. He was the only person still on the ridge.

“Certainly,” he said after a few seconds and then hesitantly turned away to join the others. “Too bad, it was just about to get interesting.”

Gene addressed Armstrong. “Lieutenant, please find us a route to avoid the natives. I don’t mind if that means that we have to take a little detour.”

The archeologist nodded and soon after led the way again.

The next half hour passed with few words being exchanged.

Spooner's main interest remained Deen while hers was still to catalog as many new species as she could. Their casual conversation was mostly one-sided with Spooner doing most of the talking. But Deen listened and never showed the slightest sign of impatience or annoyance. She answered all of his questions to the best of her abilities but never revealed much more than he was inquiring about.

"They say that there are more Tenarian females than there are males. Is that right?"

She nodded while at the same time adjusting her scanning device. "Yes, that is correct."

"Interesting," said Spooner. He seemed to be contemplating her answer. "How many more?"

"The ratio is roughly three to one."

Again Spooner was lost in his thoughts. It took a whole minute before he spoke again. "So I imagine it is rather difficult for a man to—" he interrupted himself, trying to think of a way to phrase his thoughts.

A wide smile came onto Deen's lips when she realized where he was going.

"With so many women and so few men how exactly do you choose—"

This time Spooner didn't stop voluntarily. Something up front caught his attention.

"Commander," called Armstrong from ahead. There was obvious excitement in his voice.

The away team quickly caught up to his position and found what he was so exhilarated about. The forest had given way to an impressive stone structure in surprisingly good condition. It was surrounded by monuments of animals and humanoid beings, some of which were still fairly intact. The similarities to the buildings on Hyteria were obvious even to the untrained eye.

"Fascinating," said the Vulcan once he had caught a glimpse of the structure before them.

It appeared to have a cylindrical shape and was almost as high as the giant trees surrounding it. The structure was wide enough that the away team could not see what lay on the other side and the vegetation had grown so close to it that it seemed impossible to pass it. It was covered with inscriptions and markings similar to the ones they had seen on the other planet.

Armstrong stepped closer to the building. "These symbols are Hyterian, I'm certain of it."

"Could this world have been a colony?" said Deen now directing her tricorder at the structure as well.

The archeologist touched the stone surface. "You're not going to believe this," he said.

Xylion stepped up next to him and touched the structure as well. One of his eyebrows rose in surprise. "The wall appears to radiate heat," he said.

"How do you explain that?"

"Must be a power source inside of the building with conduits running behind the walls," said Deen and couldn't help herself but join her two colleagues.

"A power source that has been active for such a long time? My God, imagine the implications of such technology. We must get a look inside," said Armstrong and began looking for an entrance. His disappointment over the loss of the Hyterian city fading away quickly in light of this new discovery.

Nora stepped closer to Gene and considered the structure in front of her with suspicion.

"Something wrong?" he said.

"If the Romulans were here, why did they leave this building intact while they razed Hyteria to the ground?"

He had no answer.

"We need to find a way inside," said Spooner

Armstrong threw him a glance. "Yes, but where is the entrance?"

He shrugged. "You tell me. I hear you're the archeologist."

A warning sound coming from Xylion's tricorder captured his attention. "Two humanoids are approaching our position from the northeast," he said after checking the device.

Gene looked around. "Let's give them some room."

They quickly retreated into the dense vegetation of the surrounding jungle but stayed close enough to be within visual range of the structure.

Soon after they had taken cover within the outer periphery of the forest, two male natives stepped onto the clearing. They were both tall, like the ones they had seen before, and they carried the successful result of their hunt on their shoulders. They passed the huge structure barely even acknowledging it, obviously quite familiar with the building already. One of them slowed down as he pointed at the structure. He said something to his partner but the away team could not make out what it was. They broke out in laughter. Whatever it was they were talking

about, it was amusing them greatly.

“Come on, move along already,” said Armstrong quietly, impatiently watching the natives.

But they didn't seem to be interested in leaving. On the contrary, they sat down on the rocks and began inspecting their bounty.

“I can't believe this,” Armstrong said, “They're going to stay.”

Gene turned to him. “For an archeologist, you're rather impatient, Lieutenant,” he said in a voice quiet enough as not to attract unwanted attention.

“We're patient people, Commander,” he said. “Have to be when studying mysteries that are centuries old and often refuse to give away their secrets. But it's hard to be patient when your greatest discovery is right in front of our nose.”

The two natives by the structure were in no hurry whatsoever. They started a heated conversation that nobody in the away team could understand, even with their universal translators.

“This could take a while,” said Nora, leaning against a small tree trunk.

She remained right. While the away team was burning for the chance to investigate the ancient building, the natives didn't seem concerned about the passing of time. The sun was still shining brightly in the sky and according to Xylion it, wouldn't get dark for at least another six to seven hours.

* * *

Gene and Nora had walked a bit deeper into the forest to find a more comfortable spot to wait out the hunters, while the three scientists and Spooner kept their position to await their departure.

Gene had made himself comfortable on a large stone covered by thick moss. Nora stood just a few meters away, keeping her eyes peeled on the others. She tried to sit down but seemed too restless to stay in one place for long.

“Something bothering you?”

“Huh?” she said with a puzzled expression on her face.

“You're pacing. I can understand why the others are anxious but what's got you so rattled?”

“Nothing,” she said quickly and stopped moving.

“Laas, you've been edgy all day, and I don't think it's merely because of Mister Charm over there.”

The Bajoran woman tensed up slightly.

“What is it?”

“Well,” she started and sat down on a fallen tree trunk. “I ... I don't really know how to ... the thing is...” she struggled to find the right words. Somewhere in her head, she knew exactly what she wanted to say but she couldn't bring herself to do it. It wasn't mere timidity that left her short for words. It was the fact that she had no experience in this field. When she had been younger, she had been too busy fighting for survival or planning and executing attacks on the Cardassians, leaving her with very little time for romance. The few times she had tried, she had come to regret it.

Her thoughts were interrupted by a soft chuckle coming from the first officer. She shot him an irritated look.

“I'm sorry. It's just in the time I've known you, I've never seen you at a loss for words. It's not like you at all.”

She jumped back on her feet. Embarrassed.

“I didn't mean to interrupt you,” he said.

“Forget it,” she said coolly as she quickly recovered from her moment of weakness.

“I'm serious. If you have something you want to get off your chest—”

This time it was Spooner who interrupted the conversation. “This is becoming ridiculous,” he said from his hiding place, stood, and headed straight toward the building.

Gene and Nora quickly returned to the others.

“Mister Spooner, don't,” Gene said with as much urgency as a hushed voice allowed.

But it was too late.

“Yes, real harmless, isn’t he?” said Nora and glared at Spooner who had just stepped out of the forest.

The two natives jumped to their feet as soon as they noticed him approaching.

“Don’t get up on my account,” he said to them with a smile. He raised both his hands with his palms facing outward. “No need for alarm, we come in peace.”

The two men simply stared at him as he stepped closer. They wore long and sharpened wooden spears on their back, undoubtedly weapons they had used to kill their prey, but they showed no intentions of using them.

“What the hell is he doing?” said Gene, unable to quite hide his annoyance.

“It would appear he is attempting to communicate with the natives,” said Xylion.

Gene shot him a glare. “I can see that.”

Indeed, Spooner seemed to speak to them as if he was talking to close friends. And judging from their laughter, he greatly amused them. Gene and the others could not make out what he was saying, however. Then Spooner turned around and looked directly at the away team hidden in the forest.

“Don’t you dare,” Gene whispered with a bad feeling about what he was up to.

Spooner pointed at their position and then waved them over. “It’s all right, Commander, you can come out now.”

The two natives looked around Spooner and spotted the officers in the jungle. This only served to heighten their amusement.

Gene didn’t see the point of trying to stay concealed any longer now they had been exposed. He stood, dusted off his uniform, and then walked onto the clearing. The others followed suit.

“Mister Spooner, you had clear orders to stay away from the local population. What part of that order did you not understand?” he said while approaching him and the two natives.

“Yes, I’m well aware of your precious non-interference directive,” he said with little apparent regard for it. “But surely it doesn’t apply here. These people have met many aliens before.”

“Interesting,” said Xylion. “If that is the case it might be almost impossible to determine to which degree the development of their culture has been damaged by exposure to advanced alien visitors.”

“Damaged? Have you ever considered that this exposure might have been helpful to their society? Leave it to a Vulcan to point out the negative aspects of every situation.”

“The natural development of these people has been greatly disturbed. At this stage knowledge of the universe will cause more damage than good.”

Spooner was about to retort when Gene cut him off. “We’re not going to discuss the wider implications of the Prime Directive with you, Mister Spooner.”

The two indigenous men were watching the off-worlders with great interest now. It was apparent that they had seen other visitors before and their curiosity was almost child-like. Their greatest interest seemed to be with Nora and Deen as they studied them very closely. Deen noticed their interest and decided to use it to her advantage. She carefully stepped closer to one of them. The man, easily two heads taller than she, didn’t seem to mind in the least. He smiled down at her and she returned the gesture and began scanning him with her tricorder.

Nora on the other hand paid little attention to the insinuating looks of the other native. She was too concerned with Spooner and kept her glare focused on him. She didn’t notice when he approached her and started poking her right shoulder. The second time he did so she just turned her head to give him a forced smile. But the insisting man kept poking her until she whipped around to face him. “What?”

The man just smiled and pointed to the animal he had hunted.

It took Nora a few seconds to understand the implications. She slowly stepped away from him, trying her best to keep a smile on her face. She didn’t wish to offend the native. “That’s really flattering but—“ she looked at Gene for help before regarding the smiling native again. “I think I’ll pass,” she said and took a step closer to the first officer.

The man looked at Gene. His smile vanished and he nodded understandingly.

Nora opened her mouth when she suddenly realized what the native had wrongfully concluded but she couldn’t quite find the right words.

When she became aware of how close she had stepped to Edison, she quickly took two steps back.

In the meantime, Armstrong had walked right up to the building again to continue his examination. After a few minutes of unsuccessfully trying to find a way inside, he considered Spooner. “Did they happen to tell you where the entrance is?”

As if knowing exactly what Armstrong had asked, one of the two natives walked up to a spot at the wall of the structure. To the away team’s surprise, he started to touch some of the symbols in a certain sequence.

"Looks like they've done this before," said Nora.

"I told you, they've had other visitors."

After a few seconds, a rectangle of pure light, about three meters high and four meters wide began glowing on the stone wall.

"Interesting," said the Vulcan.

Armstrong couldn't even find words. But he managed to direct his scanning device to the portal.

When the away team approached, they noticed that the rectangle was in fact a passageway that led inside the structure. The walls as well as the floor and ceiling were so brightly lit, the whole thing appeared seamless. There were no lamps or other forms of illuminating devices. The light seemed to emanate directly from the plain stone surfaces.

Armstrong set foot into the structure and touched the surface of the wall. It was not any warmer than before and it still felt like solid stone. "This is unbelievable. This technology has survived thousands of years." He turned to the others who were still standing outside the passageway. "The buildings on Hyteria must have had similar devices as this one."

Gene turned to face Spooner. "They said that other aliens have visited the structure. Could you ascertain who came here before us?"

Spooner shook his head and he didn't get a chance to ask the natives either.

Shortly after they had opened up the building, they quickly gathered their prey and pranced away back into the jungle. Their laughter could still be heard even after they had disappeared into the dense forest.

"I guess they got bored with us," said Deen and followed Armstrong into the building.

So did the others.

The hallway they entered seemed to be a perfectly symmetrical construction. It had no obvious features unless they were hidden by the immense bright light that surrounded the away team. Only after about fifty meters did the artificial illumination slowly give way to more natural light.

The long corridor ended and they stepped into a circular room that seemed almost identical to the one they had discovered on Hyteria. Sunlight entered the chamber from the roofless ceiling far above. Three more passages, lit as brightly as the one they had used, led in three more directions. The room had a few differences from the ones they had visited before. It was larger and it had six wide columns positioned around the room and close to the walls. All but one had collapsed, and large pieces of the broken column were spread out across the chamber.

"This is unbelievable," said Armstrong who quickly walked through the room, studying the symbols and inscriptions on the walls. He didn't even know where to begin.

"Looks like we're getting a second chance," said Deen and began a rudimentary scan of the new surroundings.

Gene was similarly surprised to not only find an ancient building in such good condition but also it being so analogous to the one they had found on a planet several light years away. "Are you sure that the same people built this place?"

"We need to investigate this building closer to determine that with absolute certainty," said the Vulcan science officer. He had walked over to another side of the room to record some symbols that had caught his attention.

"There is, of course, the possibility that later cultures have imitated styles and designs of an older and more advanced one," said Armstrong, without taking his eyes off the wall he was standing at. "But so far I have seen several clear parallels that strongly suggest that we're standing in a structure erected by the Hyterians."

"I know that we speculated that the Hyterians built colonies, but that they created one this far away from their homeworld is impressive," said the Gene.

"We knew that they traveled the stars but this..." Armstrong interrupted himself. He turned around and a small sigh escaped his lips.

Gene gave him a quizzical look, "What's wrong?"

"Everything around here is in such good condition. As an archeologist used to dig up old ruins, I almost feel superfluous," he said.

Deen stepped up next to him and put a hand on his shoulder. "Trust me, Toby, this mystery will need the mind of an archeologist to be revealed," she said and smiled at him.

Xylion turned and gave her a short nod. "I concur," he said and then faced Gene. "I suggest we consider the transfer of additional equipment and personnel to this site."

Gene sighed. He didn't like the idea of a scientific enterprise the size of the one they had deployed on Hyteria. Not only because the structure seemed to be right in the middle of the native population's hunting grounds but also because Hyteria had proven that they were not the only ones with an interest in the ancient race. He looked around to find Spooner standing close to the wall on the opposite side of the room. He seemed to have a great interest in whatever it was he was looking at.

"Did you find something, Mister Spooner?" he said while taking a few steps toward him.

The man quickly spun around. "No, not at all. Just more of these indecipherable inscriptions," he said without stepping away from the

wall. His broad back covered the part of the wall he had been directing his attention at.

Nora stepped closer. "Why do I have such a hard time believing anything that comes out of your mouth?"

"Must be because you're such a suspicious person," he said and took a step back as she approached. "I could suggest a good counselor to address your underlying trust issues."

"Or, and stay with me on this one, the reason I'm so suspicious of you is because everything you say is a lie," she said, stepped up to him, and shoved him aside.

Behind him, she discovered a large circle carved into the stone wall. It contained a few star-shaped symbols in the lower left quadrant that were connected by straight lines. The rest of the roughly one-meter-wide circle was empty.

"I'm telling you, it's nothing," said Spooner while she considered the carvings.

"Why don't we let the scientists determine that?" she said and pinned him with a scowl.

Armstrong, Deen, and Xylion quickly joined the two and focused their attention on the wall section.

"It's definitely something," said Armstrong right away.

"The precision with which this pattern is carved is remarkable. It appears to have mathematical properties," said the Vulcan. He pointed his tricorder at the wall and began recording the engraving.

"It almost looks like a map," said Deen and touched one of the star symbols. The small star lightened up when her finger made contact and she stepped back with surprise, bumping into the equally astonished Toby Armstrong.

"Interesting," said the Vulcan while he observed the light spreading from the star symbol across the lines. "It is drawing a course."

Once the light had reached its destination, a beam shot out from the wall, hitting Deen square in the chest and creating a small but bright pattern across her dark uniform.

"It's projecting something," said Armstrong as he tried to determine what exactly he was looking at. The swell of her chest made it difficult to decipher the projection.

"Do you like what you see?" said Spooner with a boyish grin.

"It's amazing," said the young archeologist who hadn't caught the insinuating tone in his voice. Instead, he moved slightly closer to Deen with his eyes glued to the light patterns. "But the uneven surface is not ideal."

DeMara Deen cleared her throat.

That's when Armstrong realized that he was staring right at her breasts.

"Not ideal?" she said.

He very slowly looked up into her purple eyes. His blush was noticeable even on his dark skin. "No ... I mean, yes ... I'm sorry I didn't ... I mean, they're just ... uh..."

Spooner laughed out loud.

She smiled sweetly at him. "Maybe I just try and move aside."

He nodded but his words were now stuck in his throat.

The Tenarian stepped out of the beam's way. Now, unhindered, the ray of light traveled to the dead center of the room where it projected a three-dimensional image of a large sphere with eight smaller globes surrounding it. Near the fourth globe, several particles were glowing brighter than the rest of the shimmering projection.

Gene found himself right in the middle of the central globe. He too stepped aside to look at the entire image from the outside.

"It is a holographic orrery," said Xylion.

Nora shot Spooner another quick glare. "It's nothing, huh?"

Spooner simply shrugged and stepped closer to join the others observing their amazing discovery.

"Is this the Dentura system?" said Gene without taking his eyes off the projection in front of him.

"Unlikely," said Xylion. "It does not match the characteristics of this system." He looked back at the circular carving on the wall and then turned to face the projection again. "It appears to be a representation of a solar system about eight light years from our current position. If indeed this is a map, then it is clearly pointing to the asteroid belt contained within that system."

"Perhaps it's the location of another colony," said Nora now stepping closer to the projection herself.

"It could be. But it wouldn't surprise me if it was something more than that. After all, these are not just your ordinary directions," said Deen.

“Whatever it is, we should go and see for ourselves. For all we know it could be a treasure map,” said Armstrong who had by now consciously put a bit more distance between him and the Tenarian.

“With all we have seen so far that wouldn’t surprise me in the least,” said Gene and eyed Spooner who stood at the opposite side of the holographic construct.

“This all feels like a wild goose chase to me,” he said and stepped into the projection. “There’s plenty to see right here. Why run off again just because of a few twinkling lights coming out of a wall?”

“It almost sounds like you don’t want us to find whatever it is this is pointing us to. Maybe it’s because you want the treasure for yourself,” Nora said without even trying to hide the accusatory tone in her voice.

“Do as you wish. I just want to spare you the trouble of chasing phantoms.”

“Of course, you are.”

“Ultimately, it’s up to the captain. We’ll return to the ship and make a decision there.” Gene continued before Armstrong could protest. “And no, this time we leave nobody behind,” he added before the archeologist had a chance to make his point.

The other man looked around and uttered a little sigh of disappointment.

* * *

It was sunny and it was hot.

But that was as much as he knew about the place he found himself in. And yet, he walked with purpose toward his destination. He couldn’t deny that there was a certain familiarity with his surroundings. And there were others, like him, yet different. They all went about their business, as he was. The situation was bizarre and yet, at the same time, he felt neither worries nor concerns. As a matter of fact, he felt thoroughly relaxed. The world seemed upside down. Everything that should have been unusual seemed as regular as breathing. Everything out of place felt like it fitted just right, and everyone unknown looked like a familiar acquaintance.

And then everything changed.

The sun disappeared, replaced by sudden darkness that crept across the land. The creatures that only moments ago had seemed as carefree as he was, now froze in terror. They turned and stared at the horizon where a menacing shade now approached.

Everything it touched, it destroyed. Trees and plants simply died as soon as the darkness was upon them. Animals and birds turned and ran as fast as they could but there seemed to be no escape.

The creatures surrounding him began to scream in horror. Many gathered their children and loved ones in a futile hope to escape while others simply stood there and cried.

He could feel the threat of the darkness as well. He didn’t know what was going to happen but he knew that it was going to be painful. Very painful. Only seconds before the uncompromising gloom reached him, he closed his eyes. From one moment to the next, all that had been good and pleasant and comforting was gone and replaced by a feeling of sheer terror and agony.

When Michael opened his eyes, he saw the ceiling of his ready room.

He had lain down on his couch for a short nap. He had felt more tired than he had thought, probably because of the restless night before. But the easy rest he had hoped for had not come.

He felt agitated, his heart was pumping faster than usual and his hands were sweaty. Once again, the feelings he had experienced in the dream had somehow crossed the path into consciousness.

He sat up and slightly shook his head when he realized that he could not explain what it was he had been dreaming about. It worried him now that there seemed to be a continuous theme, almost a structure to his dreams. It was different from anything he had ever experienced before. That alone made this unsettling.

He stood and went over to sit by his desk. There wasn’t much he could do about the dreams, he decided. There was always the option of seeing a counselor and talking about it openly. A notion he had never been entirely comfortable with. He didn’t trust psychologists and people whose business it was to analyze the inner workings of somebody’s mind. As far as he was concerned, the mind was the last true fortress of privacy and an area that should remain untouched by outsiders.

The fact that he had collapsed on the bridge hours earlier still troubled him and he couldn’t deny any longer that his dreams and the incident on Hyteria were connected somehow. But for now, he could not justify seeking out outside help. And who knew if there was anyone who could even lessen his worries? Perhaps all he had to do was to ride it out like an old-fashioned cold.

Gene had given his eager science officers a couple of minutes to collect as much data as possible before returning to the ship.

It was clearer than ever now that there was more going on than he had previously believed. Not only had they stumbled across an ancient civilization, they had also left behind secrets just waiting to be uncovered. And all evidence seemed to suggest that they were late to this party.

“I think I’ve exhausted the memory banks of my tricorder. There is nothing more I can record here,” said Deen and put her scanning device back into the holster at her hip. “It’s a shame that we can’t stay longer,” she added and looked at Gene to see if perhaps he had changed his mind.

“We might be able to return but for now we have to get back to the ship and find out what we have.”

She nodded as a small sigh escaped her lips.

Gene looked across the room to find Armstrong and Xylion going over some inscriptions on the wall. They seemed to be brainstorming theories on the constructors of the building.

Opposite them were Spooner and Nora, the latter now keeping an even closer eye on him.

“Okay people let’s—“

Loud voices coming from one of the passageways stopped him in mid-sentence. The voices grew louder quickly.

He looked at Deen and then at the others. Out of instinct, he signaled them to find cover. Something in the pitch and tone of those unknown voices was giving him a bad feeling about this.

The two science officers as well as Nora and Spooner slipped into two opposite hallways. But Gene and Deen were too far away and settled for a large piece of rubble instead. They were not fast enough not to be seen by the four large Klingon warriors who entered the hall.

All four of them were huge men and wore traditional Klingon uniforms made out of black fur and covered with metallic chest and shoulder plates. There was about a second of hesitation as the Klingons were startled by finding the Starfleet officers.

Their noisy conversation quickly died down and they stared at the two Starfleet officers trying to hide behind the fallen stone column. Their confusion was replaced by determination as they drew their pistol-shaped disruptors and opened fire.

Deen and Gene crouched down just in time to avoid an emerald energy blast that would have taken off both their heads. Instead, it hit the wall behind them, leaving a large black scorch mark.

“Klingons? I thought we had a cease-fire,” said Deen trying to make herself heard above the thunderous blasts of disruptor fire.

Gene peeked over the cover he was crouched behind and was able to squeeze off one shot with his phaser before he was forced to retract again. “I’ll make sure to remind them once they stop shooting at us.”

The firing Klingons stepped into the room, self-assured of an easy victory. But their progress came to a sudden halt once Xylion and Nora opened fire from their positions as well. Realizing they were up against more targets, they started to backtrack for cover, but not letting up on firing on anything and anyone who wasn’t Klingon.

Gene quickly realized that they had reached a stalemate. While his team was in a better tactical position, the Klingons had the advantage of superior firepower. For now, either side was going to make headway, and the longer this continued, the higher the chances one of his people was going to get seriously hurt.

He momentarily stopped firing when he could hear the Klingons loudly arguing with each other. But the universal translator seemed to have trouble interpreting their conversation over the noise of battle.

He looked at Deen for help. “What are they saying?”

She listened for a few seconds and then tilted her head slightly. “I’m not entirely sure,” she said. “Something about returning to their base?”

The exchange of weapons fire slowed as the Klingons began to retract back into the hallway they had come from. After a few seconds, Gene could hear their retreating footsteps with just a few final and unaimed blasts striking the room, blowing up stone and dust.

He slowly stood from his cover to get a better look. The passageway in front of him was still remarkably well-lit and it was easy to notice the absence of their enemies.

Nora came running up to her. “Are you all right?” she said with a little more worry in her voice than was called for.

He turned to her and gave her a nod.

Quickly realizing that she had let her concern for him become a bit too obvious, she turned to the others who were reassembling in the room. "How about you?"

"We are uninjured," said the Vulcan.

But Armstrong seemed less interested in their physical state as he was in the condition of the chamber.

As the dust of the shootout began to clear, the full extent of the damage became more obvious. Many of the inscriptions and engravings had been destroyed and the walls were crumbling at many places. Most notably, the star map and the source of the projection were scorched beyond recognition. The projection itself had long since ceased.

The archeologist was noticeably shocked by the destruction the encounter with the Klingons had caused. But this time, he seemed to manage the loss better than he had done on Hyteria. Perhaps the previous experience had hardened him.

"Good thing we finished recording most of this," said Deen as she inspected the damaged walls.

Gene turned to Nora. "Where did these Klingons come from?"

The security chief shrugged. She didn't say it but she clearly blamed herself for not noticing their approach. She had been too concerned with watching Spooner that she had paid little attention to anything else.

Gene took a few determined steps toward the passageway the Klingons had disappeared in. "Commander, what do you read?"

The Vulcan activated his tricorder. "Sensors seem to be less effective within this structure. I do register four bio signs heading rapidly southeast."

"I bet whatever questions we have about all this, those Klingons have some of the answers," he said and drew his phaser again. He turned to face the others. "I want those answers. We'll follow them to their base." Without waiting for the other's opinion, he stepped into the bright corridor and began following the Klingons.

Nora was the next through, staying as close as possible to the first officer. The other officers and Spooner followed suit.

The hallway wasn't much longer than the one they had used to walk into the structure. There were no other rooms or intersecting corridors and it seemed that the only reason for the entire building was that one oval chamber at its center.

Gene and his officers quickly found themselves under the open sky again. They were standing on an elevated plateau with the rainforest spreading out beneath them. A treacherous cliff directly ahead allowed no way to safely descend into the forest except for a very narrow path to the left. The fresh foot marks in the dirt were clear signs that the Klingons had taken the downward winding trail very recently.

Gene was about to head for the path when a loud noise caught his attention. It was coming from somewhere below in the jungle but was clearly not natural. The roaring sound increased quickly even though the origin of it remained hidden.

"I have a very bad feeling about this," said Spooner and then began covering his ears as the sound was becoming deafening.

Only seconds later, a large green object peeked up from under the cliff and fully revealed itself as it moved upward. An imposing Klingon space vessel now hovered only a few meters in front of the away team. Its two massive and upward-tilted wings spanning about seventy meters. At the end of each wing, a massive disruptor canon pointed at where the away team stood.

"This is not good," said Spooner and slowly slid toward the path, trying to get out of the way.

"Come to think of it," said DeMara Deen, speaking just loudly enough for the others to hear her. "I think they said ship, not base."

Gene turned his head to pin her with a less-than-appreciative glare.

She shrugged innocently. "Honest mistake."

A high pitch sound signaled that the mounted weapons on the Bird-of-Prey were powering up.

"Take cover!" yelled Nora and jumped at Edison, pulling him and herself to the ground.

The disruptors began firing and the powerful blasts hit the façade of the ancient building. Within seconds the entrance collapsed and rocks began raining down onto the plateau. A huge cloud of dust and smoke engulfed the entire front of the building.

The ship seemed to be in too much of a hurry to inspect the results of its attack. It promptly turned away from the structure and accelerated until it disappeared into the clouds.

Deen coughed hard when she finally got up again. She had felt the Vulcan's immense strength when he had pushed her and Armstrong to the right of the structure's entrance. She still coughed when she helped the unharmed archeologist to his feet. She was relieved to find Xylion in good health as well. They had each received a few scratches and bruises and their uniforms and faces were completely covered with dust but they had come away from the attack without serious injury.

Spooner had sprung headfirst down the trail once the shooting had begun. He had avoided most of the dust and rocks but his clothes were dirty from the muddy ground. He stepped up to the structure but couldn't see much as the smoke was still dissipating. He stumbled over something soft. He looked down and a wide smile came over his face. At his feet lay the first officer and on top of him was Nora Laas, looking right into Edison's eyes.

Even after what he had gone through, Gene smiled at the Bajoran right on top of him.

She blushed but her face was so much covered up by dust that nobody could tell. She realized that Edison didn't seem to be bothered by her weight pressing down on him and she froze for a few seconds. It wasn't until she heard Spooner's insinuating cough that she quickly regained her composure and pushed herself off the first officer.

"Lieutenant, if I had known about this before, I would have never dreamed of coming between you and the commander," said Spooner still wearing his smile.

Nora stood and turned to Spooner. "You need to shut your mouth," she said and turned her back to him to dust off her uniform.

Gene got onto his feet as well. He ignored Spooner and stared at Nora's back for a moment. Then he quickly checked on the other members of his away team, noticing that nobody was seriously injured. He tapped his combadge. "Away team to *Eagle*, we're about ready to get out of here."

* * *

Science lab three was the biggest of its kind on *Eagle* and yet it wasn't much to look at. Despite the great work that was achieved within these walls by the ship's expansive science department, their workplace didn't do much to reflect the many discoveries that took place in this room filled with computer stations and display screens.

Located at the center of the large lab stood a table covered with control panels. A large semi-transparent view screen rose from the table, dividing it into two halves.

Currently, the archeology department was occupying the extensive facilities, taking full advantage of the high-speed optical data network connection to the ship's super-powered main computing core. All the workstations were in use by the eager members of Tobias Armstrong's half-a-dozen-strong archeology team, with at least another dozen science officers with other specialties borrowed to help with the investigation of the Hyterian civilization.

There was a lot of chatter and discussion of theories and hypotheses, as the computer was churning through all the data the teams had been able to collect, running constant simulations and extrapolating the latest interpretations and simulations of the secrets the Hyterians may have left behind when they vanished.

Toby Armstrong sat at the center of it all, entering new data and altering variables into the main console and then observing the results on the large screen.

His superior, Commander Xylion was in the chair next to him and by simply watching the two scientists, it wasn't immediately obvious if he was assisting Armstrong or if it was the other way around.

The two men had company. Michael Owens, Gene Edison, and DeMara Deen all stood behind them, following along with the results displayed on the screen. Xylion had called them to the lab to present them with their findings.

"This is amazing," said Armstrong without taking his eyes off the screen, even as his fingers continued to manipulate the controls of the console.

Michael noted that it had been the third time within the last few minutes that he had uttered those exact same words. "Do you think it might be possible for you to actually show us what it is you find so interesting?"

Armstrong looked at the captain as if he had forgotten his audience altogether. He nodded quickly and then returned to enter a few commands into the console.

On the screen, a computer simulation of two buildings appeared next to each other. They slowly rotated to show them from every perspective. The one on the left was the temple-like structure on Hyteria and the one on the right was the one the away team had found on Dentura I.

DeMara stepped closer to the screen. "That is amazing."

"What is?" said Michael a bit harsher than he had meant it to sound, beginning to feel his patience reaching its limits.

She pointed at the center of each structure displayed on the screen. "Both rooms are nearly identical. Symmetrically there's almost no difference whatsoever."

"Do you have any idea what these buildings were for? Have you had any luck translating the inscriptions we found?" said Edison.

Armstrong pressed more controls and the left side of the screen now displayed a replica of some of the engravings they had collected.

"We've found over five thousand different characters so far and have very few references to go with," said the chief archeologist. "Deciphering this language is going to be a challenge for even the most skilled linguists in the Federation."

“However,” said the Vulcan and turned with his chair to face his superior officers. “We were able to identify a limited number of similar characters in our cultural database. Most likely from civilizations that may have been directly or indirectly influenced by the Hyterians.”

“We could determine a few facts,” said Armstrong while his face lightened up with excitement about their accomplishments. “We’re pretty sure that these buildings were some sort of shrines to worship a god-like entity most likely referred to as Fen’dera.”

“Fen’dera? Sounds familiar,” said DeMara.

Xylion nodded. “A cross-reference of our cultural database revealed twenty-two entries of the same name. In fifteen cases it is the name of the highest deity of their respective culture. It is also frequently associated with the stars, enlightenment, or the sun.”

“And we’re talking about civilizations as old as thirty thousand years and as far away as the Delphic Expanse,” said Armstrong.

“That is impressive,” said Michael. “Go on.”

Armstrong continued. “We’re fairly certain that the Hyterians were a highly spiritual society. The divine good is often symbolized by light, virtue, and honor while evil is darkness, treachery, and malintent.”

“We believe we have found an ongoing motif of not only a scorn of evil but actual and palpable fear of it,” said Xylion while several similar-looking characters appeared on the screen.

“With their advanced technology, I wonder what they had to fear,” said Edison and looked at the captain.

“What about the map you discovered? Have you made any progress on that?” said Michael.

Armstrong entered more commands and the screen changed to show the projection they had discovered on the surface. He shook his head slightly when he turned to face Michael. “That’s one of the many mysteries we haven’t quite figured out yet. The computer had no luck in translating the inscriptions that we think are commentaries on the projection.”

“In other words, it could be the location of their greatest treasure or a warning to avoid a certain death trap,” said Edison.

DeMara turned to the first officer. “Or both.”

“I understand that this solar system,” Michael pointed to the screen, “was projected out of a star map.”

The Vulcan nodded. “Correct. And the map features navigational points that can be translated to our current star maps.”

“So we can set a course to that location?” said Michael.

“That would be possible.”

Michael turned to his operations manager. “Dee, return to the bridge and have Culsten set a direct course and get us underway.”

“Right away,” she said and turned to leave the science lab.

“Captain,” said Armstrong and stood from his chair. “Perhaps it would be more prudent to stay here for now and continue to fully investigate this site so we can learn more about these people before we continue to yet another location. There might be plenty more that we could learn here. There are bound to be other Hyterian remains on the surface.”

But Michael shook his head. “There is more than archeology in play here, Mister Armstrong. I still have no explanation for why both the Klingons and the Romulans are showing such a great interest in a five-hundred-thousand-year-old civilization. I refuse to believe it’s scientific curiosity.”

“I’m willing to bet that there is one person on board who knows far more about this than he lets on,” said Edison.

Michael nodded. “I think it’s time that we have a proper chat with our guest.”

* * *

“I don’t know what else I can tell you, Captain,” said Spooner sitting at the end of the long conference table in *Eagle*’s briefing room. He had been summoned there by Michael who was sitting opposite him at the other end of the table. Commander Edison sat to his right.

“Why were you so interested in joining the away team?” said the first officer.

“I already told you. I felt confined on the ship.”

Edison’s expression was doubtful. “And your interest in the ruins?”

The blonde-haired merchant smiled. “A hobby.”

“Of course,” said Edison and leaned back in his chair exchanging a glance with his captain.

"I do not think there is anyone on this ship who believes a single word you are saying, Mister Spooner," said Owens.

"Actually, there's this cute ensign on deck twelve who seemed very receptive to what I had to tell her," Spooner said with a growing smile, making himself more comfortable in his chair. "But then again it's no secret that Starfleet officers have trust issues."

"Yes, we do," said Edison. "Whenever we meet the sorts of you."

Spooner gave the first officer an almost wounded expression. It was obviously an act.

"You're telling us that you know nothing about the Hyterians and why the Romulans, as well as the Klingons, seem to be interested in them?"

Barrington Spooner leaned forward and looked directly in the eye. "Nothing at all."

"Very well," Michael said and stood. "I don't feel comfortable having you wander freely around my ship anymore, I'm afraid. I would place you in the brig but you have given me no reason to do so."

Spooner stood as well, his smile widening. "I completely understand. If I may be so bold as to make a suggestion?" he said but continued without waiting for an answer. "You could lend me a shuttle craft I could take to get me to the nearest port. I promise to take good care of it and leave it there for you so that you may reclaim it once your mission is over. This way I'd be out of your hair for good."

"I'm afraid your collateral isn't good enough to make such an arrangement realistic, Mister Spooner," said the first officer while leaving his seat.

"Well then what do you have in mind?" he said, now slightly confused.

Michael turned to Edison. "Dentura is a lovely planet, is it not?"

The first officer nodded. "Beautiful. Especially this time of year."

"Many remote and uninhabited islands, I presume?"

"More than you can count."

Spooner took a few quick steps toward the two officers on the other side of the observation lounge. "Now, wait just a minute."

Michael and Edison looked at the approaching Spooner whose smile had disappeared from his face.

"You can't be serious."

"You're not giving me a lot of options here. I don't trust you enough to take you with us."

Edison walked up to Spooner. "Don't worry, we won't forget to pick you up once we're done. Say in two or three months."

Michael turned to head for the exit and Eugene quickly followed him.

Spooner sighed. "Hold on," he said. "You win."

Michael stopped and turned to face Spooner once more. "What was that?"

"They're looking for an artifact," he said quietly.

"What kind of artifact?" said Edison and stepped closer.

Spooner sat back down. "Nobody really knows. But it's supposed to be immensely powerful. It might be a weapon more devastating than anything in the known galaxy. Something akin to a doomsday device."

"And the Hyterians built it?" said Edison.

Spooner nodded. "They hid it somewhere."

Edison turned to Michael. "Most likely so it would not be found by someone who would use it irresponsibly."

Their glances fell back on Spooner.

"What exactly is your involvement in all this?" said Michael as he took his chair again.

Spooner, his glances downcast, looked back up. "A few months ago, I overheard a group of mostly drunk mercenaries on a bar on Deep Space Nine babbling about an ancient weapon that would make them rich beyond their dreams."

"Any chance that those were the same mercenaries that chased you through those planetary rings?" said Edison.

"I was on my way to Hyteria when I bumped into them. They recognized me and let's just say they weren't too happy to see me again."

"Who can blame them?" said Edison.

"What else do you know?" said Michael.

Spooner shook his head. "Not a whole lot. The mercenaries were convinced that the Hyterians left clues to the whereabouts of their weapon in their colonies. I swear that's all I know."

Michael studied Spooner carefully to evaluate the trustworthiness of his story. His instincts told him that trusting this man would be at his own peril but at least on the surface his story seemed to make sense. He pressed a control embedded on the shiny black surface of the conference table.

The door to the room opened and a security guard entered the room.

"Please escort Mister Spooner back to his quarters. He is allowed to move freely on the ship but I want him under guard at all times."

The guard acknowledged with a nod.

Barrington Spooner stood and headed for the exit where the security officer was waiting for him.

"And Mister Spooner," said Michael before he had reached the doors.

The man turned around.

"Stay away from my female crewmembers, please."

The man smirked but didn't say anything. He turned and left the briefing room closely followed by the security guard.

Once the doors had closed behind them, Edison turned to the captain. "Nora will be disappointed that we're not leaving him stranded on a remote island in the middle of nowhere."

"For now, he's the only person on board who knows anything about this artifact he claims everyone is after. He might turn out to be useful."

"You intend to look for it then?"

Michael stood. "We cannot afford not to. If there is any chance it turns out to be as powerful as Spooner thinks it is, we cannot allow it to fall into the wrong hands."

Edison nodded.

"From what we've seen of the Hyterians so far there is no telling how powerful this artifact could be. It might very well drastically shift the balance of power in this sector maybe even in the quadrant. Gene, we can't let that happen."

"I know. But it looks as if our competitors already have a significant head start on us."

Michael started for doors with a determined stride. "We'll have to make up for that. Increase our speed to maximum warp."

No Way Out

“We are now entering system XY-587, dropping to sub-light speed,” said Lif Culsten as he entered the warp drive shutdown command into the conn.

The viewscreen at the front emphasized the deceleration when the image came to a near standstill.

“Are we still sure this is the system we’ve seen on the Hyterian map?” said Edison from his chair next to the captain.

“The location of this system is consistent with the markings on the star map,” said Xylion, sitting at his usual post at the aft science station.

Edison referred to the computer screen mounted to his right. “The map seemed to be referring to a sizable asteroid belt.”

Michael stood and took a few steps toward the viewscreen. “Dee, are you able to locate it?”

Her fingers started to dance across the touch controls of her console. After a few seconds, the ship’s sensors informed her of the result of the scan. She shook her head. “There is no significant asteroid presence within this system.”

Michael turned to Xylion, fixing him with an asking expression.

Edison stood as well. “Perhaps this isn’t the right place after all. Did we make a mistake?”

The Vulcan considered Edison as if he had just proposed the unfeasible. “The Hyterian map is surprisingly precise and correlates to current cartographical data with an eighty-eight point six five percent accuracy.”

“Could Spooner have been right after all? Are we on a wild goose chase?” said Edison and looked at the captain.

Michael turned to face the screen again, staring at the emptiness it currently displayed. There was a dim star in the distant background, radiating very little light. “Are there any M-class planetoids in this system?”

“XY-587 is a main sequence red dwarf unlikely to support habitable planets. The star is also prone to high levels of solar flare activity and produces strong magnetic fields,” said Xylion.

“In other words, not a prime vacation spot,” quipped Culsten.

“Wait, this can’t be the right system,” said DeMara after double-checking her readings and then looking up from her console. “There are only five planets here.”

Edison nodded as he stepped closer to look over her shoulder. “The projection had eight planets.”

“The Hyterian chart says we’re in the right place but the system does not match the one in the projection,” said Michael still looking at the screen. “What are we missing here, people?”

Silence followed, filling the bridge with the gentle operational hum of the ship’s instruments and engines.

Michael refused to believe that this mission had come to an end before it had even begun as he walked back to his chair to sit down. He glanced at his first officer, but Gene Edison had no answers to give.

“With the assistance of the computer, I have thoroughly re-analyzed and compared our charts with all data points we were able to collect on Dentura. There is no question, in my opinion, that we are at the correct coordinates as indicated on the Hyterian map,” said Xylion.

“But we’re missing three planets and one asteroid belt,” said Culsten. “They can’t just disappear, can they?”

“Dee, put the Hyterian projection on screen,” said Michael.

Momentarily, the display on the screen changed to a rotating wireframe of the projection the away team had activated on the planet. One large central globe with eight smaller planets slowly moving around it in their respective orbits. A small dot within a much larger arrangement of dots of various sizes near the seventh planet shimmered more brightly than the rest of the illustration.

“Now show me this system on the same scale next to it.”

The wireframe moved to the left while on the right an orrery of XY-587 appeared. This one was much more detailed and displayed in photorealistic colors. It featured a much smaller central star and only five planets surrounding it.

“Those are different systems,” said Culsten.

“Not necessarily,” said Xylion who had left his station to move closer to the main screen. “Two of the planets in this system appear to have a similar mass as the two outer planets in the Hyterian projection,” he added and pointed at the screen, not unlike a college professor teaching a class of students.

“They’re the same,” said DeMara.

“This projection is what? Over a hundred-thousand years old. That’s a long time. What if the system has changed?” said Michael. “The star seems much smaller; it might have lost matter and altered the gravity forces in this system.”

“A significant shift in gravimetric forces in this system would have affected the orbits of the planets,” said the Vulcan and returned to his station. “I’m running a simulation based on the star losing mass and gravimetric pull consistent with its contemporary condition.”

On the screen, the wireframe projection took on a more natural look, similar to the illustration on the right. The large central globe grew smaller causing the surrounding planets to change orbits. The paths of the inner planets closed on each other until they intersected. The first planet collided with the star and disappeared, making it quickly lose even more matter. Then the second planet and the third planet collided with each other, eradicating both. In the end, all that was left were five planets that had significantly closed to their sun. It was now an almost exact replica of the model on the left.

“We *are* in the right system,” said Culsten.

“Mystery solved,” said DeMara with a smile.

Michael stood and gave Xylion a satisfied nod. “But this is only the first step. Can you tell what happened to the asteroids, Commander? Have they been destroyed?”

The Vulcan returned to enter commands into his station. “According to the simulation, the shockwave resulting from the collision of the second and third planet pushed the asteroids into outer space,” he said. “I’m calculating their position now.”

“Let’s hope they survived that shockwave,” said Edison.

“I have a position,” the Vulcan said and stood. “Helm, change our heading to five-six mark one-seven-six.” He looked at the captain. “According to my calculations, the asteroids should be six-thousand-three-hundred-fifty-five point five astronomical units from our present position.”

“They made quite the trip,” said Edison.

Michael nodded. “Mister Culsten, get us there now. Warp five.”

* * *

A journey that had taken the stellar rocks centuries took *Eagle* barely five minutes. They found the asteroids exactly where Xylion had predicted them. But the crew made another more unexpected discovery. They were not alone.

The viewscreen displayed another starship hovering near one of the bigger rocks. The pale-yellow ship was roughly ankh-shaped, with two wing-like protrusions flowing out from its wedge-like forward hull and a long narrow tail ending in a fork shape.

“Confirmed as a Cardassian *Galor*-class cruiser,” said Leva from the tactical station and reaffirming earlier suspicions.

“Romulans, Klingons, and now it looks as if the Cardassians have joined the party as well,” said DeMara.

“The more the merrier,” added Culsten

Michael rose from his chair. “Hardly.”

“We should all just ask them to come over for a cup of tea and talk about this,” said Culsten with a smirk. “You know, like civilized people.”

Michael looked for his science officer. “What do you make of the asteroid, Commander?”

“I believe it’s what we are looking for. Sensors are detecting a structure of artificial origin within the rock as well as a breathable oxygen-nitrogen atmosphere. I detect similar materials and structural designs as on Hyteria and Dentura.”

“Are there any life signs inside the asteroid? Cardassian perhaps?” said Edison and stepped up to Deen’s console in the front.

She shook her head, “Nothing I can detect.”

“Mister Leva, hail the Cardassians,” Michael said. “Maybe we can persuade them to that cup of tea after all.”

Leva shook his head after operating his board. “They are not responding.”

“Thoughts?” Michael said, looking at his first officer.

Gene Edison studied the screen. “We’re in the right place. We know that and our Cardassian friends know that. They also know why we’re here. But they know something that we don’t and they’re not feeling like sharing,” he said and looked at the captain. “I say we go over there and have a look for ourselves.”

“You think this artifact might be inside the asteroid?”

“Perhaps. But I know that we can’t afford not to look.”

He nodded. “I agree,” he said. “Assemble an away team. And I suppose I don’t have to tell you to exercise extreme caution while you’re over there.”

“You sure don’t,” he said and looked at Xylion who was already on his feet and ready to join him.

DeMara also stood from her station but Edison stopped her with a quick shake of his head. “I’d like you to stay on *Eagle*.”

“If this is about that little mix-up with Klingons on Dentura—”

“It’s not. We just don’t know what we’ll find over there. And with the confined space, I’d like to keep the away team as small as possible.”

Her disappointment was obvious. From their very first discovery, she had been among those most enthusiastic about piecing together the mysteries of the Hyterians and their complex culture. To be left out now while investigating an ancient site that promised to contain more secrets of this mysterious race was clearly a source of frustration to her.

“Sorry Dee, I’ll make it up to you,” he said and headed for the turbolift with Xylion following closely.

“You better,” she said under her breath. She exchanged a glance with the captain.

Michael offered an innocent shrug, his policy had long since been to leave away team assignments to his XO.

She uttered a little sigh and returned to her station, receiving a sympathetic look from Culsten.

* * *

Gene had opted to bring Lieutenant Louise Hopkins, *Eagle*’s young but gifted chief engineer into the asteroid. Initially, she hadn’t been too fond of the idea of traveling deep inside a rock since she generally didn’t go on away missions, preferring the simplicity and controlled environment of her engine room instead.

Hopkins had never joined Starfleet to be an explorer or to see new worlds but to keep herself challenged with the demanding needs of a starship engine. That’s what she was best at and that’s what she liked doing. But Gene realized that her expertise could come in handy when investigating an ancient space station that was still running after centuries in continuous operation.

“I had no idea,” she said, her mouth open in awe as she took in her surroundings.

The away team of four had been transported into the asteroid and now stood at the center of what seemed to be a huge cavern. The ceiling far above their heads was glowing in bright golden light, doing a great job of imitating daylight. The walls surrounding them were shimmering with colorful lights. They were not fixed, however, and every few seconds a spark of light would crawl up or down the wall creating an ever-changing orchestra of color and light.

The four of them stood on an elevated platform made out of solid stone and they found four paths leading in each direction. They weren’t much wider than three meters at the most and had no railings whatsoever. About ten meters below was a lake, and way down at the bottom more crystal lights shimmered through the clear water.

“I think this might be new to all of us,” said Gene who couldn’t quite suppress his astonishment either. For a moment he was reminded of fairy tales he had read when he had been a child about caverns filled with gold and precious stones. The place they had come to looked much more like a treasure cove than a space station.

Hopkins tried to get closer to one of the walls and failed to realize that the platform they were standing on did not reach all the way to it. When she reached the edge with no intention of stopping, Nora reached for her shoulder and pulled her back.

“Watch out,” she said. “Unless you want to go for a swim.”

Hopkins looked at her friend and then down at the water below.

Xylion had also approached the edge and took a knee to take a closer scan of the lake with his tricorder. “Interesting, the water seems to run throughout the entire facility and supplies the station with oxygen.”

“No life support system?” said Hopkins almost disappointed, clearly eager at getting a chance to examine whatever astonishing technology was at work here.

Xylion pointed at the water. “That is the life support system.”

The young engineer nodded slowly. "I wonder what kind of artificial gravity network is keeping us planted to the floor."

Gene looked around, trying to examine where the four paths led to. They all seemed to disappear into other caverns. "Commander, do you have any idea where to go?"

The Vulcan checked his device. "I read a power source five hundred meters from our position."

"Well, let's go find it," said Hopkins enthusiastically while pulling out her scanning device. Before Gene could say anything, she was already heading out.

He smiled and followed her and so did the other officers.

The stone path they were walking on led them out of the main cavern and into a brightly lit hallway. It connected the first chamber with a much smaller one. Here too they walked onto a narrow path to cross the lake below until they stepped onto a more solid rock formation.

"The Hyterians have integrated this structure seamlessly into the asteroid, it seems," said Xylion.

"I wish we could find out how they did it. Their engineering skills must have been astonishing," said Hopkins and then stopped. She had reached the end of the cavern. A massive stone door was embedded into the rock, hindering their progress.

She turned to face the others. "The power signature emanates from somewhere beyond this door. There is definitely some sort of complex technology at work here."

Gene stepped closer to the door and touched the stone. He wasn't surprised to find it warm. "I suppose we can't rely on help from the locales this time."

Hopkins offered him a puzzled look.

"There are no inscriptions on this door. The opening mechanism must be different from the one on Dentura," said Xylion.

"Commander, take a look at this," said Nora who was standing at the edge of the rock platform.

Gene and the others joined her and found steps that had been carved into the rock. They were leading down and into the water.

"Maybe the Hyterians were great swimmers," said Hopkins.

Xylion shook his head slightly. "According to my readings, the water level exceeds the basin's apparent design. It seems logical to assume that this part of the station has been flooded."

"The opening mechanism could be down there," said Hopkins and carefully walked onto the steps. There were only four above the water. She stepped on the last one and crouched down to touch the calm surface.

"Be careful," said Nora who clearly didn't appreciate her initiative, likely due to her inexperience with away missions.

Hopkins' hand dipped into the water. She turned her head. "It's nice and warm."

"So what?"

"We could go in and see what's down there."

Nora shook her head. "I don't think so."

"What's wrong, Laas?" Hopkins said with a smile. "Don't like water?"

As a matter of fact, Nora Laas was not overly fond of it. But that wasn't the main reason she disliked her friend's idea. "We have no idea what might be in there," she said and turned to Gene for support.

He looked at the stone door and then back at the body of water. "Commander, what can you tell about the water?"

Xylion referred to the tricorder. "It reads at ninety-eight percent H₂O. I also detect small concentrations of several halogens that interfere with sensor readings" he said. "The lake also contains significant amounts of oxygen-producing algae, however, toxicity levels are within safe parameters."

Nora turned to Gene. "Commander, I do not like the idea of sending anyone down there."

"I volunteer," said Hopkins and stood.

Nora turned and pointed at her as if she was about to put her in her place but Gene cut her off.

"You're absolutely right, Lieutenant. I'm not going to send anyone in there."

Nora nodded with approval.

"I'll go for a little dive," he said.

"What? No!"

But Gene had made up his mind and was already approaching the edge of the platform.

“Commander, I must strongly protest.”

“Laas, our mission is clear. We must find out the whereabouts of the artifact and at the moment the only way to do that is to go down there,” he said and pointed at the water below.

Nora sighed. “Fine, then let me go.”

“I was the captain of the swim team back at the Academy. Anybody else here who can make that claim?” he said even as he took off his uniform jacket. He shot a quick look at his officers, satisfied that he heard no other objections. He then turned to Xylion. “What will I find down there?”

“Sensors are still having difficulties penetrating below a certain depth, but the basin appears to be at least fifty meters deep. Due to the asteroid’s properties, the pressure is less than 1.1 bar at ten meters. I cannot detect any life forms besides algae.”

Gene nodded. “That should make for a pretty comfortable dive,” he said and took a few steps away from the edge. “You stay here and wait for me until I come back,” he added, took three running steps, and leaped into the water with a perfectly executed header.

Nora hurried to the rim and noted the disturbed surface of the water. Somewhere below she could spot him quickly descending into the depth of the lake. After a few seconds, he disappeared.

The three officers remained by the edge for almost four full minutes, anxiously awaiting his return.

Nora turned to Xylion. “How long can humans hold their breath?”

“Human apnea can last for more than eight minutes when submerged below water. Any longer could cause brain damage,” he said. “I find it doubtful that the Commander can hold his breath for such a long duration, however.”

Hopkins stepped up the stairs and joined Nora who was still looking into the water trying to find Edison again. She put a hand on her shoulder.

“I don’t like this,” said Nora.

“Give him another minute.”

But she was already taking off her jacket along with the golden uniform shirt she wore underneath, leaving her in a gray tank top. She drew her phaser. “Is this thing waterproof?”

“It’s not really designed to operate below water.”

“Great,” said Nora and pressed her weapon into Louise’s hands. “Hold that for me,” she added, obviously not happy about leaving her sidearm. “I’ll be right back.” Not a moment later she too had jumped into the lake head first.

Hopkins was standing close enough to get soaked by the splash she had made. Wiping off her wet face she turned to Xylion. “Are away missions always this much fun?” she said with sarcasm lining her voice.

Xylion raised an eyebrow in response.

* * *

Nora Laas quickly realized that the asteroid lake was much deeper than it had appeared from above. It also suddenly occurred to her that it had been quite a while since she had actually dived, in fact, she hadn’t done so since a mandatory exercise at the Academy years earlier, and it took her a few moments to get used to the idea of being completely submerged in water.

She had never been entirely comfortable with being underwater ever since she had nearly been drowned by a Cardassian to extract information from her. She had almost died during the torture session in which she had been repeatedly thrown into a river. She had never given up what she had known but the experience had scarred her for life.

Doing her job, she decided, took precedence over childhood trauma.

And it wasn’t just doing her job. She had to know that Gene was all right.

The mild temperature and the seemingly light consistency of the water made the dive fairly easy and she descended rapidly. Almost too rapidly.

The shimmering walls all around her and the thick algae at the bottom, however, made it a challenge to find her bearings, or Gene for that matter.

She stopped moving for a moment, and instead just floated, trying to take in her surroundings.

She spotted a much more powerful source of light coming from the farthest rock wall. With air running out, she really only had two choices, so she went for the light.

As she got closer, she realized that it wasn't just a light source, it was a tunnel. She spared one last look toward the surface, but by now it was clear that she was committed, she had to push on.

She slipped into the passageway and pressed on as fast as she could. She knew she wasn't the best swimmer, but with a growing sense of desperation mixed in, she practically raced through the tunnel, battling not only the water but also her rapidly growing need for air.

The tunnel felt never-ending, and with each forward thrust, she became more and more conscious that she may never get to the other side of it. Images of the ugly and distorted face of a Cardassian soldier filled her mind, grinning at her from above the water, teasing her with the endless supply of air he had access to, while he kept his firm grip on her throat below him.

The walls were starting to move in on her and she was fighting every instinct to try and take a desperate breath of nonexistent air.

Then, finally, after what had felt like an eternity underwater, the tunnel ended and led into another cavern.

She shot upward like a missile and breached the surface.

Laas had never valued air more than she did at that moment, sucking it in eagerly as if she hadn't tasted its sweetness in years.

She was so consumed with filling her lungs, she didn't even notice the hand that had reached out for her at first. Not until she was suddenly pulled out of the water and onto a rock ledge.

"Had a feeling you would come looking for me."

Laas coughed and then recognized Edison standing over her. "I... we were concerned," she said while slowly making it to her feet.

He took her arm to help her up. "I understand," he said. "I would've called in but it seems I lost my communicator," he said and looked at her soaked clothes to find that her combadge was absent as well.

Laas took a few steps away from the water to get a better look at her new surroundings. The cavern was much smaller and the ceiling hung much lower than in the others they had come across so far. She noticed that the walls were decorated with different colored crystals and that they were the cause of the shimmering lights all around them. The crystals did not just reflect light but also shined in their own respective colors. The color scheme did not seem fixed and every once in a while, the color inside a crystal would travel to a neighboring stone. All this made the cavern appear like a constantly changing rainbow.

"This is beautiful," she said after watching the changing light patterns for a moment.

He stepped next to her. "Touch one."

She looked at him and then, encouraged by a short nod, she walked toward the wall. She cautiously reached out and touched the closest crystal. Its surface was warm and smooth. She felt the transparent stone vibrate gently. It became stronger and quickly spread out to the surrounding crystals. The bright azure light contained within it began to fluctuate. The vibrations turned into a humming sound that echoed throughout the entire cavern in a pleasant melody. Then, when the humming reached its highest tone, the light expanded and spread out across all the other stones along the wall and ceiling.

She let go of the crystal and turned to look around. The entire cavern was now lit up in that same azure light and the crystals resonated their slowly dying song.

"I've never seen anything like it."

The blue light from the ceiling crystals dimmed first and small particles of light rained down like blue snow. The song ended and the crystals all around them once again took on their various colors.

A wide smile came over her face. The entire event had been quite astonishing and surprisingly soothing after having nearly drowned in the tunnel earlier. She couldn't quite explain the feeling but she knew that she wanted to do it again and she wanted to share the experience with him. It took her a few seconds before she could find her voice again. "That was incredible."

He nodded. Whatever effect it had had on her it seemed quite obvious that he had felt similar. She was glad about that. But as much as she wanted to experience it all again, she knew that she could not allow herself to get lost in emotions. They had a mission, and that had to be their priority.

She reluctantly turned away from him and closed on something that had caught her eye. It was the only part of the cavern that was not covered with crystals. It was a smooth stone surface, quite obviously not natural. It had a small platform imbedded in it and on top of it sat a sole piece of stone.

"What's this?" she said as she stepped closer.

Gene followed. "I'm not sure. I believe it's some sort of altar or shrine," he said and then stepped up to it and touched the smooth surface. "There are inscriptions here that look Hyterian."

She looked at chest high platform and at the piece of rock that lay perfectly at its center. On closer inspection, she realized that it wasn't just some rock but a man-crafted piece. It was smooth and curved but it looked broken at two ends. It wasn't much bigger than an average-

sized hand.

Gene had gone into a crouch to look at the inscriptions below the platform. “These almost look like drawings.”

She joined him. The depictions were carved directly into the stone and were rather crude, not at all like the carefully arranged Hyterian runes. “Maybe it’s some sort of warning.”

“As in, do not touch this or you die?” he said with a boyish grin.

She shrugged. “Maybe. Or maybe it’s the work of bored children.”

He used his hand to brush over the surface to reveal more drawings that had been covered up by dirt and dust. The depictions were of distinctly humanoid figures and they seemed to carry some sort of weapons. It appeared as though they were engaged in a battle with something that Edison couldn’t quite make out. In the next depiction, the humanoids were lying on the ground, defeated, possibly dead. There was another pair of carvings below with the same figures but without weapons. In that one, they remained standing.

“This is pointless,” she said after looking at the engravings and stood. “This is clearly important. Let’s just take it and return to the others.”

“Wait.”

But she had already reached for the piece of rock on the platform and picked it up. She turned to him. “What?”

He looked around ominously as if he expected something to happen.

“Oh come on, you don’t really believe that just because I pick up a piece of rock—“

The ground under their feet began to tremble.

She almost lost her balance but he caught her before she could fall.

The crystals around them began to play that same melody they had heard before but something was different this time. There seemed to be more urgency in the music-like resonance. The colors began to change more rapidly now and the sounds did not die down. The pitch was getting increasingly higher and the vibrations were becoming so strong, the crystals started to tremble.

He looked at her. “You were saying?”

One of the crystals crashed to the floor and loudly splinter just a couple of meters from where they were standing.

She looked up. The lights were dimming and the crystals on the cavern ceiling were shaking so hard, they were all threatening to come loose and rain down on them like bombs.

“I think this is our cue to get out of here,” said Nora.

“Agreed.”

Without any further delay, they ran toward the lake and dove straight into it. Just seconds after that, another more violent tremor shook the cave. They could feel it even in the water and were shocked to see that the passageway they had used before was starting to collapse.

He waved her in the opposite direction to another, nearly identical tunnel.

She acknowledged and then followed him inside.

* * *

Louise Hopkins had been staring into the lake for two minutes and couldn’t help but be worried about Edison and Nora. They had both disappeared into the depth below and were clearly overdue.

She turned to Xylion but as usual, his face was a perfect mask of neutrality, making it near impossible to know what was going through his mind. “Do you think they’re ok?”

Xylion took a look at his tricorder. “I still detect two life signs. That implies that they are alive.”

She turned to the lake again. “But they might be in trouble.” She wanted to jump in and go after them but she knew that she would probably be of little help. It was much more likely that she would get into the same predicament Laas and Edison had gotten themselves into. Whatever that was.

Xylion tapped his combadge. “Lieutenant Commander Xylion to *Eagle*.”

“This is Leva, how’s it going over there?”

“Not so good, we’ve lost contact with Edison and Nora,” said Louise when she heard his voice.

“Are you able to locate them and beam them back to our location?” said Xylion.

There was a short pause before Leva spoke again. *“I’ve got them.”*

A sudden and violent tremor shook the cavern. It was so unexpected that Louise lost her balance and fell to the ground. Xylion was slightly more effective but struggled to remain on his feet.

“What the hell was that?” said Louise still on the ground.

Xylion stepped up to her and easily pulled her back onto her feet. “We do not have sufficient information for a reliable conclusion.”

“Commander Leva, we just experienced some sort of shockwave. Do you know what happen?” said Louise once she was back on her feet.

Silence.

“Something is interfering with communications,” said Xylion.

“Look.” She pointed at the stone door that had been sealed earlier but now showed a small ray of light shining through a crease that had not been there before.

Xylion walked up to the door, slid his fingers inside the gap, and tried to push the door open. The heavy stone moved less than a centimeter.

“You think you can open it?”

“It is a simple matter of relaxing the muscles in my body and then applying the right amount of pressure,” he said and pushed again. This time the door seemed to glide open easily. He stopped once the gap was wide enough for them to pass through.

“Not bad,” she said and slipped through the opening.

Behind the door, they found a narrow passageway very similar in design to the ones they had seen on the other Hyterian colonies. Their surroundings looked man-made even though the principal material was still stone.

The bright illumination made it fairly easy for them to find their way down the corridor but they proceed slowly and with all due caution regardless.

“This technology is truly amazing. None of this material looks like any metallic alloy or poly-plastics we are familiar with. It’s almost as if they built this whole thing out of marble and stone and somehow fused it with light and heat-emanating technology. I’d love to get a look at what powers this whole thing,” she said as she made her way down the corridor.

“There is no doubt that the Hyterians were extraordinarily skilled engineers and designers.”

“You can say that again.”

Xylion gave her a somewhat puzzled look. “What would be the purpose of reiterating my statement?”

She stopped and turned to face the Vulcan. She had a wide smile on her face.

“It would not surprise me if we could learn from studying their methods,” he said. When he realized that she was not going to continue he simply passed her by and took the lead.

Louise suppressed a chuckle and then turned to follow the Vulcan. “Working with humans must be irritating for you,” she said.

“It can be challenging on occasions.”

After only a few more meters the corridor ended and led them into a large oval-shaped room. Three more corridors opened up into this chamber. The high ceiling shone so brightly that it seemed like it was made out of pure light. Xylion immediately recognized the design. It was in many respects the exact duplicate of the two other rooms he had visited on planets light-years away. It had an identical shape and even the inscriptions on the walls seemed to be similar.

“Look familiar?” she said.

He gave her a short nod and then proceeded to the same point where they had found the map on Dentura. Just as he had suspected, here too there was a large circle symbol containing representations of stars and stellar phenomena. This map displayed a different part of space. Whereas the first circle had only been filled in the lower left corner, this one was completely blank except for the upper right section.

Xylion directed his tricorder at the symbol to begin an immediate recording. Once he had everything the device could gather, he approached the wall and touched the highlighted star within the circle. He stepped aside when a focused beam shot out of the wall and projected a three-dimensional image of a solar system at the center of the room.

“Neat trick.”

"I believe we have found another clue to the whereabouts of the artifact," said Xylion.

Louise was more interested in the projection system than in the projection itself. She approached the wall but found that whatever was creating the projection was deep within the stone wall, with no obvious way to get to it.

"There must be some maintenance access or something like it," she said while inspecting the wall more closely.

Xylion moved to the center of the room and faced the projection. Like the last one, this too was a wireframe orrery made of auburn light.

This time three planets revolved around two stars. The third planet was highlighted more brightly than the others.

"How would they have fixed their systems when they broke down?" said Louise with increasing frustration. Here she was, on a space station that utilized technology every engineer in the galaxy would kill to get their hand on, and she couldn't find a way to see what made it all tick.

"This station may have been in continuous operation for more than one thousand years. It stands to reason that the technology operating this facility does not require any maintenance," said Xylion without taking his eyes off the projection.

She turned around. "Systems that do not need to be maintained? Imagine the possibilities," she said and brought up Nora's phaser she still held in her hand, considering for a moment to try and blow a hole into the solid wall.

"It would make engineering personnel obsolete."

She didn't like the sound of that. "I wouldn't go that far."

Xylion turned to face her. "I did not mean to offend you, Lieutenant. But the fact remains that this installation has not been attended to in a very long time and still appears to be fully functional."

"All right," she said conceding the point. "But this isn't a starship, it hasn't been traveling through space at faster-than-light speeds encountering unforeseen challenges and dangers. And most importantly, there haven't been any people around here to mess things up as they are prone to."

"A valid argument. Although it did, apparently survive the destruction of its home system."

She smiled at her apparent victory.

"It would be difficult to ascertain for certain the degree of maintenance required if this station had been in active use. The fact that it has survived a catastrophic event within its home system without any apparent damage however gives further proof to the technical ingenuity of its creators."

"There is that."

Xylion turned his head slightly as though something unseen had caught his attention.

"What is it?"

"Do you not hear?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "I hear nothing. Must be those pointy ears of yours."

Only seconds later she did hear a faint noise coming from somewhere deeper within the asteroid. Three additional passageways led into the room but she couldn't see anything or anyone within them.

And then, what had begun as a faint whisper, suddenly boomed through the room. It was so loud, she thought it would pierce her eardrums, even as she reached up to cover them. The bright white light up above changed to a dark blue, drowning the room in an ominous and gloomy azure color.

"What is it?" she yelled at the top of her voice.

Xylion showed some irritation but was otherwise unaffected by the deafening noise. "It's an alien language I am unfamiliar with," he said loud enough for her to understand. "It would be logical to assume that it is Hyterian."

After a short while the sound became more tolerable and she removed her hands from her ears. She could make out the alien voice now. It had an undeniable urgency to it and it seemed to repeat itself over and over again. She had no idea what it was saying.

"Something tells me they're not saying 'welcome to our space station'."

Her fears were confirmed when she saw something approach them from within one of the corridors. She couldn't quite make out what it was at first. Once it had cleared the passageway and entered the room, however, she knew what she was facing. At least in a technical sense. The drone was of the simplest design. It consisted of a one-meter high and half-a-meter-wide rectangular block. On top of it rested a head-sized globe. The gray device was featureless and looked as if it had been carved out of solid rock. It hovered over the ground and approached them slowly.

Instinctively, they both took a step backward.

"Interesting," said Xylion. "I wonder what its intentions are."

She drew her phaser and pointed it at the approaching machine. "I don't think it's here to chat," she said, with her back now pressed against the wall.

The drone showed no intention of stopping and continued to close in.

She fired her phaser but the crimson-colored energy beam was simply absorbed by its smooth surface. She quickly increased the power setting and fired again. This time the beam penetrated the drone and it crashed to the floor.

She sighed with relief and noticed that sparks were coming out of the hole her phaser had torn into the rectangular part of the drone. She cautiously approached the damaged machine and kneeled next to it. She could see some sort of circuitry within it and was surprised to find it quite easy to tear away the outer casing. It felt and looked like stone but it wasn't. The inner workings she revealed were a complete mystery to her. She had never seen anything like it.

"This is amazing," she said under her breath while investigating the circuitry. "I wouldn't even know where to start."

She touched one of the many transparent tubes containing some sort of blue liquid that ran along the insides of the drone. She felt a rather strong discharge and her fingers retracted immediately. "Damn."

"Are you injured?" said Xylion, looking over her shoulder.

"I'm fine, just a little static shock."

"Perhaps you should apply more caution."

"Duly noted," she said and went back to work inside the drone. She carefully pushed the tubes aside and found a gleaming crystal at the center of the machine. It seemed like it could have been the power source. And it was still active. She pulled on it and it came loose. As soon as she had taken it out of the drone the white light within it died.

"Another drone," said Xylion.

She looked up to see it coming down the same passageway the first one had come out of. She quickly got back to her feet.

A lighting ray shot out of the globe of the approaching drone and missed her by hand length. It struck the wall behind her and hit the projection emitter. The projection flickered and then disappeared entirely. The powerful lightning ray had ripped a small hole into the sturdy wall.

She quickly took cover behind one of the columns and Xylion behind the opposite one.

"I guess it's safe to say that they have hostile intentions," she said.

"I concur," said Xylion and fired his phaser. His aim was dead on but he had not yet increased the power settings on his weapon and it showed no effect on the drone. He promptly corrected his mistake and fired again. The drone became immobilized only a couple of meters short of the column Louise was standing behind.

"I don't know about you but I'd rather return to *Eagle* now," she said.

"Agreed. However, I'm unable to raise the ship."

Her glance fell upon the hole that the drone had torn into the wall. She could see circuitry running within it.

"Maybe there's something I can do about that," she said and walked up to the wall. She noted that the wall was indeed made out of stone but she managed with some effort to break parts of it away and increase the size of the hole in the process. Behind it, she found a design very similar to the interior of the drone. There were numerous transparent wires and tubes with different colored fluids traveling through them. She could also see more crystals and quickly figured that they were either the power source or a system that transferred the energy from some other place within the station.

"I suggest you expedite your efforts."

She turned only to spot another drone appearing from the passageway. She quickly faced the wall again, determined to make some sense of the alien circuitry.

Xylion in the meantime left the cover of the column to distract the drone and draw it away from her. The tactic worked and the machine locked onto him instead. It fired another lightning ray, he barely managed to avoid by jumping behind a column for cover.

He returned fire, landing a direct hit. The weapon's beam left a dark scorch mark on the gray casing of the drone but failed to disable it.

He avoided another blast by quickly changing his position again and then increasing the setting on his phaser once more before firing. This time his efforts showed the desired effect and the drone shut down.

"The drones are becoming more resilient," he said but was almost instantly distracted by yet another drone approaching him from one of the other corridors. He fired without hesitation.

The drone crashed to the floor before it could reach the room.

Louise rubbed her temples in an attempt to relieve some of the stress she felt coming on. As a chief engineer, she was no stranger to the sensation. And usually, she reveled in it, enjoying the challenge of working against a ticking clock. But that was when she was on board *Eagle*,

where she perfectly understood what she was working with. Where she worked within a framework she was intricately familiar with, and where there were no damningly insistent voices booming across the room, except perhaps the occasional call from the bridge, demanding an update.

And even though she was not entirely in her element and she still didn't understand everything she was looking at, she thought she was beginning to make some progress. "I think the drones are controlled by this interface," she said mostly to herself and cautiously reached inside the circuitry to pull free some of the transparent tubes.

Two new drones were already approaching the room from two different passageways to replace the ones that had been disabled.

It was becoming rapidly obvious to Xylion that this self-defense system was designed to slowly increase in strength until it overpowered any intruders. He fired at one of the approaching devices but his weapon did little damage. He swiftly increased the setting and fired again.

After two shots the approaching drone was disabled. He noted that his phaser was now close to the maximum energy setting. He turned to look at the chief engineer, to encourage her to work faster, but after noticing how focused she appeared to be, he decided not to distract her.

He had to jump to evade another attack, took cover behind a column, and went back to trying to fend off the drones with phaser fire.

"These crystals seem to increase in energy output every time a drone is disabled," she said, thinking out loud. "If I interrupt the connections, it might disengage the entire system."

Xylion had just taken out the second drone but a new wave was already approaching. His weapon now at the maximum setting, it seemed doubtful he could defend against the increasingly stronger machines much longer. He disabled the first drone of the second wave as soon as he spotted it down the passageway but two more were approaching from other directions.

He started to slowly step back toward Hopkins as he continuously fired his phaser. "I strongly recommend that you find a way to deactivate these drones now."

She turned around to see Xylion closing in on her with two drones in pursuit. His phaser was barely even slowing them down.

Realizing that she was out of time, she whipped back around, reached into the hole in the wall, grabbed as many of the tubes as she could, and ripped them clean out.

The two drones stopped and sagged to the floor.

She turned holding pieces of transparent wires, fluids dripping down her hand. A smile came over her lips when she realized that the drones had stopped.

Xylion holstered his weapon. "Good work, Lieutenant. Now we must find a way to—"

He stopped himself in midsentence when he realized that the drones began humming again.

Louise raced around to look at the circuitry and couldn't believe what she was seeing. Somewhere from above and utterly out of her reach, new connections grew out of the crystals. Like living tendrils, they were finding their way through the circuitry to repair the damage she had done. The engineer in her couldn't help but be impressed by the self-healing abilities of the system but she knew all too well what it meant.

"We're going to have a big problem here."

* * *

Michael stepped onto the bridge after he had received the urgent call from So'Dan Leva that something on the asteroid had gone very wrong.

"Report," he said as he strode toward the command area.

"We lost communications with the away team, sir," said Leva while he returned to his post at tactical and by implication returning command of the ship to the captain. "One second I was talking to them and the next they were gone."

"Dee?"

"Some sort of force field has been erected around the asteroid," she said after checking her readouts. "I cannot say what might have triggered it."

"Can sensors penetrate it?"

She shook her head. "No, but I can still make out the away team. They are definitely still alive. But there is no apparent way to reach them or bring them back."

Michael didn't like it. Losing contact with an away team mid-mission was what kept starship captains up at night. Not knowing what was going on made him feel helpless. Sure, he could try and mount a rescue mission, but with little to no information about the situation on the ground, there was a good chance that anyone he would send would find themselves equally trapped or worse.

For now, he needed to trust in the resourcefulness of his first officer to get the away team securely back to the ship. This was in no way the first time he had found himself in this position and not the first time that Edison would have managed his way out of a tight spot.

A warning sound chiming from Leva's tactical console behind him caught his attention.

"The Cardassian ship is hailing us, sir."

"Now they want to talk," said Culsten.

Michael straightened his uniform jacket. He knew that whatever the Cardassians were up to, they had chosen this particular time to contact *Eagle* for good reason. "Let's hear what they have to say."

Seconds later the image on the screen shifted to show a Cardassian officer sitting confidently in a large chair, presumably on the bridge of his ship. He wore typical gray battle armor and the spoon-like ridges on his forehead left no doubt that he belonged to a warrior race. He was wearing a self-important smile, like a man with supreme confidence in himself and his position.

"*This is Gul Renek from the Fifth Order of the Cardassian Union and commander of the Keldana. I extend my greetings,*" said the man in such an exaggerated manner of politeness that it nearly defeated the purpose.

Michael nodded briefly to acknowledge him. "I'm Captain Owens of the Federation starship *Eagle*. What brings you to this part of unexplored and unclaimed space," said Michael, making sure to emphasize that Renek had no jurisdiction here.

The Cardassian commander leaned back in his chair and steepled his fingers. "*You could say I'm something of a ... what do you humans call it? Ah, yes. A Good Samaritan. Trying to help where I can.*"

Leva uttered a sharp cough after hearing those words.

"Is that why you have chosen to contact us now, Gul Renek? To offer us your help?" said Michael, not fooled for even a moment that Renek did not have an agenda.

"*Well, it does seem apparent that you have somewhat of a problem on your hands,*" the Cardassian said calmly. "*If only you had contacted us sooner, we could have warned you about the security systems in place on the asteroid. This could have been avoided.*"

"We did try to contact you earlier," said Culsten, glaring at the man on the screen.

Renek offered the young pilot only the briefest of glances before he focused on Michael again. "*You did?*" he said with an obviously fake expression of disbelief on his vaguely reptilian features. "*We were rather busy and must have overlooked your call. What a shame, we could have saved you the trouble of having your people trapped over there.*"

"What a shame, indeed," said Michael by now well aware that Renek had no intentions whatsoever of providing useful assistance nor had he been interested in warning them. "If I may ask, how did you come to know about the asteroid and its security systems?"

"*We were fortunate enough to have been warned before we arrived,*" he said. He seemed uninterested in sharing any more information on the subject. "*Now shall we move on to more pressing issues, Captain? After all your people are in great danger on the asteroid. I believe their safe return should be of paramount concern to you at the moment. I might have the means to help you return them.*"

"I take it that the gracious help you're offering will not be completely free, will it?"

Renek leaned forward in his chair. "*Surely you understand that my noble deeds put enormous stress on my resources. It would only be fair for you to show us some gratitude for our efforts.*"

"What is it you want?"

"*It is clear by now that you are looking for the Hyterian artifact, an object of incredible scientific significance to my people. We will help you return your crewmen if you provide us with any data about the Hyterians you currently hold in your memory banks along with all information your crewmembers on the asteroid have collected. After all, the safety of your personnel is surely more important to you than a bit of scientific data.*"

"Yes, you are correct, it is," said Michael and took a step closer to the screen. "And that is exactly why I'm not going to trust you, Renek. Tell me, if you know how to circumvent the asteroid station's security how come you haven't gathered the information there yourself?" Michael continued without waiting for an answer. "To be blunt, I believe you are lying and trying to deceive us." Michael turned his back to the screen. "Have a good day, Gul Renek."

Leva ended the transmission before the Cardassian commander had a chance to reply.

Michael took his chair. "Mister Leva, keep a close eye on those Cardassians. I don't want any more surprises."

DeMara turned to face. "Now what are we going to do?"

"Keep scanning that force field for any weaknesses, see if you can find a way to penetrate it."

She nodded, stood up, and walked over to the science station at the back of the bridge, hoping that she could find out more from Xyilion's

station.

Michael glanced back at the screen. "In the meantime, we just have to trust our people to find a way to get out of there."

* * *

Nora Laas was about to explode.

For the last two minutes, she had been diving through a narrow shaft, closely following Gene. He was going as fast as he could and she had to admit that it wasn't easy to keep up. But the problem wasn't the pace; the problem was the absence of air to breathe.

By the sounds and the eruptions all around them, it had been clear that the cavern they had been in only moments ago had completely collapsed. She knew she couldn't take much more of this and if they wouldn't find some breathable air soon, they'd both suffocate.

Her silent prayers were answered when the shaft finally led upwards and she could spot another light source above. The shaft opened up into yet another cavern. She immediately noticed the smooth and even surface of the ground as well as the other passageways that seemed to lead further into the station.

She didn't have time to give it much thought, however, as her main focus remained following Gene and get to the surface as soon as possible.

He stopped for a second to make sure she was still below him, then allowed her to catch up before they both emerged from their overlong dive. They immediately drew desperate breaths of refreshing air. Laas coughed out some water she had swallowed seconds before she had reached the surface.

"For somebody who doesn't like water, you're not a bad swimmer."

"Who said I don't like water?" she said in between coughs, trying to hide her immense discomfort.

"Could've fooled me," he said and pointed to the edge of the artificial lake.

He swam ahead making sure she was following closely. He grabbed the edge and lifted himself out of the water. Once he was clear he turned around to help her onto the dry rock.

They both lay down flat on their backs, trying to recover after diving for their lives.

Laas was still busy coughing but after a few moments, it turned into laughter.

Gene turned his head to see what could have caused her such amusement.

"We're in the middle of an asteroid floating freely in uncharted space. This is about the last place I'd ever thought I might drown."

He joined her laughter. After a minute he got up to his feet to take a better look at his new surroundings. This cavern was as well illuminated as most of the other places on the ancient station thanks to the bright light emanating from the crystals all around them. The cavern was much colder than most of the other rooms they had been in, however. They were standing on a small and rocky outcropping clearly part of the asteroid itself and it didn't look as if it had been purposefully constructed by the Hyterians. The ceiling of the cavern was just a few meters above their heads. There was no place to go but back into the lake.

Laas stood up as well. "What I would give for a dry uniform," she said, looking down at her soaked clothes.

"Don't count on that to happen for a while. It would seem like we're about to get wet again," he said looking down into the lake.

She sighed. "I don't think I can take any more diving."

"I don't think we've got much of a choice here." He took a knee by the edge. Something in the lake had caught his attention.

She stepped up to him. "What is it?"

"There's something down there," he said. "I've noticed it on my way up."

She tried to spot whatever it was he was trying to find but she had no luck.

"Wait here," he said and dove back into the lake before she could object.

She could make out his form diving to the ground. He seemed to be looking at something for a few seconds, then he returned to the surface.

"I need your help," he said as soon as he shot out of the water.

She nodded and jumped in after him.

He led her to the ground. There was a lever mounted on the wall. It was a long, heavy rod that stuck straight out of the stone. There were some Hyterian characters carefully carved into the wall, undoubtedly explaining its function. He signaled her to grab the lever and push it downward. She nodded and did as he had advised. She quickly realized that the lever was stuck and did not move easily. Gene joined her and pushed as well. Being submerged in water made it difficult to apply pressure to the lever but after a few seconds their combined strength showed some effect and the rod slowly budged.

Laas heard a noise of stone moving against stone and soon after felt a current that became stronger the more the lever moved. The rod eventually locked into position and she looked up to see that parts of the wall had disappeared to reveal an opening, protected by fortified bars. The current she felt was created by the water streaming out of the cavern and into the opening.

Gene gave her a thumbs-up and they quickly made it back to the surface for a much-needed breath of air.

“With any luck, this will be the last diving we had to do,” he said.

She pulled herself out of the water to sit by the edge. She looked at the surface of the dwindling lake. Even though the current she had felt underwater had been quite noticeable, the water level dropped very slowly. “But it looks like we’ll have to wait a while.”

He left the lake as well to sit next to her. “Waiting beats any more diving, wouldn’t you say?”

She was quick to agree.

Yet she couldn’t help but feel a bit uncomfortable. Sitting still and waiting, had never been one of her strengths. She knew that she could use the breather. Even though she would have never complained about physical exercise, swimming and diving were not something she was used to, and was not part of her strict exercise regimen. Although, after her experience on this submerged space station, she was wondering if it wasn’t time to include it.

Diving and exercise weren’t the only things on her mind.

For a while now she had wanted to spend some time alone with Gene and now that they were, she felt uneasy about it, nervous even.

She had simply no idea how to breach the subject that had been on her mind for so long.

And it wasn’t as if she didn’t get signs from him as well. They had never been anything obvious but the smiles and looks he gave her had been telling.

She stole a glance at him while he was distracted observing the lowering water level and quickly found that he didn’t seem uncomfortable in the slightest. But then of, course, Eugene Edison never really looked uncomfortable. Nothing seemed to be able to rattle him, it was one of the things she appreciated about him. But she couldn’t help but wonder how much of it was an act. A façade he put on to appear like a strong and confident executive officer.

She so desperately wanted to see what she would find behind that mask.

He turned to look at her and she became painfully aware that she had been caught staring. She blushed slightly and looked the other way.

“Laas, there’s something I’ve meant to tell you for a while.”

She looked straight at him. “Oh?”

“I didn’t know if you realized how valuable you have been to us ... to me ... as chief of security. I wanted to make sure that you were aware how much the captain and I have appreciated your dedication to your duty as well as your advice and support.”

She nodded slowly but didn’t speak. It wasn’t quite what she had expected. Maybe it wasn’t what she had hoped.

“I’ll be the first to admit that I had my doubts initially about bringing you on board. After Leva recommended you for the post and I read your file I was concerned that your experiences in the past might not be entirely compatible with the position of chief security officer on a starship but you’ve excelled in the post, far exceeding my expectations.”

“Thanks, I guess.”

He looked concerned. “I hope I haven’t offended you.”

She quickly shook her head. “No, that’s not it at all. I’m sorry,” she said. “I really appreciate what you’re saying and I’m glad that you and the captain think so highly of me. It’s just that...”

“What is it?”

She tried to desperately think of a way to put her feelings into words. But it was difficult because she didn’t even know what her feelings were. Not really. “I didn’t expect this.”

He nodded.

They sat in silence for the next couple of minutes, watching as the water level continued to recede slowly.

“You know, we always seem to be talking about work, have you noticed that?” he said after a minute.

She glanced at him with a growing smile. “Yeah.”

“Looks like we’ve got time on our hands. Why don’t you tell me something about yourself? Something that’s not in your file.”

“About me? Oh, ... I don’t know...” she said, suddenly feeling completely out of her element. She wasn’t very good at sharing personal stories, never had been. “Maybe we better start with you?”

He nodded. “Sure, what do you want to know?”

“Did you ever think about doing something else? Then Starfleet, I mean. Settling down perhaps, have a family, that sort of thing,” she said and only belatedly realized how private that question had been, her head turned a shade of red. “That’s a stupid question, you don’t have to answer it,” she added quickly.

“No, it’s not. And I did once, actually, a long time ago.”

“Really?”

He nodded. “Starfleet was not my first choice. When I was much younger, I wanted to be a professional piano player.”

She smiled; her curiosity piqued. “Tell me more.”

“It’s true. And if I may say so myself, I was pretty darn good at tickling the ivories. Most parents encourage their children to take piano lessons. I had to beg mine.”

She laughed as she imagined him as a child demanding his lessons.

“My old man was never that crazy about the idea. He had it in his mind that I follow his footsteps and continue the family tradition and join Starfleet. But going into space was the last thing on my mind when I was a lad.”

“Your father forced you to go to the Academy?”

“Not quite,” he said. “I convinced him that I would be a much better piano player than an officer. And for a while, it looked as if that was exactly what would happen. Eventually, I was accepted to one of the best music schools on Earth; Juilliard in New York.”

“What happened?”

“I met a girl.”

She grinned.

His glance wandered upward as he recalled long-forgotten memories. “Isabelle from Argentina,” he said with nostalgia in his voice. “I fell for her pretty hard in my first year. Obsessed wouldn’t be too far off the mark,” he said and looked at her. “At first, she seemed to feel the same way and we made all sorts of crazy promises to each other. I guess I got carried away and my music started to suffer from it.”

Laas wasn’t quite sure if she should be amused or feel pity.

“It got so bad that they threw me out of school and Isabelle ... “

“What happened to Isabelle?”

He shook his head. “I have no idea. She broke up with me and I guess she went back to Argentina to marry some musician.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. Once I was done with music, I decided to take up my father’s request and I went to San Francisco to enroll at the Academy. It was the best decision I’ve ever made. I love what I do,” he said and looked into her eyes. “And I love the people I work with.”

“I’m glad you made that choice.”

“Yet I can’t help wondering what happened to Isabelle.”

“Considering that she left you I’d imagine she lives a miserable life.”

He laughed. “Perhaps, but I bet she’s not taking dives within an asteroid deep in uncharted space,” he said and got back to his feet. “Speaking of diving, we better get back in there before all the water is gone and we’ll break our legs to get to the bottom.”

She nodded and stood up.

He jumped into the dwindling lake and she followed suit.

Louise had run out of options.

No matter how fast she rerouted the station's systems, she could simply not keep up with its self-repairing abilities. She had never seen technology this advanced but she had no time to admire or study it.

She also had to move past the inherent restrictions of having no user interface to work with. Whatever she wanted to work on, she had to do it manually, which cost precious time. Time they did not have.

The drones had once again commenced their attack and were becoming stronger by the minute. Xylion had almost exhausted the power cell of his weapon and Louise knew that her phaser was not much better off. The only consolation was that the drones did not attack in a constant stream.

Xylion had noticed that there was an exact three-minute and twenty-three-second interval between the attack waves. But at the moment this did not matter much as there was no way to escape the hovering attack devices.

"I just don't know what else to try," she said with frustration. She had spent the last minute since the most recent attack to try and outsmart the security system by cross-linking the connections that ran behind the broken stone wall. But she had remained unsuccessful.

Whatever intelligence was at work in the asteroid station had anticipated her every move and preemptively deactivated any circuitry she had targeted. In her career as an engineer, she had rarely encountered a problem she could not solve. The experience was devastating.

"Have you located the source of the communications blackout?" said Xylion.

She shook her head. "No, but I imagine it is some sort of dampening field," she said while sliding down the wall until she was sitting on the floor.

"Lieutenant, I do not believe I have to emphasize the seriousness of our situation. The probability of our survival is minimal if you do not succeed."

She averted her glance downward to avoid him seeing her face, as she could sense her eyes getting wet.

Xylion had not served with humans for long. He had never been entirely comfortable with species that showed their emotions in such an open manner. And even though he could not claim personal familiarity with her reactions, he had observed this behavior in humans before and also the tendency of superior officers to counteract those reactions.

He took a few steps toward the chief engineer. "We must combine our efforts to improve our chances of escape. Assist me to boost phaser power output," he said. Logic told him that escape was unlikely and he was not inclined to lie to Hopkins about that but he understood the necessity to try and distract her from focusing too much on her thoughts of failure. He had learned that it played a pivotal role when handling subordinates.

She looked at Xylion's determined expression and just like that any sign of fear or doubt was gone. Instead, she gave him a firm nod and got to her feet.

They quickly managed to boost their weapons and braced for the next attack wave which commenced exactly as Xylion had predicted.

The drones were still of the same simple design as they had been before. But these armed robots were nothing like the ones they had encountered earlier. These incarnations easily absorbed most of the shots the two officers unleashed. Together they managed to disable the first two drones but the third one refused to go down.

The drone didn't return fire. Instead, it continued to approach their position, seemingly unstoppable.

She glanced over at Xylion. Her shimmering eyes begged the Vulcan for a solution but she did not speak. She knew he didn't have one.

The drone entered the chamber and closed in on its two targets.

Xylion stepped out from behind his cover and directly into the drone's path. He fired a couple more blasts at the drone but they remained as ineffective as the ones before.

"Step behind me," he said while he slowly backed away from the approaching drone.

She understood what he intended. He'd fight the drone barehanded if needed to try and stop it from killing them both.

She froze.

"Now, Lieutenant," said Xylion with just the slightest hint of urgency in his voice. His eyes remained fixed on his automated opponent.

She rushed to follow his instructions, finding momentary refuge in the shadow of the tall Vulcan.

The drone continued on its path at a slow and unchanging speed as though it wanted to study its prey up close before delivering its death blow.

Xylion, whose mind constantly calculated eventualities and probabilities for any given situation, was at this point as helpless as Hopkins. His weapon had become useless and his only remaining option was to hope that his physical strength alone could defeat the machine. Logic dictated that that action would fail.

Louise's back was now pressed against the wall and Xylion stopped as well to keep some distance from her, allowing the drone to get

within mere centimeters.

“Commander!”

Xylion turned ever so slightly to spot Gene Edison and Nora Laas who had just entered the chamber from another direction.

“We have to do something,” said Nora as soon as she realized the situation her shipmates were in. She was first and foremost a fighter and when situations were becoming threatening her instinct was to jump into action no matter if she was armed or not. That was what she had learned while fighting for survival ever since she had been a child.

But Gen held her back. “Something seems familiar about this,” he said while observing the drone and the two officers who had been pushed into the far wall. Xylion still held his phaser in his hand and his glance was once again fixed on the drone that was now within striking distance.

Right behind him stood Louise Hopkins with two weapons drawn. Her own and the one she had been given by Nora earlier both of which had proven useless against their opponents. She tried to look stoic but it was clear from the look in her eyes that she was not ready to die.

Gene slowly stepped into the room but the drone didn’t seem to register him as a new threat, instead, it remained entirely homed in on its two primary targets.

Laas couldn’t stand still and watch what was about to happen here. “Commander?” she said impatiently, urging him to allow her to take action.

“Wait,” he said, very much to her frustration. Then he looked at Xylion. “Commander, drop your weapons and raise your hands.”

“What?” Laas couldn’t quite believe what she was hearing.

But Xylion didn’t hesitate, letting his phaser fall to the ground and raising both his hands over his head.

Hopkins looked as confused as Nora but eventually followed the Vulcan’s example.

“Lieutenant, slowly step up next to Commander Xylion. Don’t make any aggressive motions,” he said.

The idea seemed to scare the engineer but in the end, she mustered the resolve to follow the order, inspired by a trust that wasn’t easily questioned.

The drone came to a stop right in front of the two frozen officers.

Laas stared at them in horror, expecting the worst. She quickly cursed herself when she noticed another drone that had approached her and Gene from behind. She had been too distracted by the events in front of her that she had paid little attention to her surroundings. A mistake that she knew could be fatal.

Gene became aware of the other drone only seconds after her. It had sneaked up on them and was already nearing striking distance. His arm reached out for the Bajoran to prevent her from making any hasty movements. “Slowly.”

They both turned to face the approaching automaton which like the other one closed within a few centimeters before it came to a stop.

“Raise your hands and remain completely still,” he said as he put his arms up.

“All right,” she said and followed suit. “But if this is not going to work I’m going to—“

“If this won’t work, we’re dead.”

It took all of her willpower not to jump at the sudden humming noise that emanated from the machine. It was powering up and preparing to do something. A blue beam shot out of the globe-shaped part of the drone and engulfed both of them.

She felt a warm and tingling sensation all over her body but it was gone as quickly as it had come. And then, to her utter astonishment, the drone simply glided away again.

The voice that still echoed through the room died down and the dark blue lights were once more replaced by bright white illumination.

She gave Gene a puzzled look.

He approached the other two officers who had gone through the same treatment. “Are you all right?”

Xylion nodded. “Fascinating. The drones appear to react to our intentions. How did you know?”

Laas stepped up to them holding the piece of stone they had collected earlier. “The carvings in the altar room?”

He nodded.

“That was a long shot,” she said. “It could have meant something entirely different.”

“No victory has ever been won without taking risks, Lieutenant,” he said and then looked at Hopkins who appeared visibly shaken but physically unharmed. “How about you?”

It took her a few seconds to respond. She had come within inches of death, practically staring it right in the face. It was not an experience

she was accustomed to or one she wished to relive anytime soon. “Next time, I’m staying on the ship.”

* * *

“It was astonishing. Every single room was brightly illuminated. It almost felt as if we were walking in sunlight,” said Gene Edison, recounting his experiences on the asteroid to the captain as they walked side by side through *Eagle*’s corridors on their way to the science lab.

“They were filled with thousands of crystals, humming the most extraordinary melodies when touched. I couldn’t even begin to explain the light drops that rained down on us.”

“I wish I could’ve seen it.”

“I’ll try to be as precise as possible when I write my report,” said Edison with an easy smile.

“I’m looking forward to reading it.”

As they reached their destination, the doors to the main science lab slid open and they stepped inside. As before the room was still a hub of activity with the science personnel hard at work trying to analyze and understand the long-extinct Hyterian civilization.

Xylion and DeMara Deen were sitting at the central workstation and Armstrong was standing behind them, his eyes fixed on the large screen in front of him.

Michael and his first officer approached the three scientists.

Armstrong noticed the senior officers arrive and turned to face them. “Captain, you will be very pleased about the progress we’ve made.”

“What do you have?”

Armstrong pointed at the texts displayed on the screen. “We have managed to translate what we believe to be key elements in Hyterian philosophy.”

“Go on.”

“We confirmed our initial believes that they were spiritual but we now also believe that they were extremely superstitious as well.”

“What do you base that on?” said Edison.

“With the additional data we gathered inside the asteroid base, we were able to complete certain translations that indicate that the Hyterians believed in the existence of pure evil that is able to physically manifest itself and then bring destruction and suffering to all Hyterians,” said Xylion.

“Manifest itself how?” Michael stepped closer to the screen to see if he could find answers to his questions there.

“At this time, we have insufficient data to form a probable theory.” “We’re hoping that we might learn more about this on other Hyterian colonies,” said Armstrong.

DeMara noticed that neither Michael nor Edison seemed to be particularly excited about their more recent findings. “We’re not talking about a purely mythological idea like say the old human belief of the devil or the Klingon afterlife of *Sto-vo-kor*. This was something very real and very physical to the Hyterians and they feared it more than anything else.”

Edison studied the screen as well but when he didn’t find anything there, he focused on DeMara. “From what we can tell these people were extremely advanced. I find it difficult to believe that people who traveled the stars thousands of years before we even built cities were afraid of monsters in the dark?”

DeMara nodded but Armstrong answered before she had the chance. “Exactly. But that is what all our translations point to. It’s a very exciting idea and we definitely have to study it further to be able to fully understand it.”

Michael frowned. It wasn’t that he disliked what he heard. On the contrary, exploring new or in this case old civilizations, especially ones as advanced and as ancient as the Hyterians, was an important part of his job but at the moment he had different concerns. “I admit that this is all very interesting but let’s not forget that we’re on a mission to find the Hyterian artifact. And time is an issue here.”

“Shouldn’t we attempt to learn as much as we can before we go after something we don’t yet fully understand?” said Armstrong, sounding almost defiantly.

Xylion shot him a glance making the younger scientist know that he did not appreciate a member of his staff trying to confront the captain.

Michael was not offended. He couldn’t help but admire Armstrong’s devotion to his field and under different circumstances would have

commended him for it. "I'm afraid we do not have that luxury, Lieutenant. This has become a race and we cannot afford to come in at anything but first. Our objective has to be to secure this artifact before anybody else can."

DeMara leaned back in her chair and crossed her arms in front of her chest. "You make it sound like a military objective."

He nodded. "It might very well be one. If it turns out to be as powerful as we think it might be, think about how the Romulans or the Cardassians may use it. We are in quite a literal arms race here. This means I need you to look at what we have learned so far and give me the most likely location where the Hyterians would have hidden this artifact," he said and then turned a pedestal that held the small piece of rock the away team had found in the asteroid, protected by a glass dome.

Armstrong joined the captain.

"What can you tell me about this?" he said.

"Not much I'm afraid. It's ... well it's a piece of rock with no unusual attributes as far as we can tell."

"It looks like it broke off from something. What about these inscriptions? Any luck with those?"

Armstrong shook his head. "No, they are still a mystery to us like many other symbols. We were hoping to learn more after investigating other locations."

Michael straightened and looked at the archeologist. "I'm sure we'll find more pieces to this puzzle as we go on. In the meantime, I want you and your people to continue your work and find out as much as you can. It might come in useful. But your priority is clear," he said and then gestured for his first officer to follow him out of the room.

Michael stopped in the corridor just outside the lab. "Gene, I need you to keep an eye on our scientists."

"You are concerned."

"I understand that they are eager and excited, Gene. And don't get me wrong, I think that's a good thing. For many of them, the Hyterians might be the greatest professional challenge of their lives. But I worry that they'll lose sight of our primary objective if we don't keep them focused on it."

"I'll make sure they stay on task, sir."

"Get me a location."

Gene gave him a curt nod and then watched Owens walk off.

Freezing Point

Tentrus VI was deep within its third ice age.

The four major oceans were frozen and most of the surface was covered by ice and snow. Life was sparse, only the most resilient animals and vegetation were able to sustain themselves in this extreme environment.

The southern continent was defined by its massive mountain ranges, the lowest peak being just over five-thousand meters high while the bigger ones reached far above the high-hanging clouds.

The air was thin this far up but it was here where the only remaining evidence of an advanced civilization that had once thrived on this world remained. A complex series of structures had been erected on a large plateau near the peak of one of the highest mountains.

The central square, right next to a frozen lake, was covered by centimeters of snow. A waterfall had once poured into the lake from the peak above but now it too was frozen into a massive column of ice. The stone buildings around the square had long ago assumed the shimmering white color of their surroundings. Some of the ancient buildings had stood the test of time and cold remarkably well while others had crumpled under the immense pressures that the freezing temperatures had put on them.

Five blue energy beams appeared on the square and quickly gave way to five humanoids, dressed in red and white environmental suits.

Xylion's first instinct was to activate his scanning device to get a reading of their environment while Nora drew her weapon and made sure that there was no danger nearby. Armstrong and Deen showed an immediate interest in the buildings but did not move away from the party. Gene Edison looked around the square and waited for an initial report.

"The temperature is minus sixteen degrees Celsius. The atmosphere is oxygen and nitrogen but considering the temperature and low oxygen levels due to our altitude, I recommend that we use the life support system," said Xylion after finishing a rudimentary scan.

Gene nodded.

"These buildings are in remarkable condition," said Deen and took a careful step toward them, the thick snow squishing underneath her boots.

Armstrong had also activated his tricorder. "From what I can tell, the compound covers an area of about one-thousand square meters. It's like a small village," he said looking at Edison. He was obviously eager to explore the ruins.

"I would sure love to have a chat with the architect of this place," said Deen.

"Me too," said Nora putting her phaser away after she was satisfied that it was reasonably safe. "What sort of crazy people would put a village this far up a mountain? What's wrong with putting it in a valley?"

"We are fortunate that they erected this structure here," said Xylion. "It would have been lost if it had been constructed closer to the surface."

"They must have foreseen the ice age," said Armstrong. "The Hyterians had a foresight that encompassed centuries to come."

"They might have planned on preserving certain parts of their civilization for later visitors to find," said Deen. His excitement was catching on.

Nora took a few steps toward the buildings. "If I had incredible foresight, I wouldn't build a colony on a planet that'll turn into a frozen rock."

Gene smirked at Nora's comment which seemed to be lost on the scientists. "All right people, let's check it out. But keep in mind we're here to find clues to the whereabouts of the artifact. Other expeditions can study their culture in more detail," he said and led his team across the square.

"Right," said Armstrong under his breath, obviously disappointed by the orders before following the others.

"I suggest we split up to maximize the efficiency of our survey," said Xylion while they were approaching the main building's large entrance.

"Good idea," said Gene as he passed underneath a wide stone arch that led into the building only to find himself in another, yet smaller square.

There was no roof but two rows of columns formed the middle of the space. There was little doubt that this structure had been built by the same people who had created the buildings at the other locations they had visited. Three additional passageways led from the square into other parts of the complex.

He waited until the away team had assembled around him. But before he could give any orders, the ground under his feet began to tremble. It wasn't an especially strong quake but it was enough to make him feel queasy.

"This place is just getting better and better," said Nora who had been caught as off guard by the quake as the other members of the away team.

Xylion had taken scans even while the ground moved under his feet. "I am reading seismic activity of a low magnitude."

"This might account for the state of the structures," said Armstrong.

"Is there any immediate danger?" Gene said.

Xylion took another look at his readouts. "That is difficult to determine from the scans I have taken. It appears obvious that this area is prone to seismic activity but it might occur infrequently and at different intensities."

"Very well, we'll proceed with caution and return to the ship at the first sign of stronger quakes. Laas, Dee, you take the west. Keep your eyes open for anything that could reveal the location of the artifact. Xylion, Toby, you're with me."

The four officers nodded and then split up by entering opposite hallways.

* * *

Gene led Xylion and Toby Armstrong down a long corridor barely wide enough for two people to walk abreast and made out of what appeared to be solid and featureless stone.

A sense of déjà vu settled over him from the many similar hallways he had explored over the last couple of days. There was no doubt that the Hyterians had a particular fondness for that simple yet functional design. These structures were nowhere in as good a condition as the ones they had found on Dentura I or inside the asteroid station. There were holes and wide cracks in the walls and in certain places, entire sections of the wall and the ceiling were missing.

He could not find any signs of the hidden power source they had become accustomed to in Hyterian structures, leading him to believe that it was damaged or had long since been exhausted. There was no artificial illumination or any indication of technology. Fortunately, the many cracks provided more than adequate light for the away team to see their steps and avoid losing their grip on the shiny and icy floor.

Armstrong stopped when they reached a spot where the wall and ceiling had entirely collapsed. The corridor lay exposed under the sun of Tentrus for almost eight meters and the narrow passageway was coming perilously close to a sheer cliff. When he carefully approached the edge and looked down, he couldn't even make out the bottom. He had a spectacular view of the surrounding mountain peaks, however. Icy winds blew against his protective suit making him lose his balance for a split second.

He felt a hand on his shoulder and turned to see that Xylion had stepped behind him to steady him. He offered him a grateful nod as he took a step back from the cliff. "It's a long way down."

"The location the Hyterians chose for this building is impressive. This structure may have held a special significance," said Xylion while taking a look at the peaks in the near distance.

"Do you think they hid the artifact here?" said Gene.

"It is possible," Armstrong said.

"But unlikely. This structure is highly exposed. The Hyterians were a space-faring society. It would be more logical to keep a device of great power in a more concealed place."

Gene turned to continue down the corridor. "That is if their logic is the same as yours."

Xylion nodded. "Indeed. Many ancient cultures had very different views of the universe and their own nature. We cannot naturally assume that their ways of thinking were the same as ours," said Xylion in agreement while following him.

"It would make our job easier though," said Gene. He walked carefully along the opposite side of the gap and the two scientists followed his example. "But then again, that's why you're here, Mister Armstrong."

"I'm doing what I can, sir. But we're not having much to work with and too little time."

Gene cleared the dangerous opening. He made sure the others passed him safely before he followed them. "Any thoughts on what it is exactly we're looking for?"

Armstrong shook his head. "We've yet to find any mention of a powerful artifact in the texts we have been able to translate so far."

"Nothing at all?"

"We have only been able to decode thirty-six point seven percent of all the material we have gathered," said Xylion who was now leading the team. "There is insufficient reference material at present to attempt further translation efforts."

"My best people as well as most of our computer resources are working on this around the clock," said Armstrong. "We should get more results soon but the more material we collect, the quicker we'll make progress."

They stepped into a larger room with three triangular but glass-less windows overlooking the vast depths below. Whatever purpose the room had once fulfilled, it had long since lost that function. The walls might have contained elaborate inscriptions and depictions once but the cold and the ice had shown no mercy or intention on preserving any ancient secrets. A narrow, winding staircase led upward.

Gene carefully approached the stairs and checked their integrity. Once he was reasonably sure they wouldn't collapse under their collective weight, he began climbing them.

The others followed closely. They encountered an exit that seemed to lead to another yard but Gene opted to continue their ascent using the staircase instead. He took one step at a time, carefully balancing his weight. Once they had cleared the staircase, they found themselves in a similar room to the one where the stairs had originated from. They continued their search by entering yet another corridor.

"Any speculations on what this artifact might do exactly?" said Gene, now leading the away team again.

"Many," said Armstrong.

"It would be logical to assume that it is a weapon with the potential of causing widespread destruction."

"How so?"

"It has captured the interest of Klingons, Romulans as well as Cardassians. The only reason these groups would divert such effort and resources to finding this artifact is that they are convinced that the device they are looking for is of immense power and therefore of great value to them."

"Yes, and let's not forget that the Hyterians had access to a power source that is still a complete mystery to us. Their technology is so much more advanced than anything we know that it would be safe to assume that any weapon designed by the Hyterians would be inherently powerful," added Armstrong.

"So a doomsday device of some sort?" said the Gene, referring to the widely known but rarely encountered weapon of such destructive power that in theory it could obliterate entire solar systems. Rumors had it that these machines had been created by unknown civilizations from without the Milky Way galaxy. No present galactic empire had ever achieved creating such a weapon, mostly because the power it would consume was nearly immeasurable.

"That is not entirely implausible," said Xyliojn. "Especially because the Hyterians appear to have gone to great lengths and efforts to keep the artifact hidden."

"Well, gentlemen that's even more reason to double our efforts to find this thing before anyone else does."

The two scientists nodded in agreement and increased their pace to match Edison's.

* * *

DeMara was trying to record as much of her surroundings as possible while she and Nora Laas made their way through the compound. They hadn't encountered much that was noteworthy. The corridor they had been walking down had quickly split up and they were now seemingly making their way from one empty room to the next. Many had neither walls nor roofs so for the most part it felt as though they were stepping through open ruins.

Laas was getting impatient with her slower pace. She stopped and turned like she had done numerous times before to wait for her to finish a scan. "Dee, there's nothing in here."

She looked up from her tricorder. "I beg to differ. The layouts of these rooms can tell us about how the Hyterians lived, how they thought, and what they valued most."

Laas sighed.

"Look over there," she said and pointed at a small platform that had been built into the stone wall. "That is the third altar I've seen so far. This could mean that Hyterians were very spiritual and that their faith was part of their everyday life."

"Yes, or maybe that's where they put their flower pots."

She was about to reply when she changed her mind and thought better of it. Laas was not the right person to discuss the scientific method with. She closed her tricorder and followed the security officer out of the room.

"Being Bajoran, I would have thought you'd show more interest in a religious culture," she said as they walked side by side.

"I've never been very spiritual," she said. "Even less so since I left Bajor," she added in a thoughtful tone as if reflecting on a lifelong past.

"Do you miss it? Bajor, I mean."

She didn't answer right away. She didn't enjoy being reminded of the place she had once called home. To her, she had left all that behind a long time ago. "All I remember of Bajor is the fighting and the people I saw die. I don't miss that in the least," she said. It wasn't the complete truth but it was good enough for now, she decided.

DeMara nodded in sympathy. For her, it was difficult to even imagine what Laas' life must have been like before joining Starfleet. DeMara had been raised and had spent her childhood on a planet that some outside observers had called a place of perfect harmony.

She had never quite seen her home world in that same way but she had to admit that their people's way of life was nothing to what she had encountered after she had left. Wars and violence had been difficult concepts for her to fully understand at first and even after her Starfleet training and years in service, she hadn't quite figured out why some people chose to kill others for material gain, for power, or ideological reasons. She would never understand why the Cardassians had invaded Bajor and oppressed the inhabitants and forced them to labor for them.

"But Bajor has changed. The Cardassians are gone," she said after a short while.

"Maybe so but I have a new home now," Laas said. "I might go back someday. Maybe when I'll get too old for this," she said as her facial features began to relax. "But I do not intent to retire for a long time to come."

"And I bet you've got other things that keep you here as well," she said with a little smirk dancing on her lips.

She stopped and aimed a puzzled expression at the younger woman. The tone of her voice had been suggestive. "My duty," she said.

"That too," said DeMara, stopping as well.

"What else is there?"

"You know, certain crewmembers."

Laas continued down the broken hallway. "Of course. I greatly enjoy working and socializing with the crew."

Her smile grew wider. "There is no harm in admitting that you like him, you know."

She stopped again but kept her back to DeMara for a few seconds before turning to face her with that same puzzled look. "What are you talking about?"

She rolled her eyes. Laas was her friend but when it came to matters she deemed personal she was as hesitant as a complete stranger. "Our first officer, of course."

"Gene?" she said, trying to sound surprised. "I get along with him, just like I get along with everyone else onboard."

This time DeMara moved on, leaving Laas behind her. "Well, I for one can't recall you calling him *Gene* before," she said, walking by the dumbfounded security chief.

"I didn't." Laas turned. "Did I?"

DeMara halted and faced her, pointing an accusatory finger at her. "Admit it. You're not just getting along with him. You're getting along with him famously."

"Who told you that?" she said, her voice much louder than she had wanted. But she couldn't help herself. She was getting angry at the fact that people were talking behind her back. Worse yet, talking about something she had trouble getting to grips with herself.

"It's obvious to everyone, Laas," she said in a more serious tone.

She was about to raise her voice again but she couldn't. It was hard to yell at DeMara for whatever reason and that in itself was quite frustrating to her. One look at her face and her sparkling purple eyes was usually enough to want her to evaporate any kind of rage she might have felt bubbling under the surface. This had been very upsetting when she had met her for the first time. She had gotten used to it by now but not entirely. Like everyone else, she admired DeMara and her people but at the same time, she was often confused and frustrated with them. She took a deep breath.

"I don't understand why you insist on keeping it a secret," DeMara said softly. "I'd say you two make a great couple."

"Because..." Laas stopped herself when she realized that she had already given away more than she had wanted. "Because it's nobody else's business. That's why."

DeMara's tricorder interrupted any further conversation when it sounded an alert. She looked at the device and quickly muted it.

Laas stepped next to her.

"I'm reading life signs nearby," she whispered.

"How far?" said Laas in an equally quiet tone.

She pointed westwards. "Seventeen meters. That direction."

Laas nodded. "Stay back," she said and began to carefully make her way in that direction. If there was something Laas knew how to do it was sneaking up on people, a skill that had kept her alive when she had been little more than a child.

They silently crossed a large square that might have been a room once and then entered what seemed to be a spacious chamber. Three

wide columns close to the entrance concealed whatever lay within.

Laas took cover behind one of the stone pillars and gestured for DeMara to do the same behind the other.

Once DeMara was in position, she took another look at the tricorder. For some reason, it could not tell her how many life signs there were or of what sort. She looked at Laas and communicate to her using hand gestures.

Laas nodded and drew her phaser.

DeMara put her tricorder away and followed suit.

The security chief raised her hand and wordlessly began counting down from three.

On her mark, they both sprang out from behind their cover with their weapons ready to fire.

“Wait, don’t shoot!”

Laas froze.

Three men in Starfleet environmental suits were standing in front of her, their own weapons drawn.

Armstrong let out a gasp. “You almost gave me a heart attack.”

“You picked up life signs?” said Laas and put her phaser back into the holster at her hip.

“Yes. And they led us right here,” said Gene securing his weapon. “I can’t believe it was you we picked up.”

“I don’t think it was,” said DeMara who had taken another look at her scanning device.

Gene and Laas gave her a puzzled look.

“She is correct. You didn’t.”

The away team turned to discover seven figures standing at the opposite end of the room. They too were clad in environmental suits but theirs were brownish in color. Their heads were covered by a transparent fabric-like revealing the familiar ridges of Cardassian faces. They carried rifles and they were all pointed at the Starfleet officers.

“This would be the part where you drop your weapons,” said the man standing at the center of the Cardassian party. He had an impossibly wide grin on his face.

“Gul Renek,” said DeMara who recognized the Cardassian from their meeting by the asteroid station.

“The very same,” he said and raised his rifle higher to emphasize his point.

The away team disarmed itself. Everyone except Laas. The gleaming in her eyes did not go unnoticed by Gene. “Laas,” he said in a soft tone.

She turned to look at him.

“Don’t,” he said, looking straight into her eyes.

She turned to see the Cardassian’s self-satisfied grin and closed her eyes. She couldn’t believe that she had gotten herself captured by her sworn enemy. She opened her eyes again and then dropped her weapon.

“Good choice,” said Renek. “Consider yourself prisoners of the Cardassian Union.” He took a step toward Nora. “Especially you, Bajoran,” he said with disdain. “I’m sure that’s something that you should be used to by now.”

Gene reacted quickly and positioned himself carefully between her and the Cardassian commander. “What is it you want?”

“I’m pretty sure you know what we want,” he said. “It’s the same thing you want.”

“You are mistaken if you believe that we are in possession of the artifact you seek,” said Xylion.

“I realize that you don’t have it. But the fact that you are here means that this place might hold the key to finding it. Now hand over your scanning and communication devices,” he said once again lifting his rifle in a threatening manner.

The away team didn’t move.

“I do not intend to kill you, it’s not the kind of political fallout I’m interested in, but trust me when I say that we have means at our disposal that are far worse than death. Ask your Bajoran lackey, I’m sure she knows what I’m talking about.”

None of them needed to ask Laas about his implications. Cardassian torturing methods had a well-established reputation.

Gene signaled for the others to comply. For now, he did not see a better option.

The away team removed their combadges from their suits and handed over their tricorders. Two Cardassian soldiers collected the Starfleet equipment, including the weapons. They handed the scanning devices to their commander and then took positions overlooking their prisoners.

Renek accessed the data contained in the tricorders but didn't seem to be satisfied with what he found. He glanced at Edison. "Looks like you haven't had much luck yet. No matter," he said and gave the tricorder to one of his subordinates. "We will reveal whatever secrets are hidden here."

"By leaving no stone on top of the other no doubt," said Laas under her breath.

The Cardassian did not catch the Bajoran's remark. "You shall be returned to your ship once I'm satisfied you have shared all relevant information with me."

"You'll let us go?" said Armstrong surprised. He had never been a prisoner but he had heard plenty of stories about those unfortunate enough to fall in their clutches. If only half of those were true, he knew that he and the others were as good as dead.

"Once your captain has provided adequate compensation for our efforts," he said.

"What efforts?" said DeMara.

"Entertaining you as our guests, of course," he said with a grin. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I've got an artifact to find. Feel free to stay here and do absolutely nothing," he said and signaled his men to follow him out of the hall. Three of the soldiers remained to keep guard over their prisoners.

DeMara turned to Gene. "He's going to try and exchange us for the data we have collected on the artifact so far."

"That isn't much though, is it?" said Gene while keeping his eyes on the guards.

"We don't know that yet. We might already have the location of the artifact without even knowing it. We cannot let them have our research," said Armstrong. He wasn't especially bold or courageous but he was suddenly very much aware of what Edison and Owens had talked about. If this artifact proved to be a doomsday device it could not be allowed to fall into enemy hands. Five lives were a small price to pay to prevent that from happening.

Gene remained silent. His instincts told him that if the captain had to be forced to make a decision, he would always put the well-being of many over the well-being of just a few. It was what he would do in his position. But he didn't even want to imagine what the Cardassians might do with them if the captain proved unwilling to cooperate.

"I say we take them," Laas said through clenched teeth while studying the guards closely. "I say we take them right now."

"Considering our current situation, the chances of successfully overpowering the guards and surviving the ensuing conflict are less than eleven-point-four percent."

The three-armed Cardassians were standing about five meters from the away team, two at their flanks and one directly in front of them. Not willing to take any chances, they all had their rifles pointed at their prisoners, ready to fire if they made any move to try and escape.

"We can't just stand here and wait for them to kill us," said Laas and shot Xylion a glare although the Vulcan did not seem to be impressed by her emotional outburst.

Then the ground split open.

* * *

Shortly after the away team had transported off *Eagle*, Michael had left the bridge to make for his quarters. Under normal circumstances, he wouldn't have left while a critical away mission was in progress but he had made an exception this time. He knew that the mission could take hours and he could no longer fight the fatigue beginning to take over his body and mind.

This shouldn't have come as a surprise considering that he hadn't had a good night's rest for days. None of his officers, not even Doctor Wenera realized this but Michael had been plagued by strange dreams ever since he had collapsed on Hyteria. It was one of the reasons he had tried to avoid sleep as much as possible as he had since learned the hard way, his dreams did not care if he was asleep or not.

He had kept the details of his nightmares a secret for obvious reasons. And since he had found out that they were in fact looking for a weapon of enormous power it had become even more imperative that he remained in control of *Eagle*. Something that would be at risk if he were to admit his true condition.

He was still convinced that whatever it was that was causing these exhausting visions, he still had a handle on it and that eventually they would pass. He had no concerns with leaving Leva temporarily in charge of the bridge in his absence, knowing well that he was a capable officer.

He hoped a quick sonic shower would suffice to stave off the fatigue.

Michael Owens never even reached his quarters.

He had felt his body grow heavier with each step and soon enough it was nearly impossible to set one foot after the other as if he was walking

against a powerful and invisible current.

His vision blurred and the corridor began to twist and turn like an angry snake. He stopped and reached out to grab hold of the bulkhead in case his balance was going to leave him next.

He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and ventured another step.

This one turned out to be much easier than the ones that had come before.

He opened his eyes.

And found that he was no longer on his ship.

He was back amongst the ruins of the Hyterian city they had visited days before and it felt all perfectly real. The smell of the fresh air, the touch of the nearby stone, and the warm sunshine on his face.

It was nothing like a dream but he knew it couldn't be real.

The ruins had been destroyed.

He stood only a few meters from the large temple-like building that had captured his attention the first time he had visited this world. The very same place where he had been injured.

He approached the building and walked up the few steps leading up to it. He entered the passageway and carefully made it into the oval chamber.

He moved to the center of the room only very hesitantly, the memory of collapsing here for no apparent reason still fresh in his memory.

He didn't lose consciousness this time.

Instead, the room came to life.

The inscriptions on the walls began to glow in bright blue colors while outside day turned into night.

Strange and unfamiliar voices began to speak up. He did not understand the language but he knew he had heard it before. Most prominent of all was a distinctly female voice. It was soft and soothing. So harmonic that Michael couldn't be sure if she was talking or singing.

A three-meter-wide circle of pure yellow light appeared on the floor around him making him its center. It moved upward, creating a veil of light between the floor and the ascending ring.

The circle of light passed his hips then his face and continued its journey toward the sky. He reached out carefully to touch the veil of light that gently moved with the wind. His hand easily passed through it without resistance and left a warm and tingling sensation on his skin. He retracted the hand and looked up. It had traveled out of his sight and he was now standing within a column that seemed to reach to infinity.

His attention was redirected toward the voice.

He still did not understand what the woman was saying in her sing-song voice but her tone had grown more urgent.

When he looked up again, he could see something approaching him within the column. Before he could even think of stepping out of its way a beam of pure light hit him from above. He gasped at the suddenness with which it had made contact but he quickly came to realize that it was harmless.

More than harmless. It felt pleasant. Revitalizing.

The ray grew in width until it had him completely swallowed up.

The woman began to speak faster and the light became brighter. Soon it completely illuminated the chamber he was standing in. The intensity increased still though he remained at the center of its focal point he felt neither heat nor pain.

Within moments not only the chamber but the entire sky above him was bright as day.

It was like nothing Michael had ever experienced.

It was intense and yet comforting, disturbing in a sense but also as natural as sunlight. He was soaking up the energy released here like a sponge and it gave him never-before-known strength, comfort, and confidence.

The only thing truly askew was the warning voice of the unseen woman.

And then everything changed.

The beam of light began to pulse erratically and whatever comfort he had known quickly evaporated when he felt it release a massive amount of heat.

So much he instantly stepped out of the circle.

It wasn't enough.

The voice was now booming as though to warn him to get away while he still could.

The angrily fluctuating beam of light began to grow and expand across the chamber. The heat increased but so did its intensity and brightness. Slowly the chamber began to fade as if it was being wiped out of existence.

Michael ran.

By the time he cleared the building, he found the world on fire.

He didn't stop, didn't even take the time to wipe the sweat off his face.

He couldn't stop. Behind him, a wall of pure, bright white light turned everything it came into contact with into nothingness.

And it moved faster than he could.

It finally caught up with him like the shockwave of an explosion.

He froze when he realized there was nowhere else to go. The world was gone, turned into complete and utter blankness.

Michael closed his eyes and took a deep breath. His rational mind tried to convince him that what he had witnessed was impossible.

When he opened his eyes again, he was back where he had started. Back in the corridor on *Eagle* with no sign of the depressing desolation or the Hyterian city. It was as though he had never left the ship and something told him that he hadn't.

Sweat pearls dropped into his eyes.

"Bridge to the captain."

He still felt unsteady on his feet but the fatigue he had felt earlier was gone. So was the strange, invisible current that had made it so difficult to move.

To his relief, he found that the corridor was empty. There were no crewmembers in sight who could have wondered about their captain's strange behavior.

"Bridge to Captain Owens," said Leva again, his voice containing a hint of concern now.

Michael stood away from the bulkhead once he was satisfied that the episode had passed. "This is Owens," he said, still sounding much weaker than he had anticipated.

"Sir, a Romulan warbird has just entered the system and is approaching the planet."

He took another breath and forced himself to backtrack his steps. "Understood, I'm on my way."

* * *

The quake that shook the icy mountain was nothing like the one the away team had experienced before.

By the surprised look on the Cardassians' faces, it was quite clear that they did not know about the seismic activity the region was prone to.

The quake intensified and part of the back wall of the large room collapsed, engulfing the surprised guard who was standing closest in a cloud of dust and debris.

The noise was near deafening but Laas knew that this was their best chance. She glanced at Gene who had clearly been thinking the same thing. He promptly offered an approving nod.

Without wasting another second, they both charged. Laas the guard on the left, the first officer singled out the one on the right.

The Cardassian didn't even hear coming.

Laas leveraged not only her speed but also her hatred for Cardassians to press her attack. She had clenched both her fists to deliver a devastating blow against the guard's head. Her fists impacted with his lower jaw and his screams left no doubt that she had dislocated the bone. She ignored the pain that shot through her own hands while the Cardassian flew backward and landed on the hard stone floor.

He tried to crawl back onto his feet but Laas refused to show mercy and followed up by kicking him hard into his unprotected face. He flipped over and onto his back and passed out from the pain almost instantly.

Gene's attack was less ruthless yet as effective. The guard on his side was not quite as distracted. From the corner of his eye, he had spotted the threat approaching. He swung around but by the time he could squeeze off a shot, Gene was already so close, he simply shoved the rifle aside allowing the deadly energy blast to fizzle harmlessly into the air.

Gene delivered a powerful blow into his midsection, aiming just under his ribcage and driving his fist upward. The guard began to double over but another blow to his head stopped him short and jerked him backward instead.

He landed unceremoniously on his back where he remained.

Then Gene heard the shots.

He whipped around to see that they had come from where the third guard had stood.

He could see the man outlined within the slowly dissipating dust cloud. He had survived the collapse of the far wall and was now firing blindly at the away team.

“Get down,” yelled Gene as he rushed the Cardassian, trying to reach him before he could get a clean shot.

DeMara, Armstrong, and Xylion scrambled for cover.

Gene wasn't quite fast enough. The Cardassian had taken a couple of steps to clear the cloud and brought up his rifle again to find the nearest target of opportunity.

It turned out to be Toby Armstrong.

Gene jumped but not before the guard managed to squeeze off a shot.

The young archeologist went down as he screamed in pain.

Gene tackled his target at full speed but realized too late that his momentum would push them both toward a wall that no longer existed.

Laas watched with terrible foreboding. She raced toward the scene but she was already too late and watched with disbelieving eyes as both Gene and the Cardassian tumbled over the cliff.

When she reached the collapsed wall, she found that she couldn't even approach the cliff safely, with powerful gale-force winds keeping her back. She could spot a few clouds but was unable to see what lay directly below.

She thought she could hear a faint noise over the hauling wind but she couldn't be certain. There was no reason to believe that Gene Edison could have survived the fall, and all signs seemed to point toward the simple fact that he had not.

It was not an outcome she was willing to accept.

Armstrong in the meantime had hit the floor and clenched the wound on his chest. The phaser beam had ripped through his suit and blood was rapidly soaking the uniform underneath.

DeMara and Xylion had hurried to his side immediately.

DeMara knelt next to him and investigated the wound while Xylion opened a tricorder he had collected from one of the fallen Cardassians.

“It's bad, isn't it?” said Armstrong, his face distorted by pain.

She looked at him. “It's going to be all right.”

“I'm going to die.”

She smiled her marvelous smile and looked right into his eyes. “You're going to be just fine, Toby,” she said and took his hand into hers.

Doomed or not, Armstrong couldn't help but believe her. He suddenly found it very difficult not to. As if it was impossible that the beautiful young woman could have ever said anything to him that wasn't the truth, as if she was incapable of lying.

It gave him a sense of comfort he had rarely felt before.

She looked up at Xylion.

“We must return him to the ship immediately,” he said and closed his tricorder.

She nodded.

Xylion looked up to see Nora Laas still trying to locate the first officer near the cliff. “Lieutenant, is there any sign of Commander Edison?”

Laas ignored him. Instead, she quickly approached one of the incapacitated Cardassian guards and collected her gear. “I'm going to go find him.”

“Lieutenant, we must return to *Eagle*. We will come back with a search party.”

“You go ahead, I stay here and look for Edison,” she said and headed for the nearest exit.

“That is unacceptable,” said Xylion while she walked away.

But Laas didn't listen and within moments she was gone.

* * *

His recent experience haunted him all the way to the bridge. When he stepped out of the turbolift his forehead was still covered with perspiration and his knees felt weak. His strength was returning but only gradually.

Michael had no time to be weak. He wiped away the sweat, determined to face the Romulans with resolve after already having suffered one painful blow by their hand.

He walked down the ramp and toward the command area of the bridge and by the time he had reached his chair, he had already forced the memories of his unexplained sensation out of his mind.

Leva had risen from the center seat once he had noticed him and quickly returned to his station.

Michael took his chair, glad for the opportunity. He was also relieved to realize that the bridge officers were too busy to take notice of the paleness of his face.

Only seconds after Leva had reassumed his regular post his console informed him of yet another occurrence. "Sir, the away team has returned to the ship."

Michael simply nodded.

"Lieutenant Nora and Commander Edison are still on the surface, however," he continued, unable to keep his voice entirely free of concern

"Still on the surface?"

"Yes. Commander Xylion is on his way to brief you as we speak."

Michael's thoughts quickly rearranged themselves to push matters of immediate concern into the foreground.

"The Romulan warbird is approaching our position," said Ensign Lance Stanmore who was in charge of operations in Deen's absence.

"Mister Culsten, set course to intercept," he said. "I want to face those Romulans head-on instead of sitting duck in orbit. They have already shown their hostile intentions once and I do not intend to be their victim for a second time."

Culsten acknowledged and then steered the ship away from the planet and toward the majestic warbird.

"Go to yellow alert. Raise shields."

Xylion entered the bridge and stepped into the command area.

Michael stood. The uneasiness he had felt before, vanished. "What happened down there, Commander?"

"We were taken prisoner by a Cardassian landing party but were able to overpower them. Commander Edison was separated as a result. I ordered the away team to return to the ship after Lieutenant Armstrong was injured."

"What about Nora?"

"She disregarded my order and stayed behind to locate Commander Edison," said the Vulcan. "Sir, I am unsure if he's still alive."

Michael felt his throat tighten.

"We are intercepting the warbird in thirty seconds," said Culsten.

"Understood, Commander," Michael said, realizing that he had to deal with one crisis at a time. "We'll deal with that matter as soon as we can."

"The Romulan ship is slowing," said Leva.

"Match your speed, Mister Culsten."

"Aye, sir."

Both ships slowed until they came to a complete stop only a few thousand meters from each other. The imposing green warbird almost twice the size of the Federation starship.

The Romulan vessel filled out the entire view screen on *Eagle's* bridge. Michael knew that the ship was as menacing as its looks

suggested. It was more than capable to pose a serious threat to *Eagle*.

“They are hailing us,” said the half-Romulan tactical officer. He seemed quite unperturbed by the fact that he was about to face his own people. He had never been forced to fight other Romulans in a major combat engagement but the unsteady relationship between the Federation and the Star Empire had always made that a possible scenario.

Michael had no concerns about the man’s loyalties if it came to a fight. “On screen.”

Two Romulan officers appeared on the viewer. Only the woman on the right spoke. She appeared quite young for a starship commander but her facial expression and body language seemed so tense that Michael was sure that she must have been extremely uncomfortable. “*This is Sub-commander Sentar of the Imperial warbird Heruc. You have trespassed on a world claimed by the Romulan Star Empire. You are to surrender any information or objects you have retrieved from that world and leave this system immediately if you wish to avoid serious repercussions,*” she said in what seemed to be a well-rehearsed speech.

“I was not aware that the Romulan Empire had claimed this system or anything else this far outside your territory,” said Owens.

“*An honest mistake on your part,*” said the man sitting next to Sentar. He seemed to be a subordinate to the woman but his attitude was as self-assured as his superior’s. “*We shall overlook your oversight and spare you further embarrassment if you leave at once.*”

Michael sat in his chair and Commander Xylion followed suit by sitting next to him to present a united front against the Romulan duo.

“I would, unfortunately, there is a problem.”

Sentar raised an eyebrow in an almost Vulcan fashion.

“You are, in fact, guilty of trespassing on a planet claimed by the Federation. Not only that but you ruined an archeological dig site on that very planet. You destroyed Federation property without provocation,” said Michael. “Not to mention that you endangered Starfleet personnel in the process. This is a serious matter. You understand my dilemma?”

The Romulans did not answer. They had apparently not expected him to make the incident on Hyteria official. The two Romulan commanders exchanged a quick look. “*We will have to consider what you have said, Captain,*” said Sentar. “*You will remain at your present position until this matter has been resolved to our satisfaction.*” She was trying to maintain her authoritative tone but it had begun to crack, showing her apparent inexperience in dealing with foreign matters.

She pressed a button on a computer console next to her and the picture faded away.

Michael knew that he had merely bought some time. Romulans could be extremely stubborn and once they had laid eyes on something they wanted, they would find a way to justify getting it. No matter who got in their way.

“Mister Culsten, how far are we from Tentrus VI?”

“Five and a half million kilometers,” he said. “Well outside scanning and transporter range,” he added, sensing his commanding officer’s intention.

Leva stepped away from his station and walked down to the command area. “Captain, I request permission to take a shuttle and return to the planet and get our people.”

Michael shook his head. “Too dangerous while the warbird has us in their sights. They might interpret it as an aggressive gesture and open fire.”

“I doubt that, sir. At the moment they are uncertain as to how to proceed. I do not think they’d be bold enough to fire upon a shuttlecraft and provoke a battle with *Eagle*,” he said. “I know how they think. They’re trying to figure out how to get what they want without causing an interstellar incident. They are convinced that they haven’t done anything yet that can’t be justified. They blow a shuttle out of space and they’ll lose any chance to explain this away.”

Michael looked at Xylion for further advice.

“I concur that their recent behavior suggests that they would prefer avoiding open hostilities. It stands to reason that they would not wish to be seen as an aggressor in an ensuing conflict to retain plausible deniability. However, I strongly recommend that we do not move *Eagle* as this may be interpreted as an aggressive gesture.”

Michael’s glance returned to his tactical officer. It wasn’t hard to tell that he was eager for the chance to rescue his comrades. “Very well, we’ll send a shuttle.”

Leva nodded with satisfaction.

“But not you, Commander,” said Michael causing the Romulan’s features to darken.

“Sir?”

“I need you here in case you’re wrong and they consider open hostilities a small price to pay for a chance to obtain the Hyterian artifact,” he said and turned to Xylion. “Commander, assemble an armed detachment and locate Nora and Edison. Return as quickly as possible.”

Xylion nodded.

“I want you back on *Eagle* if there is any indication that the Romulans or the Cardassians are moving in on the shuttle.”

“Yes, sir,” said the Vulcan and made his way to the nearest turbolift.

“Mister Leva, send word to the *Heruc*. Inform them that we are dispatching a shuttlecraft to the planet to retrieve our crew.”

Leva’s disappointment was obvious but to his credit, he didn’t hesitate and confirmed the order with a short nod and then returned to his station.

Michael sat back in his chair and sharply monitored the Romulan ship on the view screen. *Ball’s in your court*, he thought grimly.

* * *

Laas found a staircase and made her way down as quickly as the frozen steps allowed.

She had just disobeyed a direct order from a superior officer based on nothing more than a gut feeling. But at least for the moment, her thoughts were not focused on what she had done but on what she needed to do next.

Gene was still alive and she had to find him. She didn’t know how she knew, the rational part of her brain tried to convince her that she had no basis whatsoever to believe this but she paid little attention to that. She just knew.

The staircase ended and she found herself in one of the many similar-looking chambers of the Hyterian compound. She was about to cross the room to get to the other side when she heard the voices.

She froze.

They sounded familiar and they were closing.

She quickly stepped back into the winding staircase for cover.

Not a moment later a group of Cardassians entered the chamber from one of the many arches that led inside. She couldn’t make out what they were saying but from the animated discussion they were having, it was clear that they weren’t happy.

Laas raised the rifle she had taken from the unconscious guard earlier and took careful aim at Gul Renek. She had a clear shot and a compelling yearning to squeeze the trigger. Renek would be one of many Cardassian commanders she had killed in a very similar fashion. It would have been just one more.

She hesitated, something she would never have done ten years earlier.

She lowered the rifle.

That person she had once been was long gone, left behind on a war-torn planet. She was a Starfleet officer now and more importantly, she had a mission that required her to remain unseen.

The Cardassians seemed to be communicating with their ship. Renek was furious about the news he had been given and promptly stormed out of the chamber closely followed by his men.

Laas could only guess what had upset him that much. To her relief, he was too distracted to think of contacting his guards as the com-unit she had taken remained silent.

Once the Cardassians were gone, she carefully stepped out of her hiding place and approached one of the large, empty window frames just in time to witness them dematerialize in rays of crimson light. They had returned to their ship.

She then left the chamber to continue her search.

Without DeMara’s meticulous approach slowing her down, her exploration of the ancient structure proceeded at a much faster pace. She was not concerned with finding any hidden artifacts or remains of scientific interest. She was simply trying to scour the westwards facing lower levels, the only places where Gene could have landed after he had fallen.

She quickly realized that the entire structure was much bigger than she had first assumed. It seemed to be divided into different parts with streets and large squares separating them not unlike a village.

Laas hurried through the rooms and across the narrow alleys as fast as she could, with just one thing on her mind.

She tried to look for clues, disturbed ground, pieces of his environmental suit, or maybe blood. But there was nothing.

She didn’t let that deter her.

She continued downward, taking one staircase after the next until she had reached the lowest level of the compound.

The building from which Gene had fallen was to her immediate right. She stood on a small plaza, a large obelisk-like statue at its center.

Doubts were beginning to spread in her mind. If Gene wasn't here, there weren't many other places she could look. If he wasn't here then he had plummeted off the mountain and to his certain death. As much as she wanted to believe otherwise, there simply couldn't be any other explanation.

She lowered her rifle to activate her com-unit. She needed mountain climbing gear to continue her search. She'd repel down the entire height of the cliff if she had to.

But before she could activate the device, the ground began to tremble once more.

She fought to maintain her balance but the quake only intensified.

She lost that battle and was painfully thrown onto the stone-tiled street.

Out of the corner of the eye, she noticed that the stone obelisk that stood nearby had begun to wobble dangerously.

It happened so quickly that she barely had time to react.

Another jolt gripped the ground and the tall monolith came crashing down.

Directly toward her.

She rolled out of the way just in time to avoid being crushed but the impact was so forceful it ripped the ground wide open, swallowing her and dragging her into darkness.

* * *

"What is the status of the *De Gaulle*?" said Michael, sitting in his chair at the center of the bridge.

His science officer and a security detachment had left *Eagle* in the shuttle *De Gaulle* only a few minutes ago. Their departure had been uneventful. Leva and Xylion had remained right and the Romulans had shown no sign of hostility so far but Michael knew that that could change in a heartbeat.

"They'll be entering the planet's orbit momentarily," said DeMara Deen who had since returned to her station on the bridge.

"So far so good."

Michael's sentiment didn't last very long. As if on cue, a sensor alert from Leva's station signaled trouble.

"A Cardassian ship has appeared close to the planet," the tactical officer said.

Michael stood up. "Damn."

"Same configuration as the ship we encountered earlier," said Leva. "It's the *Keldana*."

"They must have followed us from the asteroid," said Culsten.

Michael nodded, silently chastising himself for not having been more cautious. "Why didn't we detect that ship earlier?"

"Judging by their ion trail, they must have maintained a low altitude orbit over the magnetic pole of Tentrus VI," said DeMara. "We would not have seen them unless we knew where to look."

"The Cardassian ship is approaching the *De Gaulle* and..." Leva interrupted himself to double-check his computer panel.

"What is it?" said Michael.

"The warbird is moving to intercept the *Keldana*."

"This could turn ugly," said Michael. "What about our shuttle?"

"The *Keldana* has changed course to intercept the *Heruc*. The *De Gaulle* is being left alone of the now."

"They're going after the bigger fish," said Culsten.

"I believe the Romulans have hailed the *Kaldana*," said DeMara. A small smile formed on her lips. "If I make this out correctly, they're both trying to claim this system for themselves."

"Under different circumstances, this could be quite amusing," said Culsten who couldn't hide a smile either.

"We've got a new contact."

Michael turned to face Leva. There had been something in his tactical officer's tone he had never heard before. It wasn't quite fear but it was perhaps the closest thing he had ever witnessed in his voice.

"What is it?"

"Holy mother of King—" said Culsten slowly but unable to finish his sentence. His eyes were fixed on the viewscreen

Michael turned back to the screen, curious to find the reason for his helmsman's unusual exclamation and his tactical officer's apparent trepidation.

When he finally recognized what had caused everyone's surprise, he wished he hadn't looked. The screen showed a massive gray and black globe approaching his ship. It had no visual features that could have hinted to a propulsion or weapon systems of any kind but Michael knew exactly what they were facing; one of the most powerful and fearsome races in the known galaxy.

"It's a Borg sphere," said DeMara, her eyes the size of saucers.

* * *

Laas opened her eyes and saw nothing at all.

She tried to move and found that it would be a difficult task. She was halfway buried underneath rock.

Then her eyes adjusted to her new surroundings and she was able to make out the contours of a cave. Her glance wandered upward and she could see pieces of what remained of the obelisk. But the fracture through which she had slipped was now sealed by earth and rock. She would not be able to return that way.

The quakes had since stopped but she was in a precarious position. The slightest tremor could potentially loosen the feeble ceiling above her and this time there'd be no room to evade it.

She put all her strength into trying to free herself.

The third attempt did the trick.

She managed to pull herself out from under the rock and quickly inspected her suit. She noticed with relief that it was undamaged except for a slight crack in the transparent aluminum visor. She felt bruised but found that she hadn't broken any bones.

Her gear, however, including the phaser rifle and the com-unit were gone.

She noticed a dim light coming from somewhere further down the cavern. It was the only way to go and so with little hesitation, she sat out that way.

The terrain was rocky and unsteady and she had to watch her every step carefully so as not to trip and injure herself further. A noticeable draft of air was getting stronger the further she went.

She soon discovered why.

The cavern led to a small, snow-covered ledge inset into the steep mountain precipice.

Somebody was lying there.

"Gene!" She moved as fast as her bruised body would allow and knelt next to him.

He was flat on his stomach and she carefully rolled him onto his back. Her heart fluttered noticeably when she heard him moan quietly. He was still alive.

His environmental suit looked mostly undamaged but she knew that this didn't mean that he was not injured. Blood was trickling out of his nose which meant something as innocent as a broken nose or something far more life threatening.

"Commander," she said, took hold of his shoulders, and shook him gently. "Commander Edison."

His eyes opened slowly.

She smiled. "You gave us quite the scare, Commander. We thought you were dead."

For a moment he looked as though he didn't recognize her. The notion was quickly dispelled as familiarity set in again. "Fortunately, the reports of my death have been greatly exaggerated," he said and tried to move his head slightly to look around. "Where are the others?"

"They returned to the ship. Armstrong was wounded."

“But you stayed behind.”

She nodded.

“Can’t believe Xylion liked that idea much.”

“The important thing is that I found you. How do you feel? Do you think you can move?”

He tried to get up but a sharp pain quickly convinced him that he wasn’t going anywhere by himself. “I don’t think so. We’ll have to call *Eagle* and have them beam us out of here.”

She didn’t answer but the look on her face spoke for itself.

“Let me guess, you misplaced your communicator again.”

She slowly shook her head.

“That would seem to complicate matters. Maybe if we—“ he interrupted himself when the pain returned unexpectedly but with increased intensity. It caused tears to shoot into his eyes.

“What is it?”

He couldn’t find the strength to speak and clenched his teeth tightly.

“Commander, are you all right?”

“Yes, I’m ... fine,” he finally managed to say. The tone of his voice, however, seemed to indicate otherwise.

And Laas could see through the bravado. “Nonsense. You’re in pain.”

“A bit maybe,” he said, barely audible.

“We have to get you to sickbay.”

“I’m open to suggestions.”

Laas was frustrated. She knew that there was nothing she could do. Without means of communication, there was no way to contact the ship and arrange for transport. And without medical supplies, she could not treat him. She had only the most basic medical training which was going to be entirely inadequate to deal with a patient who was most likely suffering from internal injuries.

Gene’s body twitched slightly as he experienced another jolt of pain. It was becoming unbearable and he felt a sudden desire to rest and close his eyes. He knew it would stop the pain.

Remembering some of her medical training she quickly collected as much snow as she could and pushed it down under his legs to keep them elevated. It wouldn’t stop the internal bleeding but hopefully, it was going to buy them some time.

Gene didn’t even seem to notice and when she looked at his face, she saw that he had closed his eyes.

“No,” she cried. “Stay awake. You must stay awake.”

“I’m gonna close my eyes for just for a little while,” he said so quietly, she had to lower her head to hear him.

She took him by the shoulders again. “Listen to me. You cannot sleep. I get us out of here somehow but you have to keep awake.” Laas couldn’t remember a time she had been more frightened. She had seen many people die, many people that had been close to her and who had fought by her side against the Cardassians. But somehow, this was different. She wasn’t sure if she could bare seeing him die. She didn’t want to find out.

“I don’t know if I can, Laas, I just don’t...”

“Yes, yes you can do it. I know you can. Just tell me what to do and I do it. Please, just hang in there. Don’t do this to me,” she said, with tears threatening to escape her eyes. The fact that she could not wipe them away making it worse.

He stared into her hazel eyes. Then he nodded slightly. “Talk to me,” he said.

“What?”

“Keep talking, tell me a story, anything.”

“I ... I don’t know any stories.”

“If you want me to stay awake, you need to tell me a story,” he said, his eyes threatening to close once again. “And it better be a good one.”

“Okay, wait, I know a story,” she said. “It’s a tale that I was told once. I’m not sure if I can remember it all.”

“Just tell it.”

“It’s about a little boy who lived in a small village in Kendra Province. No, wait. It was Lonar Province. Or was it—“

“Laas.”

She looked at him.

“It’s not important, just tell the story.”

She nodded and then continued. “He lived in a small village all his life. Then there came a day the village was plagued by a terrible disease and his mother became very sick and passed away. He was very sad but then he remembered the stories his mother had told him when he had been younger about a creature called the Dal’Rok, a massive beast able to spit fire, four stories high, with immense wings and huge razor-sharp blades on its feet.”

“A dragon.”

She nodded and continued. “He often sat by the fire, listening to stories the townspeople would tell about the creature and the many heroes who had been sent out to slay it but who had never returned. Legend claimed that the Dal’Rok guarded the most precious treasures in the entire land. Whoever was strong enough to defeat the beast would return as a king.

The boy didn’t care about riches. What he really wanted was to get to the Spring of Desire which was said to be deep within the Dal’Rok’s cave. And the story went that the hero who slew the monster would be allowed to drink from the crystal-clear fountain and then be granted one single wish.

The boy became obsessed with the legend. He came to believe that the Spring of Desire was the only way he would ever see his mother again. So, from that day forward, he made it his single mission in life to find the Dal’Rok, to slay it, and to drink from the spring.

The town elders tried to talk him out of what they believed to be a foolish undertaking. A myth at best, a suicide mission at worst, they tried to convince him that even if the Dal’Rok really existed, no man could ever defeat him. He was too powerful and so many others, equally dedicated warriors had lost their lives in pursuit of riches and fame.

But the boy could not be deterred. His cause was just, he told them; he was not interested in fame or wealth. All he wanted was to bring back a loved one that had been unjustly taken from him. Determined and utterly devoted he began his training as a warrior.

For many years he learned and trained. He went out to see the greatest masters and teachers to steel both his body and mind.

After eight long, hard years, the boy, now a young man, had become one of the strongest and most respected warriors in all the lands. He had aced one competition after the next and a great number of kings and warlords had become eager to hire him and pay significantly for his services. He turned them all down. Instead, he set out on his journey to find the hidden cave of the Dal’Rok.

He traveled for months, crossing oceans, climbing the highest mountains, and searching the thickest woods. Months turned into years as he endured the coldest winters and the hottest summers. Determined not to rest until he had found what he was so desperately looking for.”

Laas paused to take a breath and to remember the ending but when she looked at Gene she realized that his eyes were closed. “Commander!”

He didn’t react.

She desperately took hold of his shoulders and shook to no avail. “Gene, open your eyes. Please, just open your eyes.”

* * *

Michael had never encountered the Borg before.

But he knew them well enough from official briefings and horrific witness testimonies. The race of cybernetic drones, half machine, half man, traveled the galaxy with the aim of assimilating other races and their technology in an endless pursuit of perfection. They had already tried to conquer Earth once and in the process had caused the most devastating loss of life and ships in Starfleet history. If there was one thing Michael understood it was that the best way to win a battle against the Borg was to avoid one.

“The *Kaldana* and the *Heruc* are moving to intercept the sphere,” said Leva.

DeMara shook her head. “They’re insane.”

“Or desperate,” said Culsten.

“Mister Leva, go to red alert. Raise shield, arm all weapons,” said Michael and sat in his chair.

DeMara turned to face the captain. “You’re not seriously considering going up against the Borg?”

"I'd say that we have even more at stake than our Cardassian and Romulan friends. We have two crewmembers still on that planet, not to mention a shuttle in orbit," said Michael. "Mister Culsten, execute attack pattern omega-three."

"Omega-three, aye sir."

The two warships didn't waste any time opening fire on the Borg sphere. They pounded the vessel with phaser fire, torpedoes, and disruptor volleys. But the Borg failed to be impressed, not even bothering to avoid the incoming fire. Instead, the ship kept its course and speed, making its way determinedly toward the sixth planet of the system.

Moments later, *Eagle* joined the two other starships and added its firepower to the mix, trying to inflict as much damage as possible. The Starfleet vessel's involvement seemed to make the difference as the Borg finally changed course, acknowledging the enemy for the first time.

This did not go unnoticed on *Eagle*'s bridge.

"The Borg vessel is sending a general hail," said Leva. "Audio only."

"Let's hear it."

A second later a choir of voices boomed through the speakers of the bridge. "*We are the Borg. You will be assimilated; your biological and technological distinctiveness will be added to our own. Resistance is futile.*"

"I guess we have their attention now," said DeMara.

"They are returning fire."

Michael didn't need to be told. He could see the emerald-colored energy beams being hurled toward the *Kaldana*. Its shields were barely withstanding the onslaught.

"Evasive maneuvers, keep firing weapons," said Michael and held on to the armrests of his chair.

Culsten's palms became sweaty as he steered the ship as fast and as erratic as the mass of *Eagle* allowed. It didn't matter how much faster the Krellonian's reaction times were compared to those of average humans, in the end, it wasn't fast enough to avoid the innumerable energy blasts unleashed by the Borg sphere.

Leva had to put all his long experience as a tactical officer to use to inflict damage on the much bigger and more powerful vessel. His fingers raced over the weapons and defensive controls making sure that he kept up *Eagle*'s barrage. At the same time, he needed to worry that the shields remained stable around the ship's most vulnerable areas like the engineering section and the warp nacelles. His frown was evidence that the battle was not going well.

Eagle was taking a beating, and the only reason that the shields had not yet collapsed under the immense pressure of the Borg weapons was that the sphere had to deal with three different ships that all attacked using their own individual tactics. This seemed to be effective in keeping the Borg busy but it failed in causing any serious damage to their massive vessel.

"Our shields are down to forty-three percent," said DeMara, her voice now drained of anything but cold, hard professionalism.

The shape of the green warbird began to dissolve and slowly disappeared from the view screen.

Michael couldn't believe it. The Romulans were cloaking their ship and retreating.

"That's right, tug in your tail and run," said Culsten when he caught a glimpse of the ship turning invisible. He had not much time to comment on the apparent Romulan cowardice much further, however, as he had his hands full avoiding another incoming volley.

"Mister Leva, Mister Culsten, implement attack pattern kappa-six," said Michael. Kappa-three was a more direct tactical strategy that sacrificed certain defensive systems for a stronger offensive. Michael realized that playing it safe would be ineffective against the Borg. If they wanted to beat them, they had to give them everything they had.

Leva and Culsten did not reply but they followed his order to the letter. *Eagle* turned to face the Borg sphere head-on and unleashed a volley of its weapons arsenal; deadly phaser fire, photon, and quantum torpedoes as well as a couple of tri-cobalt devices.

"Transfer all available auxiliary power to forward shields."

The Borg's answer to *Eagle*'s aggressive maneuver came at once. Multiple energy beams hit the forward section of the saucer, sending shockwaves through the interior of the ship.

On the bridge, several energy conduits overloaded, showering the command center with sparks and filling it with smoke. Two crewmembers unlucky enough to have worked close to the overloaded stations were thrown to the floor.

"The *Kaldana* is in trouble," said DeMara.

Michael noticed. The *Galor*-class ship had been completely engulfed by a green energy beam and was now being held firmly by the Borg ship. They were getting ready to carve up the ship like a Thanksgiving turkey.

Michael understood that he could not allow the Cardassians to be taken out of this battle. Without them, the Borg would be able to concentrate solely on *Eagle* and he knew that they wouldn't stand a chance.

"Target the tractor beam emitter and fire quantum torpedoes. Full spread."

Only seconds later, six torpedoes were catapulted out of the launchers and made their way toward the sphere. A few, quick Borg energy bursts took out half of the torpedoes before they could reach their target. The other three impacted on the metallic surface of the machine ship. The energy beam that held the captive vessel fluctuated and then disappeared completely. The Cardassians didn't hesitate to steer their ship clear of the Borg sphere.

Eagle was once more the unlucky recipient of the Borg's retaliation efforts. This time, the shields were not able to absorb all of the incoming fire.

Michael was nearly thrown out of his chair by the force of the impact. He knew his ship well enough to know it had taken serious damage.

"Hull breaches on decks four and six. Emergency force fields are in place," said Leva. "We will not be able to withstand much more of this."

The Cardassians came around for another pass, firing all their weapons at the enemy to pay them back for their attempts to dissect them. The damage caused turned out to be minimal. Instead, a well-placed Borg shot ripped a gaping hole into the starboard wing of their hull, causing the ship to bleed plasma and oxygen. The ship spun out of control for a few seconds before it could compensate for the damage and stabilize again.

Michael took a quick look at his ship's damage report being fed through a small display in his armrest. He glanced back up at the screen and shook his head. "This is getting us nowhere," he said, stood, and made his way to DeMara's ops station. He held on to the back of her chair to avoid losing his balance after another hit. "Lieutenant, find us the most damaged part of the Borg ship."

"I'll try but they're in fairly good shape."

"Whatever looks like their weakest spot will have to do," he said and then turned to his tactical officer. "Prepare to transfer all power we have left to weapons, everything but shields. I don't care if it's waste reclamation, pump it into our guns."

Leva responded with a curt nod and began to reconfigure the energy relays. A necessary step to ensure they wouldn't blow out from the massive redirection of energy.

"Open a channel to the *Kaldana*."

Michael didn't wait for a reply. "We cannot win this way Renek. I suggest we concentrate all we have left on one single spot."

Michael turned to his tactical officer. One look told him that he was ready.

"Dee?"

The young lieutenant sighed. "This is as good as it gets."

"We'll take it. Commander, target those coordinates and give'em hell."

Eagle slowed as the power to the impulse drive was cut in half. On the bridge, lights and even computer consoles dimmed significantly.

Then she opened fire with everything she had.

It was a splendid firework of destructive energy.

The Cardassians joined in a moment later.

"We are definitely causing some damage," said DeMara. "I'm reading energy fluctuation all over the Borg sphere."

But Leva shook his head. "We cannot keep this up for much longer. Main energy will be drained in a few seconds."

The Borg ceased their fire, refocusing all their efforts on repairing the damage the two ships were causing before it could lead to disaster. It was an ingenious strategy that was going to ensure that they would outlast this final desperate maneuver.

Once their enemies were spent, the Borg would be able to blow them out of space as easily as shooting fish in a barrel.

"Sir, the *Heruc* is de-clocking," said Culsten now unable to restrain his excitement. "They're rejoining the party."

"About damn time," said Michael who watched as the warbird came swooping in like a bird of prey and unleashed its own weapons arsenal at the sphere, adding its awesome firepower to that of *Eagle* and the *Kaldana*.

"I think that tipped the scales. I'm detecting a massive overload within the Borg ship," said DeMara. "Something bad is happening over there."

Eagle stopped firing. But not by choice.

"We're out of weapons."

Small explosions erupted on the surface of the sphere. Seconds later the two other ships ceased their assault as well.

"Lif, get us out of here, now. Put anything we've got left into the engines, including shields."

Eagle turned and accelerated away from the Borg sphere at full impulse.

The explosions continued to rip through the outer hull of the Borg vessel and then stopped suddenly. For a moment it appeared as though their collective will and efforts had managed to avoid disaster.

It was just the quiet before the storm.

Something immensely powerful at the very center of the sphere erupted.

It tore the ship apart with such force the shockwave was felt for many thousand kilometers.

In the end, nothing remained of the once deadly sphere but debris.

* * *

“Please, wake up,” Laas whispered.

For the last couple of minutes, Gene had shown no signs of life whatsoever as he lay peacefully in the snow.

She had tried to shake him in the hopes that he would regain consciousness but it had been useless. She could no longer control the tears flowing down her cheeks and for one of the few times in her life, she felt completely and utterly helpless. She couldn't even bring up the energy to talk anymore. Gene Edison was dead and there was nothing she could do to change that.

She stared at his closed eyes for a while longer before she let herself fall on top of him. She could still feel the warmth of his body even though both their protective suits. But she couldn't sense a heartbeat or breathing.

Then a familiar feeling spread across her body. She got up and looked at the sky as if she could make eye contact with their saviors. Her vision blurred but she could still see that her hands were beginning to disappear along with Gene's body. A few seconds later they had both left the surface of Tentrus VI behind.

* * *

Michael entered *Eagle's* briefing room at the back end of deck two. Most of his senior officers were already sitting at the conference table. His first officer as well as Lieutenant Nora, Lieutenant Commander Xylion, and Doctor Wenera were noticeably absent.

He quickly took his usual seat and immediately turned toward So'Dan Leva who was his acting first officer at present.

“Report.”

“The warbird and the Cardassians have retreated beyond sensor range. They took serious damage from the battle and the subsequent destruction of the Borg sphere. I don't predict that we'll see them again until they have concluded their repairs.”

Michael nodded, acknowledging what the half-Romulan had said. It was not surprising that he had chosen to give him a tactical report first.

“Commander Xylion and his team have managed to retrieve Nora and Edison from the planet. The *De Gaulle* is docking as we speak.”

“What is their condition?” said chief engineer Louise Hopkins.

“Nora is fine but it seems that Commander Edison has been severely injured. He has been transported to sickbay as soon as we were within transporter range,” said Leva, his voice betraying his obvious concern. He had been quite relieved to discover that Nora Laas, a close personal friend, was all right but Edison's serious condition prevented him from feeling any palpable relief. “There has been no word from the doctor yet.”

“Understood,” said Michael. He did not show it but he was concerned as well. He always was when a member of his crew was injured especially if the person in question was a valuable officer and friend. As much as he wanted to, he had no time to concern himself with the welfare of his officers at the moment, however. They were now in the care of his medical staff and there was nothing more he could do. Recent events had made clear to him beyond a shred of doubt that their mission was of the uttermost importance. The involvement of the Borg could not be understated.

He turned to DeMara who was sitting opposite Leva. “I hear you found something in the Borg debris?”

She nodded. “We think it’s a Borg data module. Unfortunately, we don’t know enough about Borg technology to completely decipher the information it contains.”

“Did you get anything out of it?” said Leva.

“Bits and pieces,” said the chief engineer who was seated next to DeMara. “We believe we found what could be the coordinates for a planet twelve light years from our position. Off course it could also be total gibberish.”

Leva turned to the captain. “They might have visited that world.”

“Or were planning to,” he said. “Do we know anything about this planet?”

“We do actually,” said DeMara. “Deleana IV.”

“Sounds familiar,” said Michael, leaning back in his chair.

She nodded. “It’s on the outermost rim of Federation space but it does have an outpost. The surface is almost entirely covered by oceans and the outer crust contains large deposits of valuable ore. The Federation established a mining station on the planet about three years ago.”

“Yes, I remember reading about it,” said Michael. “If I’m not mistaken, there is a small fleet of maritime vessels operating on the planet. They also have a spaceport on the surface and a few underwater settlements.”

DeMara shot him a surprised look at his detailed knowledge of such a remote world.

“What could the Borg possibly want there?” said Leva.

“I don’t know,” said Michael. “But I intend to find out.” He turned to DeMara and Lou Hopkins. “I want you to keep working on that Borg device. See what other information you can dig up. Give top priority to any information related to their fleet activities. If there’re any more Borg ships in the area, I want to know about it.”

They both gave him a short nod.

“As soon as the shuttle is secured, we’ll head for Deleana IV,” said Michael and looked at his temporary first officer. “But have Mister Culsten set an indirect course this time. I want to avoid leading anybody else to the possible location of the Hyterian artifact.”

“Yes, sir.”

Michael stood, signifying the end of the meeting and the others quickly followed suit.

* * *

Gene Edison didn’t look as if he had come within a hair’s length of meeting his maker, Laas thought, as she considered him peacefully slumbering on a bed in sickbay.

Although he was well on his way to a full recovery, according to Doctor Wenera, she couldn’t help but entirely dispel that sense of trepidation she felt that had never really left her since she had first come across his broken body in the snow.

The doctor had done miracles, that was for certain, having spent nearly two hours in a surgical bay with a team of medical professionals to heal and stabilize their patient.

Laas hadn’t been able to leave his side since he had come out of surgery, still filled with the irrational fear that if she left him now, she may never see him draw another breath again.

That fear never quite left her until he finally opened his eyes again in what had felt like an eternity.

“How do you feel?”

“Like I fell off a cliff and never hit the ground,” he said, his voice still raspy.

She offered him a glass of water and helped him sit up on the bed before he greedily took a large sip.

“Close enough. Wenera said that you were technically dead for a couple of minutes. Had we been rescued just a little later—” she cut herself off, not wanting to even entertain that thought.

“I guess that means that she’ll want to keep me here for a while,” he said and tried to break the somber mood with a smile.

“You can consider yourself lucky if she’ll ever let you leave at all,” she said, her lips mirroring the gesture.

For a moment there was silence.

“Gene, there is something I have to tell you,” she said, suddenly sounding much less self-assured.

He gave her an expectant look.

“I think I—“ the words got stuck in her throat.

The doors to sickbay opened and Captain Owens entered. He quickly found who he was looking for and approached the bed his first officer was occupying.

Laas noticed him right away and quickly took a small step away from Edison. “Captain.”

“Lieutenant, how’s he doing?” he asked while stepping up to the bed.

“He’s stable for now but still weak,” she said, her eyes remaining focused on the first officer.

“You gave us quite the scare, Commander,” he said.

“You don’t need to worry about me, sir How’s *Eagle*? What of the mission?”

Michael smiled. Edison was not interested in talking about what had happened to him or his condition. All he wanted was to be filled in on what he had missed. “We had a little run-in with the Borg.”

“The Borg.” Edison instinctively tried to get up but Laas stopped him short by pushing her hand gently against his chest.

“You’re not going anywhere.”

Edison shot her a glare.

Michael couldn’t help but smirk. “Looks like security has got you pinned for the time being,” he said. “But Nora is right, we’ve got things under control and you need to get your strength back before returning to duty.”

“Sir,” said Edison and then gave the Bajoran officer such a hard stare that she removed her hand voluntarily. “If you’re facing the Borg, you’ll need all the help you can get.”

“The Borg vessel has been destroyed and we’ve been able to determine that no other ships are in the immediate vicinity. Besides, you wouldn’t be any good to us in your present condition. You’d just slow us down.”

Edison was about to reply but Michael cut him off. “Gene, don’t make me restrict you to sickbay. For the time being, the doctor is your boss, understood?”

The commander nodded reluctantly and then relaxed on the bed. “If I thought it made any difference, I’d point to when our roles were reversed, and you refused to let a little injury slow you down,” he said with a little twinkle in his eyes.

“Don’t even try it,” Michael said with a frown. “That was different. Besides, rank hath its privileges, I’m sure you’ve heard that one before.”

“Once or twice,” he said and then grew more serious, apparently having accepted being sidelined for the time being. “Have we made any progress on the whereabouts of the artifact?”

“We picked up some data from the remains of the Borg vessel we hope is relevant. A planet called Deleana IV is our best bet for the moment. The whole surface consists of one massive ocean. I can’t wait to see it for myself.”

“To be honest, I wouldn’t mind sitting that one out,” said Edison with a smirk. “I’ve had enough diving this week to last me a lifetime.”

Laas couldn’t hide a smile of her own, recalling being stuck inside the flooded asteroid with Gene a day earlier.

Doctor Wenera stepped out of her office adjacent to the ward. “Captain, could I have a word with you, please?”

“Certainly,” he said and then turned to Edison. “You just stay here and get better quickly. And don’t get too comfortable, we’ll need you back eventually.”

Edison nodded and Michael left to follow the doctor into her office.

Laas watched as the captain and Wenera disappeared and then looked back at Edison. His face was still pale and his eyes bloodshot.

“I should let you rest now.”

Edison nodded softly. “I am a bit tired.”

She smiled. She was pretty sure that that was an understatement.

“What is it you wanted to tell me?”

“It can wait.”

“I will,” he said. “Thank you, Laas.”

“For what?”

“For coming back for me, for staying at my side, for talking to me, for whatever you did to keep me alive down there. I wouldn’t have made it without you.”

Laas couldn’t find the right words to reply.

“Now get out of here and let me get some sleep already,” he said. “But I expect to see you first thing in the morning.”

She nodded. “You bet.” She turned and headed for the exit.

“By the way,” said Edison.

She stopped and turned. “Yes?”

“What happened to him?”

“What happened to whom?”

“The boy in the story. Did he ever find the Spring of Desire?”

Another smile cracked her lips. She had all but forgotten about the tale she had told him while they had been on the surface of the planet. She was glad that he had remembered. “After looking for years and years he found the cave the Dal’Rok lived in.”

He rose from the bed a bit. “And?”

“The beast tore him apart limb from limb.”

“What?”

“No one ever gets to the Spring of Desire. No matter how much you want it or how well you train, it’s not something within any mortal’s grasp. There is no such thing as a free wish.”

“That’s a hell of a story to tell to a dying man.”

She shrugged. “I told you. I’m not good at telling stories.”

* * *

Doctor Wenera stepped behind her desk while Michael stopped just about a few feet after passing the threshold to her office.

“So, how long do you think until I can have my first officer back?”

“Three to four days, maybe sooner depending on how well his body responds to the surgery.”

Michael sighed. He didn’t like the idea of not having his first officer by his side for this mission but he was not willing to sacrifice his health either.

“What about Lieutenant Armstrong? I heard he had been shot.”

She nodded. “He’s fine. I treated him for a phaser wound and released him to his quarters. Aside from a headache, he should be fine in the morning. I also prescribed a couple of sessions with Trenira in case he develops any symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder but he seemed in pretty decent shape, considering what he’s been through lately.”

“Good.”

“There’s another matter I’d like to discuss with you.”

He gave her a puzzled look.

She sat behind her desk. “I’m still not convinced that you should’ve left sickbay so quickly.”

“We’ve been over that,” he said and took a step forward.

“No, you have. We haven’t.”

“I’m fine, Doctor. There is no need to worry.”

She leaned back in her chair, her probing eyes appraising him carefully. “You might be able to fool the rest of your crew but I am a doctor, Captain. I can tell when people are not fine.”

He sighed. She was right, of course. And under different circumstances maybe he would have listened to her recommendations. He wanted some sort of treatment, making those dreams and hallucinations go away so he could focus on his mission. But at the moment he simply had no time for this. If he was to allow the doctors and psychoanalysts free reign now there was no telling what they'll do to him. And he needed to be on the bridge, now with Edison temporarily out of the picture, more than ever.

“Doctor, we are dealing with an object here that could for all we know be able to destroy entire solar systems. The Borg are looking for it. Can you imagine what they might be capable of with technology like this? Wolf 359 will look like a donnybrook compared to the kind of destruction they'd be able to cause once they have access to this artifact.

To put it simply, I do not have the luxury of going through lengthy medical examinations right now. We have to ensure that we get there first, no matter the personal inconveniences this may cause us.”

“There are other ships.”

“Not out here they're not. It would take the nearest Starfleet vessel days to meet us. And it would take them even more time to catch up on what we have already learned. We're already behind our competitors. We cannot afford to lose any more time.”

She frowned, clearly not convinced. She was a doctor and all she cared about was the well-being of the crew she was responsible for. She did not consider matters of political or strategic importance. She could not allow herself to do that.

“I promise you, doctor, once we're done with this, I will make myself available for as many tests and treatments you can think of,” he said. “Until then, I ask that you let me do my job. A great number of lives might depend on it,” he said and then, considering the matter closed, left her office.

“I just hope it won't be too late.”

A Sea of Troubles

Eagle shot into the Deleana star system like a bullet. And as if it had struck its target, the saucer-shaped vessel decelerated from its incredible speed to sub-light within a fraction of a second. The ship's bow slightly adjusted its heading to approach the fourth planet, a silver and blue world covered predominately by oceans.

Leva had established communications with Deleana IV even before the ship had entered the system. On the bridge, Michael was talking to Commodore Aldous McLaughlin, the highest-ranking representative of the United Federation of Planets on the planet, over the view screen.

McLaughlin, a man not much older than Michael, wore a full beard complete with sideburns and as red as the hair on his head. The commodore was surprised by the unannounced visit but not displeased. On the contrary, McLaughlin seemed to enjoy the occasion, making it obvious that he did not get many visitors on a world as remote as Deleana IV.

"Once again Captain, you're more than welcome to visit my ship and I will personally show you around on Deleana IV. I'm just afraid there isn't much to see down here. Except for water. A whole lot of it," he said with a smirk.

"I happen to be a great admirer of the sea," said Michael, sitting in his chair. "I'd love to have a look at your one."

"In that case, you won't be disappointed. It's the biggest you've ever seen," said McLaughlin but then paused. His expression became more serious. *"But I have to admit that I have trouble believing that this is purely a social visit."*

Michael nodded, acknowledging the fact that McLaughlin, even though stationed at one of the farthest edges of the galaxy, was no fool. "I'm afraid you're right. But I'd be more comfortable briefing you in person."

"I'll see you on the Poseidon then. You'll have the coordinates by the time you get into orbit."

"Thank you, Commodore. I'm looking forward to meeting you."

McLaughlin gave him a short nod and the channel closed. McLaughlin's face disappeared and was replaced by the steadily growing shape of Deleana IV.

Michael stood from his chair and turned to his tactical officer. "Have the away team meet me in transporter room two."

Leva acknowledged.

DeMara had left her station as well and practically blocked his way to the turbo-lift. "You do understand, of course, that according to regulations you're not supposed to join away missions, don't you?"

Michael considered her for a moment before his eyes found the ocean planet on the viewscreen again. There was no chance he was going to miss out on going down there, he had decided. "It's a nice, friendly planet. There's a Federation presence. What could possibly endanger my safety?" he said with a playful smile.

She shook her head. "You're just asking for it."

He easily side-stepped her and headed for the lift. "Are you coming?"

She uttered a sigh, perhaps realizing the futility of her argument, and then followed him.

* * *

Ever since *Eagle* had set course for the ocean planet there had been a sparkle in Michael's eyes that DeMara had not been able to explain. As they both stood in the turbolift, waiting for the fast-moving car to deliver them to their destination, she was still trying to figure it out.

The penetrating look did not go unnoticed and he turned to face her. "What is it?"

"There's something about you and this planet."

Michael shrugged and then faced forward again.

The lift came to a stop and the doors opened. The captain walked out.

"Oh, come on," she said, unable to hide her growing frustration. She left the lift and quickly caught up with him. "We've known each other for twelve years and I've never seen you quite so..." she paused, trying to think of the right words. "Can I say excited?"

Michael stopped in the middle of the corridor. Two crewmembers startled by his abrupt motion gave him a surprised look but walked on to tend to their duties.

"Did I ever tell you about what I really wanted to do? Instead of joining Starfleet, I mean," he said while looking into the empty corridor

in front of him.

“Now that’s a revelation,” she said. “Captain Michael Timothy Owens. The epitome of the career officer, the very model of what it means to live and breathe the Starfleet way. The great defender of Federation values and morality did not set out to be a starship captain.”

“Well, I’m certainly pleased that I still manage to surprise you even after all this time,” he said with mock annoyance evident in his tone. “When I was younger, I wanted to explore the seas. I’ve always taken more after my mother who was an oceanographer and often take my brother and me along on her expeditions. Both Matthew and I were eager to follow her footsteps when we were children.”

“What happened?”

Michael seemed to be somewhere else at that moment. It took him a couple of seconds to react to the question. “Earth’s oceans have all been explored a long time ago. There aren’t many unexplored seas left in the galaxy,” he answered, fully aware that it was only a half-truth. He then turned to look at her. There was a smile on his lips again. “I do not regret the decisions I made, Dee. Exploring the galaxy is much more rewarding than anything else I’ve ever done. Especially when I get opportunities like this,” he said. “Come on, let’s not keep the commodore waiting.”

* * *

A minute later both of them entered transporter room two. All the members of the away team were already assembled, including Lieutenant Toby Armstrong who appeared to have recovered well from the injury he had sustained on the previous away mission.

Commander Xylion approached the captain as soon as he had set foot into the transporter room. “Sir, as acting *Eagle XO* it is my duty to point out that regulations demand that you remain on the ship.”

DeMara shook her head, knowing what was coming.

“Been there, done that,” said Michael.

The Vulcan raised one of his eyebrows. “It would not be prudent for the two most senior officers on duty to take part in the same away mission,” he continued as if trying to find some other manner with which to sway his captain.

“You’re saying you want to stay behind?” Michael said with a little smirk.

It was perfectly obvious that this was, in fact, not at all what he had meant. “I believe my presence would be mission critical.”

“I agree,” he said. “And so is mine, so let’s not waste any more time, and let’s get going. Captain’s orders.”

And that sealed the argument.

“Oh, before I forget,” said DeMara who hadn’t been sure if she was supposed to be amused or concerned about their little disagreement. “Mister Spooner asked me earlier if there was any chance that he could join the away team again.”

Nora immediately stepped up to the captain, “Absolutely not.”

Michael, DeMara, and even Xylion turned to give the Bajoran security chief surprised looks. This was, of course, hardly her decision to make. From the tone of her voice, one may have thought otherwise.

Michael couldn’t help but smile. Nora’s feelings toward their guest were no mystery. But considering what they had found out about Spooner, he tended to agree with his chief of security. “Not this time. I think I’d be much more comfortable if he stays put for now.”

Nora nodded with satisfaction. No doubt thinking that it was about time somebody listened to her advice.

The five officers took their positions on the transporter platform.

“Chief, whenever you’re ready,” said Michael.

Chief Petty Officer Yang-Sen Chow nodded shortly and then operated the console. Within seconds the Starfleet officers were engulfed in shimmering blue light and then vanished just to reappear in the same manner but in a different room hundreds of kilometers from where they had departed.

Michael found a young female officer awaiting them after they had fully rematerialized. She wore a blue two-piece tunic, much more reminiscent of old naval uniforms than the modern Starfleet outfits.

“Permission to come aboard,” he said.

The junior crewmember nodded quickly as if a bit uncomfortable to be asked by a superior officer. “Granted, sir.”

Michael stepped off the transporter platform and his officers followed suit.

"I'm Lieutenant McPhee and I'm delighted to welcome you and your officers to Deleana IV and aboard *Poseidon*," she said.

"Not as delighted as he is," said DeMara under her breath.

The statement confused McPhee slightly but she quickly moved on. "I'm afraid that the senior officers are held up at the moment. I understand that we're facing an emergency."

Michael was immediately intrigued. "What kind of emergency?"

"I have not been made aware of the details yet, sir. But if you like I'll show you to the briefing room. You can wait there until the present situation is resolved."

Nora noticed the large porthole in the transporter room and approached it to find an endless silver and blue ocean beyond it.

"I don't think I've ever been on a boat before," she said more to herself than to anyone else in the room.

"A submersible to be precise," said Xylion.

She turned abruptly to face him and then glanced at Michael. The captain nodded.

"You're saying that this thing is actually going to dive into the ocean?" she said, the tone in her voice a bit more shaky than she had wished. "With us inside?"

"Don't tell me you're afraid of going underwater?" said DeMara with devilish amusement twinkling in her bright purple eyes. "You serve on a starship where you are constantly surrounded by the vacuum of space."

"Of course not," she said quickly and then turned back to the window.

DeMara stepped next to her. "Just think of the ocean as outer space. Except a lot wetter and with much more pressure bearing down on you."

Nora offered her a scowl. "You really know how to put a person at ease."

Michael redirected his attention to the naval officer. "To be honest, Lieutenant, I'd much rather see the command center."

"Maybe something can be arranged. If you would just follow me I—"

The heavy doors of the transporter room opened before she could finish her sentence and a dark-haired man entered the room. He was of medium height but he carried himself with great confidence. Judging from the rank insignia on the sleeves of his uniform jacket, he was a senior officer.

"Captain Owens," he said addressing *Eagle*'s captain right away. "I'm Commander Rico, first officer of the *Poseidon*. Welcome aboard," he said and it didn't escape Michael that he sounded somewhat aloof. Certainly not as inviting as McPhee.

"Thank you, Commander. Meet my officers—"

"I'm afraid we don't have time for introductions. We have a situation developing and I need to return to the conn."

"I completely understand. And if at all possible, I would love to get a chance to see it myself," said Michael. "Only if it isn't too much trouble of course," he added.

Rico didn't exactly appear happy about the request, making little effort to hide his displeasure.

"Very well," he said. "You and one of your officers may accompany me to the conn. Lieutenant McPhee will escort your remaining officers to the briefing room where they may wait until the current situation has been resolved."

"Thank you, Commander. I appreciate this," he said and turned to DeMara, "Lieutenant."

She gave Nora who was still preoccupied with the sight of the ocean outside the porthole a pat on her shoulder, mouthing the word 'outer space' before she joined the captain and Rico.

Michael turned to Xylion. "I'll meet you and the others in the briefing room."

The Vulcan nodded dutifully and then the captain and DeMara followed Rico out of the transporter room.

The most obvious feature of the *Poseidon* was the fact that she seemed much sturdier built than most starships. Doors and bulkheads were thicker and heavier. The floors were covered with metal grates and pipes intersected the hallway at various junctions forcing them to duck to avoid bumping their heads. Rico walked ahead with a steady pace, practically ignoring the fact that he had company.

"Not the most charming fellow," whispered DeMara, making sure she was not overheard

He nodded. "I guess they don't get many visitors out here."

They took a tight and winding staircase upward and reached the conn. The room was filled with computer stations and personnel. It differed greatly from *Eagle*'s bridge. Like most of the rest of the ship, it was much more compact which was also because the submarine was less than half the size of a *Nebula*-class cruiser. Yet Michael was immediately fascinated with what he saw.

The most noticeable feature of the control center was the windshield-like window at the front that reached all the way from the floor to the ceiling. The window also seemed to function as a computer screen; numerous small displays were projected on the translucent screen, displaying various pieces of information.

Michael's attention quickly focused on the part of the conn that was most familiar to him. The center seat.

The chair turned toward him and revealed a bearded officer. The man stood and approached the two visitors. He was a bit taller than his first officer and radiated a warmth that was lacking in his subordinate. He offered smiles and handshakes.

"Welcome aboard *Poseidon*, Captain."

Michael returned his smile and shook his hand. "Commodore McLaughlin, I presume."

The man nodded.

"Thank you for inviting us, Commodore. It's a pleasure being here. This is my operations officer, Lieutenant DeMara Deen," said Michael and gestured at his company.

McLaughlin, of course, had already noticed her the moment she had stepped onto the deck. But now McLaughlin's face lit up. He was too much of a professional to stare but he gave her an even warmer smile. "Welcome aboard, Lieutenant."

She smiled back and gave him a short nod.

Commander Rico cleared his throat and quickly gained his superior's attention.

McLaughlin uttered a short laugh and then faced Michael. "You must excuse Commander Rico, Captain. He is not the sort of man who wastes much time on pleasantries."

Rico frowned, not pleased at being talked to as if he wasn't present.

"But then again, he is entirely correct in reminding me that there is an urgent task at hand. You're welcome to stay if you like."

Michael didn't need to think about the offer. "If we're not in the way, absolutely."

"Great," McLaughlin said with a smile. "I will fill you in as we go along and naturally, I'm quite curious to find out what brings you all the way out here," he said then returned to his chair. His first officer followed him while Michael and DeMara stayed at the back part of the control room near a sturdy-looking railing.

Michael could not complain. The view was extraordinary. The back part of the conn was slightly raised and he had an unobstructed view of the large wrap-around viewscreen. At the moment all he could see was the endless shimmering ocean.

"Helm, adjust our heading to zero four six, full speed," said Rico with military authority.

"Zero four six, ahead full," confirmed the helmsman from his station.

McLaughlin sat down in his chair. "Estimated time to target?"

Rico quickly checked a computer console. "Eight minutes, thirty-four seconds."

The commodore turned in his chair to glance at his guests. "If you like submersibles, you're going to like this," he said smiling. "Better hold on to something."

Michael knew what was coming. Both he and DeMara grasped the railing.

"Take her down, Commander."

"Aye, aye, sir," said the first officer. He pressed several controls causing the lights to be dimmed; blue warning signals began to flash. "All hands, all stations prepare to dive. I say again, prepare to dive."

"This is going to be fun," said Michael with almost childish glee.

"Not for Laas."

"Secured for diving," said one of the bridge officers.

"Helm, fifteen degrees. Make your depth three thousand five hundred, dive, dive, *dive*," said Rico.

Michael could feel the ship lurching forward and it took him a second to get used to it. But what he saw and what he felt did not correspond. The ship had quickly and quietly dipped into the huge silver ocean at a steep angle yet he didn't feel much more than a slight bump. Within moments the entire ship was engulfed by the sea and shot downward.

Even though the ocean had appeared almost silver from the surface, it was remarkably clear underwater with just the barest hints of blue. This ocean looked nothing like what he had seen before. The light consistency of the water allowed much faster travel and also made it much easier to see through it and into the distance.

A read-out on the main screen indicated the submarine's depth. After only half a minute, they had descended six hundred feet. Except for a slight swaying every now and then, there was almost no indication of their rapid descent.

He let go of the railing and a few seconds later DeMara followed suit. "That wasn't as bad as I thought," she said after she had made sure that it was safe to stand.

"They use artificial gravity plating similar to what we use on starships. They compensate for the ship's movements."

Michael could see several fish and fish-like animals in the ocean, most of them swimming in huge swarms consisting of various colors. The *Poseidon* was moving too fast to make out any specifics.

After a few more minutes, the submarine had reached the set depth and leveled out.

"Destination depth achieved. Four minutes and thirty-eight seconds to target," said Rico.

McLaughlin nodded and then turned his chair once again to face Owens. "How do you like it so far?"

"It's quite something," he said, sounding genuinely impressed.

"I'm glad you enjoy it. Believe me, you're going to see much more soon enough. We're on our way to answer a distress signal from an ore freighter in the region."

"Do you have any idea what the nature of their distress is?" said DeMara.

"A pretty good one, actually. We've had some problems with the Ferengi for a while now. I wouldn't be surprised if they were behind this."

Michael and DeMara exchanged surprised glances. This was not exactly a place either one of them would have expected to find the Ferengi, the most notorious merchants and profit seekers in the known galaxy.

"From your reaction, I take it that they are not the reason you're here," said McLaughlin with a slight hint of disappointment in his voice.

"I'm not sure, Commodore."

"Sir, we are being hailed," said the first officer.

"Put it on, Commander."

The speakers on the conn crackled for a second. "*This is the freighter Tulsa. We are under attack by a pirate vessel and need immediate assistance,*" the voice of the person was desperate and the noise and interference in the transmission were enough indications that the *Tulsa* was taking a serious beating.

McLaughlin got to his feet. "Increase to emergency flank."

"Aye sir, increasing speed to emergency flank," said the helmsman.

"All hands to battle stations," the first officer said.

Alarm klaxons began howling all across the ship.

"Torpedo systems loaded and ready to fire," said the weapon's officer from her station.

"We're approaching the target, sensors are reading the *Tulsa* and an unidentified vessel in retreat," the first officer said from the sensor station.

"We're too late," said McLaughlin under his breath. "What's the *Tulsa*'s status?"

"She's suffered heavy damage, her primary hull has been breached and she's taking in water. At this depth, she's not going to last long," said the first officer and then turned to his superior. "They're requesting emergency assistance."

Michael knew all too well how McLaughlin felt. After all, he had been in the exact same position just a few days earlier. Not many things were more frustrating to a commanding officer than to let somebody escape who was sure to attack other vessels again.

"Stand down from battle stations, prepare to dock with the *Tulsa*," said McLaughlin and sat back down in his chair.

"Aye sir, standing down," said Rico.

The alarm lights and klaxons shut off as *Poseidon* slowed down.

Michael left the railing and approached the captain of the submarine. "I'm sorry, Commodore."

McLaughlin turned. "This has been going on for months now. Pirate vessels attack freighters, steal their cargo, and then disappear before we can stop them."

DeMara joined them. "You mentioned earlier that it was the Ferengi that are the cause for your troubles. Are these pirates Ferengi?"

McLaughlin shook his head. "Not quite. But we're pretty sure they're the ones behind it."

"They hire the lowest scum they can find for the sole purpose of harassing these freighters. What we need to do is get to the pirate base and put a stop to this once and for all," said Rico.

“The problem is that we don’t have definite proof who exactly engages in pirate activities and who doesn’t. Everybody seems to cover for everybody else,” said the Commodore.

It was obvious that Rico didn’t much care for that answer. It seemed this was not the first time they’d had this discussion. He uttered a frustrated sigh and then returned to his duties.

McLaughlin stood up. “If it was up to Mister Rico, we’d probably end up arresting half the population of Pacifica City.”

Michael offered a quizzical look.

“Pacifica is one of the less desirable settlements on Deleana. We believe it to be the launching pad for most pirate activity. Anyway, there isn’t much more we can do here. What do you say we talk about your visit? I have full confidence in Rico and my crew to be able to handle the *Tulsa* in the meantime. I’m looking forward to meeting the rest of your team.”

Michael nodded.

McLaughlin turned to his first officer. “Commander, please oversee the docking and assistance to the freighter. Give me a full report when you’re done.”

Rico acknowledged and McLaughlin and the two Starfleet officers left the conn.

* * *

Shortly after leaving the bridge, McLaughlin led Michael and DeMara into the ship’s briefing room where the rest of *Eagle*’s away team was already waiting.

DeMara sat down next to Nora who appeared slightly paler than usual. “How are you feeling?”

She considered the other woman briefly before her glance wandered over to another porthole. “Just fine.”

Michael sat and quickly introduced all his officers to McLaughlin who had taken the chair at the head of the table, seemingly genuinely pleased about meeting *Eagle*’s away team.

“So, Captain, I’m burning with anticipation. What brings you to the far end of the galaxy?”

“It’s a long story. We’ve been on a routine cartography mission less than a light-year from here when we stumbled across the remains of a long-dead civilization. We believe that they hid an object so powerful that numerous significant powers have shown remarkable interest in acquiring it.”

“You certainly have my attention,” said McLaughlin.

“Let me ask you this first,” said Michael. “Have you had any form of contact with the Borg?”

McLaughlin’s eyes opened wide. His reaction was not surprising and it told Michael what he wanted to know.

“The Borg? By heavens, no.” He needed a second to compose himself. “You honestly think they’re after whatever you’re looking for?”

“We know for a fact that the Borg are after this artifact,” said DeMara. “We had the pleasure of encountering them.”

“You mean to say that the Borg are in the region?” said McLaughlin, clearly well aware of the threat the cybernetic race could pose to a colony, especially one as poorly fortified as his.

“Were,” said Michael.

“We have found no evidence of additional Borg activity in this sector. We are presently operating under the assumption that the vessel we destroyed was the only Borg ship looking for the artifact,” said Xylion, exuding soothing calm.

“Well, I’m certainly relieved to hear that. And you believe they were trying to uncover something here on Deleana IV?”

“That’s what we are trying to find out,” said Michael.

McLaughlin considered this for a moment. “I can’t think of anything on this world that would point to a previous settlement but then, of course, this planet has not been completely surveyed. The people who come here are primarily interested in mining ore.”

“To be perfectly honest, Deleana IV is a long shot. The data we found was mostly inconclusive,” said DeMara.

“But it is the only lead we have at the moment,” Armstrong said.

Something outside the window caught Michael’s attention. It wasn’t much more than a flash of light and it was gone as quickly as it had

appeared.

"I wouldn't even know where to start looking," said McLaughlin. "This is a big planet and we haven't even explored a third of it."

"I assume initial surveys were conducted before the planet was populated?" said Xylion.

The commodore nodded. "Of course. Trust me, if they had shown signs of previous colonization efforts, I would know about it."

"That is strange," said Armstrong. "An initial survey should have shown some hint of a Hyterian presence here. None of their colonies were particularly difficult to find once we knew where to look."

"Nothing is hard to find when you know where to look, Lieutenant," said Nora. "Which means we may be looking in the wrong place."

There was another flash of light just outside the porthole. This time it was bright enough to blind him for a moment. And then he felt something he did not expect.

An unseen force grabbed his body and pulled him away from his chair as if he was weightless. He tried to hold on to the table but it was no use, he had suddenly turned completely intangible. Or at least that's how he felt as he passed right through the table. The others in the room were oblivious to what was happening right in front of their very eyes and continued their conversation as though nothing out of the ordinary was happening.

All resistance was pointless, as Michael was dragged right toward the porthold. The pull became even stronger as he approached the glass. He stretched out his hands to hold on to the bulkhead but like a ghost, he phased right through the hull of the submersible. He felt like screaming but his instincts told him to hold his breath instead.

Within seconds he was outside the vessel and deep within the ocean. He neither felt pressure nor the moisture of the water as he was dragged faster and deeper into the sea. He shot past underwater cliffs and reefs deep below. He lost all sense of orientation; all he could think about was to hold his breath.

And then he slowed down.

He could hear voices. Just whispers at first but they became louder and clearer the closer he got to wherever he was going.

He had been pulled all the way down to the ocean floor where he found a stunning variety of life and color. The ground was covered with a surreal-looking green, yellow, and red meadow, swaying with the movement of the sea. There were plants of almost every size and hue. There were fish he had never seen before and numerous crawling animals.

He crossed the underwater landscape unbothered and seemingly unnoticed by the indigenous animal life.

In the distance, he could see what looked like a monolith, a massive rock that seemed to reach hundreds of meters upward. It was the first sign of a large rock formation that stretched out as far as he could see.

It was then that he realized that he had opened his mouth and that he was breathing air without trouble.

But he had little time to wonder how that could be.

Instead, he was focusing on the voices that were now so clear he recognized the language. He still couldn't understand.

He was pulled toward something that looked like a cave entrance. As he came closer, he could see that it was an artificially created portal. There were familiar inscriptions and signs all around the massive arch. Familiar and yet still unknown. He could not see what lay inside the cave. It was completely dark. He accelerated again as he entered into the cavern. The darkness remained as he shot into the unknown. And then he stopped.

For the first time since this strange journey had begun, he could feel solid ground under his feet. Slowly and carefully, he took a step forward. Then another until the darkness gave way and he could actually spot the exit of the cave.

He was no longer surrounded by water. His clothes were completely dry and there was not a single sign of his trip across the ocean.

He exited the cave and found himself on a wide-open platform. Below him sat a city. He recognized the architecture immediately.

It was Hyterian. He had seen it before but that wasn't what caused him to gasp. The city was alive. Creatures and vehicles were traveling the streets and going about their business.

The city itself was not as big as the ruins on Hyteria had been but it was still impressive. Like nothing he had ever laid eyes upon before.

His gaze wandered upward to see a massive glass dome protecting the city from the ocean above. The sunlight shined through it and the glass-like material intensified it, easily illuminating the entire city as if it were just another regular settlement on the surface.

There was a central building that stood out among all the others. Not just because of its position but also due to its size and design.

It seemed almost identical to the temple in the Hyterian capital. The building stood in the middle of a large square. And in front of the building stood a single creature.

It looked straight at him and spoke.

Even though Michael was standing at least a few hundred meters away, he could easily hear her calm voice. It was clearer than all the other

voices around him as if it was being projected right into his mind.

While the creature spoke a column of light shot out from the center of the building. The voice of the creature became noticeably rueful while the light became brighter. The voices all around him became more and more disorganized, chaotic even. The people in the streets began to panic.

The column began to radiate so brightly that Michael had to close his eyes. There were screams and cries but the one voice remained constant. It took on volume and began to boom in his head.

The intensity drove him to his knees.

When he opened his eyes once more the city was burning.

The creature seemed to take no notice of this.

A shockwave of bright white light gripped the city and threw Michael to the ground. The voice was gone and nothing but darkness remained.

For a moment he could still hear faint cries but they too faded away until there was nothing left. He felt something reaching for his arm. He looked down and saw a hand touching him. He looked up and saw DeMara's face.

"Are you all right?"

He looked around. He was sitting in *Poseidon's* conference room and everyone was staring at him. He felt a few sweat pearls running down his forehead and he quickly wiped them away with the back of his hand.

"What ... what happened?" he said.

"We were just talking when you suddenly fell into some sort of trance for a few seconds," said McLaughlin and stood up.

"A few seconds?" he said to himself. He looked toward the window but there was nothing unusual there.

"I better call our doctor," said McLaughlin as he walked over to the intercom system.

"No," said Michael quickly. "No, I'll be all right."

McLaughlin stopped and looked at him skeptically. "Are you sure?"

Michael nodded and managed a smile. "Yes. It's nothing. Dinner last night probably didn't agree with me."

He looked at DeMara and it wasn't hard to tell that she was not buying this story.

"I'm fine," he reassured her.

She was still not won over but decided to let it go for now.

McLaughlin sat back down in his chair.

Michael took a deep breath. "We have come to the right place," he said with a conviction in his voice that wasn't missed by the others.

His officers looked at him with a mixture of confusion and skepticism but he chose to ignore them all. Instead, he faced McLaughlin but the commodore had no words to offer.

"You mentioned that the Ferengi have started to give you some trouble. Do you know why?"

"I wish we knew. They came here about a year ago to profit from the rich ore deposits like everyone else. At first, there was nothing strange about that. But very recently they started to hire more and more workers for their mining efforts and buying out many of the local outfits. Those they can't get to, they rob through pirates. We don't have any definite proof that they are behind it."

"Do you believe the Ferengi intend to establish a mining monopoly?" said Xylion.

"If that's not what they're up to then I don't know what it is."

"No," said Michael to himself, massaging his temples. "It's got to be something else."

McLaughlin offered him a quizzical look.

"Do you know where the Ferengi are focusing their mining efforts?" said Michael.

He shook his head. "No, they go to some lengths to keep their main sites a secret. We believe that they are concentrating their efforts somewhere in the Greater Horseshoe basin but that is a huge area to cover."

"The Ferengi might have found something," said Armstrong with renewed excitement. "If they did find clues to the Hyterians on this planet, the last thing they'd want was to advertise this to the general public."

DeMara nodded. "And they harass other ships to make sure nobody else gets their hands on Hyterian secret before they do."

"We should refrain from making premature conclusions," said Xylion.

“Agreed,” said Michael. “But it’s worth investigating.” He faced McLaughlin.

“If what you say about this artifact is true, I will help you any way I can but I don’t even know where to start looking for their mines. Even with every vessel I have available, it’d take us over a month to scour the entire Greater Horseshoe basin.”

“How about Pacifica City?” said DeMara. “Those pirates are bound to know more about what the Ferengi are up to.”

McLaughlin nodded reluctantly. “I can take you there but I’ll tell you right now, we’re not going to be welcome.”

Michael stood. “That wouldn’t be the first time.”

“Very well,” said the commodore, stood as well, and walked over to the intercom. He activated it and connected to his first officer.

Nora walked over to Michael. “Sir, are you planning to enter this city yourself?”

He nodded.

“I must strongly discourage you from that idea. From what I’ve heard it is not the friendliest place. Your safety would be greatly compromised.”

He smiled. “I guess that means you’re going to have your hands full, Lieutenant.”

McLaughlin turned to the starship captain. “We will depart for Pacifica immediately. It will take us about two hours to get there. I can offer you a tour of *Poseidon* in the meantime if you like.”

“That’s a wonderful idea,” said Michael and followed McLaughlin’s invite.

Nora moved closer to DeMara. “I don’t like this one bit,” she said once the captain was out of earshot. “He shouldn’t even be down here in the first palace.”

“No, he shouldn’t,” she said before she followed him out of the briefing room.

* * *

The next two hours turned out to be extremely interesting for Michael who took the opportunity to learn more about the *Poseidon* and Deleana IV. His interest had been considerable and yet he could not completely focus on what McLaughlin had to say. His thoughts kept trailing off to that vision he had experienced earlier.

The details of it were already beginning to fade and others were as clear to him as if it had happened just seconds ago.

He could still hear a voice in his head and it still seemed familiar in the strangest way. Something had been different in his last vision, something that made it more immediate and more important. It felt as though there was more to what he had seen and heard but he couldn’t put his finger on what it could be.

The tour of *Poseidon* came to an end and the submarine approached Pacifica City. To Michael’s disappointment, it was nothing like what he had expected. A large metallic dome formed the center of the underwater city and connected to several smaller domes through tunnels. The city had been erected in a hurry and with no interest in style or esthetics. Michael had seen much more impressive underwater structures at the bottom of the Pacific and Atlantic oceans on Earth.

McLaughlin had suggested keeping the landing party as small as possible and so Michael had decided to have only Nora and DeMara accompany him. Of course, the Bajoran security officer had tried to convince him to stay behind but he dismissed the notion almost immediately.

DeMara who had been at the captain’s side since the briefing earlier, followed Michael into *Poseidon*’s docking port. Commander Rico, who was going to lead the away mission, and Nora were already waiting for them. Rico had also brought three security officers who were armed with assault rifles. Nora was inspecting a similar weapon she had borrowed from *Poseidon*’s armory.

“Don’t you think we should try to maintain a low profile?” said DeMara when she noticed the security detail, consisting of two men and one woman both wearing black combat outfits, armor, and rifles.

Rico grabbed a sidearm from a locker nearby and secured the weapon in his holster. “I know these people. They can smell us from miles away,” he said. “Trust me, if you intend to get out of Pacifica in one piece you better follow my example.” He pointed to two belts complete with holsters and guns sitting on a table.

DeMara looked at Michael. He nodded, walked over to the table, and picked up the belts. He passed one to her and fastened the other one on himself. DeMara followed suit. Michael removed his sidearm and quickly familiarized himself with it. The design was significantly different to Starfleet-issue phasers but the basic functions seemed to be the same. Once he was satisfied, he put it back into the holster.

“What can we expect over there?” he said.

“In one word: Hostility,” said Rico. “These people don’t like us very much and I’m pretty sure they don’t like Starfleet any better. Remember that this is not a starbase or Federation colony. These are mostly renegades who do not share the same value for life as we do.”

“Sounds lovely,” said DeMara.

Nora stepped up. “Sir, are you positive about this? It’s not too late to change your mind.”

“I survived Eteron, I think I can handle this,” said Michael, referring to an away mission to a less-than-savory locale a few months earlier.

Nora sighed silently.

“*All hands prepare for final docking procedure,*” said McLaughlin’s voice over the intercom.

Poseidon shook slightly when it made contact with the underwater city’s docking port. A red light next to the exit hatch changed to green and the hatch opened, revealing an unremarkable, short corridor and a second hatch that opened only seconds later.

Rico walked up to the first hatch and then turned around. “Stay close and do as little talking as possible and we won’t have any problems,” he said and then stepped through the hatch. One of the security officers followed him.

Michael and DeMara were next then Nora and the last ones through were the two other security officers.

After passing a few unremarkable and mostly empty access corridors the away team reached the center of the city.

Michael found the inside of Pacifica City as disappointing as the outside. The main promenade was lined with stands, shops, and other establishments that attracted all kinds of customers. The city was a busy hub for traders, merchants, and rogues. There weren’t many humans in the city which made *Poseidon*’s party stand out even more. An anthropologist would have had a field day, many of the races mingling here, not even Michael recognized.

Law and order did not appear a priority. The place was dirty, poorly maintained, and barely functioning in places. Anarchy and the rule of strength seemed to be the way of life. Most inhabitants seemed to try to keep to themselves but many traveled in groups and were well-armed. Fights, verbal, with fists, knives, and the occasional blaster seemed to be a regular occurrence.

Rico had appeared right about the denizens’ dislike for authority figures. Entire groups of people stopped what they were doing when they noticed the approaching Federation contingent. They were regarded with suspicion while others made for a quick getaway, most likely because they had outstanding warrants. Most looked on with obvious despise mirrored in their eyes, some spat on the floor when catching a glimpse of the uniformed visitors.

Michael and DeMara carefully followed Rico while Nora warily surveyed everyone she deemed suspicious or dangerous. Not an easy task considering the general look of the people frequenting the city.

“Don’t get the wrong idea,” said Rico while walking down the promenade. “Not all settlements on Deleana IV look like this.”

“That’s a relief,” said DeMara who sounded like she was starting to get second thoughts about leaving *Poseidon*. She was the most eye-catching member of the group and most of the men and even a few women they passed stared at her with more than just disdain for her uniform.

“If it was up to me, we would’ve cleaned this place up a long time ago,” said the commander. “But Federation law does not yet apply on this world. Officially, Deleana IV is an unaffiliated colony run by several independent city-states. Most tolerate our presence here, a few welcome it to keep up a semblance of law and order and protect the shipping lanes. And then there are places like Pacifica where we are regarded as the enemy. People here are free to do whatever they feel like.”

“And that’s a bad thing?” said DeMara with a hint of skepticism in her voice.

“Look around, Lieutenant. This is no clean and orderly Starfleet base. This is where the scum of the universe hides from people like us.”

Michael could not understand why these people would choose to live this way. After all, there was no reason why they would be rejected somewhere else. He noticed a large alien with green skin standing in a corner. He wore a prominent prosthetic leg and something that remotely looked like an eye patch. Maybe Rico was right, he thought. Perhaps these people had made wrong decisions a long time ago and now chose to live in exile in a place like this instead of taking responsibility for their actions and serving time in a rehabilitation colony.

Rico stopped in front of a rundown bar. Most of the letters in the neon sign above the entrance had long since died. “I guarantee half the people in this joint are on the Ferengi’s payroll.”

“Guess this would make it a good place to start then,” said Michael and stepped into the bar.

The establishment was decently sized, spread out over three levels. The lower one offered a long bar counter and a great number of chairs and tables as well as plenty of dabo and dom-jot stations as well as other games of chance.

Business seemed to be going well, almost all chairs were occupied by noisy customers who yelled, laughed, and drank. Over thirty rowdy patrons made casual conversation nearly impossible.

Michael walked over to the counter which was not quite as populated as the rest of the establishment. The few men who stood there quickly walked off once they noticed him and the others approaching. It didn’t take long for the rest of the customers to realize who had

entered their bar.

The noise level dropped dramatically.

Most appeared surprised at first, a few choked on their drinks, others simply started laughing hysterically, no doubt induced by the large quantities of alcohol they had consumed. After a few seconds, the general chatter began anew but nobody fully turned their backs toward the bar counter and Michael could sense that their appearance had caused the tensions to rise.

An especially bold and noticeably inebriated Bolian stood up and staggered toward the counter, his glance fixed on DeMara. "We don't see many of the likes of you around here," he said with some difficulty, his speech slurred and his wide smile revealing a row of ugly, yellow teeth. "Maybe ... maybe I can interest you in a drink, friend."

Nora quickly stepped between DeMara and the rude Bolian, her phaser rifle pointing right into the man's face. "If you'd like to keep your head on your shoulders, I suggest you move on," she said in a tone of voice that left no doubts about her determination. "Friend."

The man stepped a little closer until the beam emitter almost touched his nose. He looked at the weapon for a second, then at Nora, tried to get another glimpse at DeMara but eventually gave up and turned around. "Just ... trying to be nice," he said and broke out in laughter.

Many of the other patrons joined in. The Bolian attempted to sit down again but missed his chair completely and fell to the floor which caused another round of amusement.

"Under different circumstances, I'd be flattered," DeMara said.

But Michael's attention had already been caught by somebody else. In one of the far corners stood four Ferengi who were watching the Federation officers with great suspicion. The short, bald-headed, and big-eared men were whispering to each other while never taking their eyes off the landing party.

Michael turned to Rico. "Commander, do you think you could find a way to get those Ferengi out of here for a few minutes?"

Rico looked at him then at the short aliens at the other side of the bar. He nodded. "Priestley, Bentrai," he said getting his officer's attention. "Come with me."

Rico and the two guards slowly and carefully walked toward the Ferengi while Michael and Nora observed the unpredictable crowd. Some of them were getting agitated but not enough to oppose the black-clad officers. The Ferengi themselves became nervous and started to back-peddle. Michael could not make out what Rico was saying to them but he saw him pointing at a second exit and after a few moments the Ferengi complied reluctantly. A minute later Rico and the Ferengi had left the bar.

"Now what do we do?" said Nora without taking her watchful gaze off the restless crowd in front of her. "I suggest we don't draw unnecessary --"

Michael had grabbed a mug from the bar and loudly banged it on the counter. The patrons of the bar fell mostly silent again.

"Attention to us," said Nora quietly, finishing her sentence.

Michael took a step forward. "We're looking for somebody who might be able to assist us in locating a major mining location in the area," said Michael loud enough for all to hear.

Most customers began laughing at his seemingly ridiculous request. One of them, a tall Edosian, a tripod species with three arms and legs and sepia-tinted skin color, stood. "I know this place is filthy and got more holes than Terran cheese but there ain't no rats here," he said and looked around the room. "Isn't that right?"

His question found ample agreement within the bar.

DeMara stepped forward and immediately received the full attention of the present crowd. "You may not realize this but the Ferengi mining operations on Deleana might be in direct violation of ... Intergalactic Mining Safety Act Sixteen. We're here to inspect this facility for the safety of all workers."

Michael gave her a puzzled expression. "Mining Safety Act?"

She offered a quick shrug and turned back to the crowd. She took another step forward. "We would be very grateful for any assistance any of you could render for us to perform these necessary inspections."

There were some chuckles but most of the male patrons couldn't help but be captivated by the beautiful woman addressing them.

One man stood up and slowly approached her. Nora was about to raise her rifle again but Michael kept her back.

The man, a cat-like Caitian with white and black fur and a long tail that seemed to wag with excitement licked his lips as he stepped closer. He walked up to her until he was only a couple of feet from her.

She did not budge.

"How grateful?" he purred with a wide grin on his face.

"Extremely," she said, returning his smile.

He seemed to savor the moment, taking in her smile, her brilliant white teeth, and her sparkling purple eyes.

A shot was fired. Nora and the security officer jumped to attention and raised their weapons.

The Caitian dropped to the floor. Another man, standing at the other side of the bar, holstered his gun and took a step forward.

DeMara knelt to check on the unconscious body but she couldn't make out if he was dead or only stunned. She looked up at the man who had fired on him. "Why did you do that?"

"Because that is not the kind of person you want to do business with," he said and walked toward the away team. He raised his hands slightly when he noticed the phaser rifles tracking him. "Easy, I'm done shooting," he said. "For right now that is."

DeMara stood to look the man in the face. He was of a race she didn't recognize and she was well-versed with most races inhabiting much of the known Alpha and Beta Quadrants. His body was covered with slick, silvery, and hairless skin. His pitch-black hair was braided close to his skull in four large plaits that seemed to grow out of four vertical ridges on his smooth forehead.

She couldn't quite help but feel intimidated by the mysterious alien and took a few steps back until she bumped into the bar counter.

The man stepped over the body of the man he had shot and stopped.

"And why should we trust you?" said Michael.

"For one, I'm probably the only person in here who is sober enough to help you, and two, you could say that I'm less than satisfied with the terms of my current employment. Something tells me that we could agree on a form of payment that we will both find satisfactory," he said in a much lower tone to keep their conversation as private as possible.

Michael didn't like the man. He wasn't sure if it was because of his line of work or the fact that he had just shot a man in the back.

"My name is Jungo and I suggest you make up your mind quickly. I can lead you to where you want to go," he said and then turned around. "Why would I want to work for Starfleet?" he yelled across the room and spat on the floor. "There is enough garbage right here in Pacifica!"

The room began to fill with laughter again.

Jungo turned to face Michael again with impatience etched on his face.

Michael glanced at his security chief.

"I don't know, sir. But I agree that we better hurry up. This could get very ugly, very quickly," she said while keeping her focus on the patrons. "We are rapidly outstaying our welcome."

DeMara didn't have an opinion to offer but her facial expressions made it quite clear that she was less than impressed by Jungo.

Some of the guests were becoming restless and impatient with the away team's prolonged presence and the fact that they were mingling amongst one of their kind wasn't helping matters. "Go home, Starfleet!"

"Watch Out!" Nora pushed Michael aside just in time to avoid his head being hit by a glass that had been slung their way. Instead, it shattered loudly against the wall behind them.

The *Poseidon* security officer fired his rifle and hit the man who had thrown the glass. This caused several others to jump off their chairs and draw their weapons.

Nora took out the first one who had tried to aim his weapon at them.

Michael, DeMara, and Jungo all had their phasers up in a flash.

"This would be a good time to leave," said Jungo.

"Can't argue with that," said Michael when a phaser blast missed him by just a hairline.

General chaos broke out within seconds.

Half of the patrons reached for their weapons and opened fire. Chairs, glasses, and plates were thrown to the floor and tables were turned to provide cover. Some who were too intoxicated to understand what was happening simply fell off their chairs or wandered around aimlessly and got into random fistfights. Another portion felt it to be safest to stay out of a fight entirely and tried to make it to the nearest exit.

Nora and the security guard attempted to cover the other's escape but they didn't get far. An energy blast hit the *Poseidon* security officer square in the chest and he collapsed to the floor.

DeMara immediately grabbed the fallen man and dragged him behind two overturned tables. Nora continued to provide cover fire until all of them could make it behind the cover.

"Are you all right?" she said as she tried to attend to his injuries, removing his chest armor only to be greeted by a vicious, bloody wound.

"I live," he said through clenched teeth, attempting to be cavalier about the pain he surely felt.

DeMara looked up at Michael. "Not for long if we don't get him back to *Poseidon* quickly."

“Transporters?” said Nora.

Michael shook his head even as he was distracted by an angry mob trying to blast them all to pieces. “Not reliable at this depth.”

The security chief had taken position next to the captain and fired her weapon relentlessly but she was faced with too many opponents. This was by no means a new situation for her but even all her experience didn't make this much easier. She had to limit her fire to a defensive effort to keep their enemies who had taken position on the opposite side at bay and prevent them from attempting an all-out assault. Numbers were their weakness; they would not be able to defend against a charge.

“Now that I've had time to reconsider,” said Michael while firing his phaser. “I think you were right. I should've stayed behind.”

Nora laughed and knelt behind the table to pop a new power cell into her rifle. “I'm your chief of security. It wouldn't hurt if you'd listened to my advice from time to time,” she said and looked at him. “Sir,” she added quickly and then returned fire once more.

The situation was dire but Michael couldn't resist a boyish smirk. She was absolutely correct, he realized. He could only imagine how frustrated she must have been at his tendency to dismiss her suggestions. “I gladly take any advice you have to offer now,” he said while unloading his weapon.

Nora did not have to answer as a solution presented itself at that very moment. The mercenaries in the bar found themselves in the crossfire when Rico and his two security specialists reentered from the second exit and opened fire.

They took out a handful of the mercenaries right away before they could readjust themselves to the new threat.

For a moment it appeared as if the firefight had tipped into their favor. That was until the mercenaries barricaded themselves behind the bar counter and in various positions in the room making it impossible for either Rico to move toward Michael's position or for Michael and his team to get to the exit.

The fight seemed to have turned into a stalemate with the mercenary's reinforcements a whole lot closer.

“Stop shooting, you morons!”

Nobody seemed to pay attention.

“Stop!” the Ferengi barked again while entering the room with two associates. “Stop firing.”

The shooting slowed and eventually died down completely.

The three Ferengi made it to the middle of the bar stepping over chairs and unconscious bodies alike. “This is insane,” said their leader.

Michael and Nora looked at each other with puzzlement and then carefully stood from behind their cover.

“You think this is a trick?” said Michael.

“I'd be a fool to trust a Ferengi,” said Nora and aimed her rifle at the newcomers.

The others in the room peeked out from their cover as well. Two of the Ferengi walked over to the mercenaries convincing them to lower their weapons while the leader remained near the center of the room. “This is insane,” he said again shaking his head. “There is no need for this.” He took a step toward Michael and Nora. “My name is Brax and I'm the *chief administrator* of this great city,” he said, putting special emphasis on his position.

Nora took aim but Michael pushed her weapon down gently.

The Ferengi smiled at them, revealing his pointy, crooked teeth. “You are guests in my city. We have no quarrel with Starfleet,” he said and turned around to the others. “You hear? Guests!”

Rico walked out from behind the corner he had been using as a cover and approached the Ferengi.

The short big-eared alien took a quick step back, almost stumbling over a chair.

“This is not your city,” said Rico. “You wield no authority here.”

The Ferengi chuckled. “More than you,” he said and pointed to the upper level. Several more mercenaries had taken position at the railing and were aiming their weapons at the officers below.

Michael took a step toward Rico and the Ferengi. “Commander, given the circumstances, I suggest we recognize his authority. At least for now.”

The Ferengi pointed at him and nodded. “You should recognize my authority,” he said and looked at Rico, still wearing his unpleasant grin. “Did you hear that?”

“I say we get the hell out of here while we have the chance,” said Jungo and holstered his gun.

Rico who towered over the smaller Ferengi uttered a dismissive grunt and then signaled his two officers to retreat. They quickly crossed the room and helped their wounded comrade out of the bar. Jungo and DeMara followed closely.

“One of these days I'll be back, Brax. You can count on that, you hear me?” said Rico and finally turned away to head out of the bar.

“Lucky break,” said Michael while he and Nora began back paddling toward the exit, covering the others by keeping their eyes on the mercenaries.

“I don’t believe in luck.”

“I hope we meet again someday, Captain,” yelled the Ferengi as Michael and the others made for a quick retreat toward *Poseidon*. “It was a great pleasure running into you. A great pleasure indeed.”

* * *

The submarine hastily departed from Pacifica City and set course for the coordinates Jungo had provided.

He had managed to convince Commodore McLaughlin that it was impossible to reach the Ferengi mining site with a ship the size of *Poseidon* and after Michael had assured McLaughlin that he was quite capable of piloting an underwater vessel, the commodore had allowed the five Starfleet officers and Jungo to use one of *Poseidon*’s small support crafts, aptly named *Pathfinder*, to get to their destination.

Jungo directed them to dive deeper and it became quickly apparent that he had remained right. There had been no way for the large-sized *Poseidon* to navigate in between the narrow canyons they descended into. It also reaffirmed the suspicion that the Ferengi were not actually mining for ore as the remote location would have made it extremely difficult to transport it to the spaceport.

Michael showed great expertise in steering the silver, arrowhead-shaped vessel through the challenging terrain. He had gained much of his experience when he had been younger, before joining Starfleet, when he had piloted very similar crafts deep inside Lake Baikal on Earth and later in the Pacific Ocean.

“What exactly is the nature of your interest in the Ferengi?” said Jungo who was sitting in the co-pilot seat next to Michael. He swiveled his chair to look at DeMara, sitting behind him. “And don’t tell me this is about an inspection. I’ve been in this business for years and I’ve never heard of an Intergalactic Mining Act.”

But she had nothing to say to the man. She Cleary still found him wholly unsympathetic and entirely untrustworthy. And he seemed equally unimpressed by her usually spellbinding aura. He quickly turned away once she simply shrugged her shoulders and continued to work on her tricorder instead.

Nora leaned forward from her chair. “You’re here as a guide. I suggest you ask fewer questions and concentrate more on guiding.”

Jungo looked at the other officers but neither of them seemed particularly interested in sharing information. He finally gave up and turned back to face the front. “Friendly company you’ve got here, Captain.”

“I share their distrust,” said Michael and steered sharply to the right to avoid a large school of purple fish that seemed completely oblivious to the artificial vehicle approaching them.

“You stick to your end of the bargain and there won’t be any reason for any distrust between us,” said Jungo. He had negotiated a deal with Michael while on the *Poseidon* that would obligate the Starfleet captain to pay him a significant amount of gold-pressed latinum for his services.

Michael had been reluctant to agree to the deal. Starfleet was a moneyless organization but *Eagle* usually carried a carefully regulated amount of legal tender for encounters with races that did not share Federation values. Like in every bureaucracy worth its red tape, there would be an endless amount of digital paperwork to complete to allow him to make any payments. A small price to find this artifact, Michael had ultimately decided.

Jungo pointed to a large rift ahead. “Take us through there.”

He changed course and *Pathfinder* passed safely through the narrow fissure.

“I must admit you’re quite the pilot, Captain,” said Jungo. “I wouldn’t have expected that from a space jockey.”

Before them lay a wide-open landscape of sand and rock, impossibly illuminated by the sunlight shining onto the ocean’s surface hundreds of meters above.

“Fascinating,” said Xylion. He had unbuckled his seatbelt and walked to the front of the craft to look through the large viewport. “The texture of this ocean makes it exceptionally easy for light to traverse the water.”

“Yes and it makes it much easier to find what you’re looking for,” said Jungo. “Take us toward that mountain range, straight ahead.”

Michael nodded and headed the craft in the direction he had been told while slightly increasing speed, now that there were no more obstacles in their way.

The terrain became more and more familiar. When the sandy ocean floor turned into a lush green field of sea algae all his doubts disappeared. He had been here before. Perhaps not physically but he had seen this exact place.

DeMara had also left her seat and come to the front. "This is beautiful," she said and then looked at Michael. "I bet you wish you could take a dive through this," she added, fully aware that one of his favorite off-duty activities was deep sea diving.

The captain nodded. As fascinating as this place was, something different and much more important preoccupied him now.

The underwater mountain range became more prominent as they closed in. Its peaks reached at least a hundred meters from the ocean floor.

"If you head south, we should reach the primary mining site in about five minutes," said Jungo who seemed to be less impressed by the sight. Clearly, he had seen it many times before.

Michael turned the boat north.

"What are you doing?" said Jungo.

Michael ignored their guide. Instead, he sharpened his gaze to carefully scan the mountainous terrain ahead.

"We won't get to the mining site this way," said Jungo somewhat upset about being ignored.

"We're not going to the mining site," said Michael without taking his eyes off the viewport.

"We're not?" said DeMara surprised.

Nora leaned forward both curious and concerned. It was not like the captain not to explain himself. She looked at DeMara. *What's he doing?* she mouthed.

She shrugged and then looked back at the captain. But his concentration was completely focused on what lay below.

He descended the craft closer toward the rocky ocean floor. The object that had aroused his interest was almost impossible to spot. Moss and other vegetation had grown all over it, causing it to blend in with most of its surroundings.

What looked like a large rock fragment at first became a much more symmetric shape as they approached.

"Lieutenant Armstrong, what do you make of this?"

The young man left his seat to join the others by the forward viewing point.

The captain activated the external spotlights and focused them on the rectangular object. It lay flat on the ocean floor and was at least thirty meters long.

The archeologist scrutinized it carefully. "It does not look as if it was created naturally, look at those sharp angles."

"Could it be Hyterian?" said DeMara.

"I'm not sure," said Armstrong and stepped closer to the screen. The submarine was now hovering only a few meters over the object. "I can't see any markings but the stone looks remarkably smooth."

Michael turned the craft and steered it alongside the object. There were more, similar shapes and from their position, it appeared as if they had all been one piece once.

"It must be Hyterian. What else could it be?" said Nora.

"I don't know who those Hyterians are but the Ferengi have uncovered several odd things around here," said Jungo without showing great interest in the discovery.

"Look at that," said Armstrong and pointed at a large square on the ocean floor. It was mostly covered by algae and sand but some of the edges were visible. It seemed to be made of the same material as the other objects and a wide column stood out at its center. Something had broken off it.

Michael stopped the craft and looked at the column. He had seen this before but not in its present state. It had been a massive monolith that had towered over the entire mountain range. He tried to remember the direction he had moved when he had passed this point in his vision.

As it came back to him, he steered the craft further toward the mountain range until they reached several dark cave entrances.

"There's a lot of these here. Most of them are nesting grounds for all kinds of animals," said Jungo.

Michael piloted the ship into what seemed to be a random cave entrance. It was twice the size of the submarine and the ship fit through it comfortably. The interior of the cave was completely devoid of light. Even the ship's exterior illumination seemed to be unable to penetrate the darkness.

"This is highly unusual," said the Vulcan.

Michael stopped the submarine and left it to hover in front of the cavern entrance.

"How come we can't see inside?" said Nora.

"Because there is nothing there to see," said Jungo. "What are we even doing here?"

Nora moved closer to the screen. She could see the spotlights but they did not seem to penetrate the cavern. Everything remained dark. "Shouldn't we be able to at least see a wall or something?"

Xylion turned to a computer console. "External sensors are not able to register any mass."

"Nothing?" said DeMara amazed and then joined the Vulcan. "There must be some sort of force field here. Except there is no sign of an energy source," she said once she had looked over the readouts.

"Well," said Michael and activated the throttle. "We're going in."

The submarine lurched forward.

"No wait!" yelled Jungo and raised his hands. "We're going to hit—"

But there never was an impact.

Instead, *Pathfinder* glided unhindered into the interior of the cavern. After a few seconds, the ship was completely engulfed in darkness.

"Now that's what I call strange," said Jungo.

"How did you know?" DeMara asked the captain.

"Call it a hunch."

They traveled through the darkness for another few minutes that were spent in relative silence. While Nora, Michael, and Jungo kept their eyes peeled for any sign of light, the three scientists turned to computer consoles for answers.

The small vessel had not been designed for scientific study and the sensor results remained inconclusive, insisting that *Pathfinder* was traveling through a complete void.

And then there was light at the end of the tunnel.

But even that failed to illuminate the cavern itself.

The distant speck of light grew gradually until the craft emerged from the darkness.

They found themselves at what looked like the bottom of a lake, an unmistakable surface shimmered just a few meters above them.

Michael activated the vertical turbines and the craft slipped out of the water and onto a sandbank.

Everybody in the vessel moved to one of the viewports.

They had entered a large cavern, at least forty meters high and perhaps twice as wide. Light seemed to reflect itself endlessly from the walls and the ceiling which were lined with colorful crystals.

Nora recognized the structure immediately; she had been in a very similar place just days before. "Now this is definitely Hyterian."

"An air pocket of this size and so far below the surface?" said DeMara. She looked at the Vulcan science officer. "How is that even possible? The water pressure should be enough to crush this place instantly."

Xylion's silence was evidence that he had no answer to that mystery.

Michael didn't look quite as surprised as the others. He disengaged the engine, unbuckled his seatbelt, and left his chair. "Let's have a look."

Nora stepped into his way defiantly. "Sir, considering the problems we ran into on that space station I strongly recommend that you stay behind this time."

He looked at her as if she had lost her mind.

"Fine, but let me and Xylion scout ahead," she said. "Just to make sure that the air is clear, so to speak."

He nodded reluctantly.

Soon after Nora and Xylion exited the vehicle and stepped into the shallow water surrounding *Pathfinder*. It took them only a few steps to set foot on dry sand.

Xylion used his tricorder to make sure that the air contained no toxic elements and was safe to breathe. His results, he quickly found, were satisfactory.

There was only one path leading from the lake but it seemed as if part of the ceiling had collapsed a long time ago. There was still enough space to pass through but they had to climb over several large rocks to get to the other side.

From inside the submarine Michael, DeMara, and the others watched closely as Nora and Xylion disappeared behind the half-collapsed path.

After less than a minute, the captain tapped his combadge impatiently. "Lieutenant, report."

“It looks clear so far.”

“Is there a but?”

“Well, there is a lot of space here. It would take a while to make sure.”

“Hold your position, we’ll come and join you,” he said and then closed the connection before she could protest.

Michael, DeMara, Armstrong, and Jungo exited the small craft and followed Nora and Xylion over the rocks. After a few more meters they found them waiting at the exit of the cavern up ahead.

The captain joined up with them first. “Did you find anything—“

The cavern opened up into a huge space. And in that space sat an abandoned city.

The design was unmistakably Hyterian. Most of the buildings had collapsed and only a handful still consisted of three or more walls. The most amazing structural feature could be found far above them. It was a shimmering dome made out of some sort of sheer material. It shielded the city from the silver and blue ocean but even more impressively, it intensified the far-removed sunlight exponentially, functioning like a small artificial sun, hanging over the city.

“Wow.” It was all that DeMara managed to say as she still tried to figure out what she should focus on first.

Armstrong didn’t even have words. Up until very recently, he had been working on fairly routine things on a starship that had not encountered many mysteries that required an archeologist’s skills. But ever since they had discovered the Hyterians they had uncovered one marvelous find after the next.

Michael’s reaction was different.

Yes, he was fascinated by what he had found but something had become a bigger mystery still. He had not found this place by accident. He had been led here and he could not understand why.

The city he looked at now was the same he had seen in his vision. He recognized it even though it had little in common with what he had seen. A few hundred meters away to his left was a raised platform jutting out from the rock. He recognized it as the exact spot where he had stood.

In the vision, his attention had been drawn to the building at the center of the city. Without further hesitation, he set out to find it.

“Sir.”

But Nora’s protest came too late and she was left with no other option but to scramble after him as he walked determinedly down the path that led to the city.

Toby Armstrong’s curiosity couldn’t be held back either and he quickly joined the others.

DeMara watched them go. “That can’t be the best way to search this place.”

Xylion nodded. “Agreed,” he said and activated his tricorder. “We will probably be more successful if we separate.”

“That didn’t work out so well last time.”

Xylion looked at her.

“But your logic is, as always, undeniable,” she said with a smile and then reached for her tricorder. “Let’s get started.”

It was only after she and Xylion had parted ways that she realized that Jungo had already slipped out of sight.

* * *

Michael walked down what he believed to be the main road of the ancient city that led toward a large empty square. Nora and Armstrong were just a step behind him.

Armstrong used his tricorder to scan his surroundings. The city was a great find but so far, his scans hadn’t yielded any new information that could have helped them find the much sought-after artifact.

When they reached the square, they noticed that it wasn’t quite as empty as it had appeared from a distance. A large structure had once stood there but now nothing much besides ruins remained.

“Judging by the layout, this looks like it might have been the equivalent to the temple on Hyteria,” said Armstrong.

“Too bad there isn’t much left,” said Nora.

There were still a few walls and columns standing but not enough for it to pass as a building.

Michael approached the ruins. "Maybe we find something within it."

"Sir," said Nora and fell into step next to him. "I so hate sounding repetitive but maybe it would be better if you stayed here and let us have a look around in there. I'm sure Mister Armstrong is more than qualified to find anything that might be of value to us."

He stopped. It wasn't difficult to spot the somewhat pleading tone in her voice. Then he looked back at the ruins. They didn't look particularly safe.

"Very well, Lieutenant," he said and noticed the relieved expression on her face. "You two go ahead and have all the fun. I'll be staying out here and waiting like a good starship captain."

She gave him an affirming nod and then turned to head for the ruins.

"Lieutenant," he said after them.

The pair stopped and turned to face him.

"Don't do anything stupid. If you get injured, it'll be a long way back to *Poseidon*."

"We'll apply due caution, sir."

* * *

DeMara had found a building that seemed almost completely intact.

It had a large dome-like ceiling, parts of which had long since collapsed. From what she had gathered on Tentrus VI, she believed the building to have had a religious function.

There wasn't much left inside but she did notice some form of altar that seemed to be part of the far wall. As she carefully approached, she noticed an object sitting on the stone platform. It was covered by a thick layer of dust. She knelt down and carefully blew away the dirt.

She recognized the object immediately. It was nearly identical to the curved stone Nora and Edison had found within the asteroid station a couple of days ago. It had similar markings on its surface and just like the other stone, it seemed to have broken off at both ends.

She removed it from the platform and then quickly froze as if she expected something to happen.

Nothing did.

Just as she was about to inspect the artifact closer she was startled by the sound of footsteps coming from directly behind her.

"I think I'm going to take that."

She turned around.

Jungo was standing on the other side of the room. His weapon was firmly pointed at her.

"Why doesn't this come as a surprise?"

He shrugged. "Who knows, maybe you're psychic," he said and stepped closer. "Now, remove your communicator and your weapon." He pointed at a large hole in the wall. "Throw'em out."

She quickly considered her options. But nothing she could come up with involved her not being shot. She decided to comply. She removed her combadge from her uniform and tossed it out the hole and then did the same for her sidearm.

"Good," he said and crossed the room.

"This has no value to you," she said in hopes of changing his mind.

"My dear, you have no idea what has value to me and what hasn't."

She took a few steps back until her back was against the wall. "I'm sure we can find something else to compensate you for your services," she said. "You don't need to take this."

"I'm afraid this is all I need," Jungo said still closing. "It would be a real shame if I had to kill somebody as pretty as you over a piece of rock, don't you think?" He raised his gun until it pointed right at her forehead. His other hand reached out for the artifact she was still holding in her hands.

She looked directly at him, her shining purple eyes making contact with his.

“And spare me that insufferable look of yours. Your charms mean nothing to me.”

She reluctantly handed the object over to him.

“See, that wasn’t too painful,” he said with a smirk as he stuffed the stone artifact into the pocket of his pants. But his smile quickly disappeared when he heard another person entering the building. His head turned slightly to spy over his shoulder.

She made use of the distraction.

Balling her hand into a fist, she drove it hard into his midsection.

She tried to get around him but he was faster and seemingly much more resilient than she had anticipated.

Just when she thought she was out of his reach, she felt his hand grabbing her lower arm. He jerked her back toward him and yanked her back hard, using her as a shield in front of him as he faced the new arrival.

“That was quite a punch,” he said. “I guess you’re not just a pretty face after all.” He raised his weapon and pressed it against her temple. “Don’t do it again.”

On the other side of the room, Xylion stepped through the entrance. As soon as he noticed Deen being held at gunpoint, he drew his phaser.

“You want to be really careful, Vulcan,” said the mercenary and pushed the emitter of his gun harder against her head. A discharge of an energy weapon at point-blank range would most likely be fatal.

Jungo took a few steps toward the large hole in the wall but continued to hold his hostage closely in front of him.

“Shooting your hostage is illogical. You would instantly lose your leverage and be left defenseless.”

“I don’t think Mister Jungo will necessarily do the logical thing here. Please keep that in mind,” said DeMara. She knew that this man had no scruples, just a couple of hours earlier he had shot a man in the back without wasting a second thought.

“You better listen to her,” said Jungo with a boyish smirk on his face. “Logic has never been my strong suit.”

“You have no means of escape. Your best option is to surrender,” Xylion said, calm as ever. He took a careful yet determined step toward them, taking aim with his phaser.

Jungo neared the hole. “Your best option is to drop your weapon and let us both—“

He did not get a chance to finish his sentence. Xylion fired his weapon and the energy blast found the small area of his shoulder that had been left exposed.

Jungo jerked backwards. “Son of a—“

He pushed DeMara harshly away from him, causing her to collide head-on with the nearby wall and collapse to the ground, and fired at Xylion at the same time.

But the Vulcan had anticipated the move and leaped out of the way in time.

By the time he came back up, ready to fire, Jungo had jumped through the opening in the wall behind him.

Xylion rushed to where Deen had landed.

He knelt next to her and inspected her unconscious body. He carefully lifted her head from the cold stone floor to discover that she had a nasty wound marring her forehead from where she had hit the wall headfirst. It was oozing thick red blood.

Her eyes fluttered open and she looked at the Vulcan looming over her. “Thanks,” she said. “Now, please, make the room stop spinning.”

* * *

He had grown tired of watching Nora and Armstrong investigating the ruins.

It was a slow process made even more difficult by the apparent instability of the remains.

The chief archeologist had requested additional personnel from *Eagle* for the task but that wasn’t an easy proposition due to the remote location of the ruins. Transporters and comms didn’t work here and that meant that the only way to get more people and equipment was through conventional means. Which, of course, was a logistical nightmare.

Chances were that they wouldn't find anything at all, that any mystery this place had once held had long since crumbled to pieces, just like the city itself.

It didn't stop Michael from venturing into the small roads that led away from the central square. He had promised Nora that he was going to stay away from any dangerous ruins but he had never agreed on standing still.

He reached an intersection and once again noticed the raised platform from where he had overlooked the city in his vision. So far, he had found very little that he recognized from his visions. For a moment he considered finding a way to get up to the platform to see if perhaps a different perspective would help their cause.

He never even got the chance to finish that thought.

A brick wall slammed into him.

Or at least that's what it felt like.

The sudden impact pushed him forward with such abrupt force, it knocked the air out of his lungs. He had the mental wherewithal to try to roll as soon as he hit the unforgiving ground. It wasn't quite enough to avoid a burning pain in his shoulder but it absorbed some of the impact.

For a moment he just lay there as his mind tried to understand what could possibly have happened.

And then he saw Jungo.

He was lying on the ground a couple of meters away, bleeding from his nose and clearly dazed. Michael figured he must have been at a full run when he had slammed into him, most likely looking over his shoulder instead of watching where he was going. A telltale sign that he hadn't just been running, he had been running away.

Something had rolled out of his jacket and Michael thought it looked strangely familiar.

Jungo was already coming back around, moaning in pain and rubbing his sore shoulder.

The man looked at Michael through half-opened eyes and then quickly searched for his weapon. He found it on the floor, grabbed it, and stumbled to his feet.

Michael was faster.

He took a step toward Jungo and before he could even stand up straight, he delivered a picture-perfect right hook that connected with his jaw.

The mercenary took another spill and landed back on the ground.

Michael regretted the punch instantly as a sharp pain shot up his hand and arm. It had been a long time since he had sucker punched someone. He unclenched his hand and shook it out a few times, trying to alleviate the pain more quickly.

He then turned his attention to the small artifact that was still lying on the ground. There was no doubt that it was very similar to the one in *Eagle's* science lab. He crouched down low to pick it up and inspect it more closely.

But before he could even make out the markings that adorned the artifact, a bright flash of light blinded him and an invisible force pushed him down onto his knees.

And just like that his surroundings were gone, replaced by a uniform sheet of white nothingness.

No, not nothing.

For somebody else was there with him.

A creature was slowly approaching. And he had seen her before. He knew without a doubt that it was the same creature he had seen in his vision of this very place.

Like before she spoke to him in her singsong voice he couldn't understand.

She was beautiful.

Slender, tall, and graceful with white feather-like hair and a warm and yet mostly featureless face. A small nose, slim lips, and narrow but piercing eyes.

She was not so much walking but gliding toward him. She wore a long white dress that seamlessly blended in with the colorless background.

As much as tried he could neither speak nor move. He was frozen in place, on his knees, and holding the stone artifact in front of him.

The creature came to a gradual stop in front of him. He could smell her now even though he found it impossible to define, like nothing he had ever experienced before. Sweet and pleasant yet faint and fleeting.

Her entire upper body swept down gracefully until her face was mere inches from his own, almost like a mother bending down to regard her child. Her eyes were shining in a variety of colors, never quite staying the same for longer than a moment.

And then he understood.

The words began to make sense.

“*The Circle of Commencement*,” she said and then stopped talking.

Michael wanted to reply, wanted to desperately ask her to keep speaking, hoping that now he would understand more of what she had been saying.

But she just smiled.

Michael could feel something being taken from his hands. When he looked down the artifact had disappeared. He looked up again but the majestic creature was gone as well.

His vision blurred and he thought he could spot the outline of the ruins of the city again.

He turned his head and saw Commander Xylion standing above him. His lips moved but he couldn't hear the words he was saying.

He tried to get back to his feet. When he stumbled the Vulcan steadied him until he found his balance once again. Jungo was no longer there, nor was the stone artifact.

“Are you injured?” he said.

Michael considered the Vulcan curiously. “What happened?”

“Mister Jungo stole an artifact Lieutenant Deen discovered. He escaped before I was able to neutralize him. He must have come this way.”

Michael tried to sort his thoughts. “Dee? Is she all right?”

“She has suffered a minor concussion. Her injuries are not life-threatening but I recommend that she receives medical attention as soon as possible.”

Nora and Armstrong came running down the street and quickly approached.

“Sir, are you all right?” Nora said before she had even reached him.

He massaged his temples to try and shake off the cobwebs in his mind. “I'm fine. A bit dizzy.”

“What happened? Where is Jungo?” she said, her phaser at the ready, thoroughly scanning the surrounding area.

“I wish I knew.”

Xylion had activated his tricorder and checked the read-outs. “I'm detecting an undetermined bio signature moving rapidly back toward the cave.”

Michael nodded and then turned to Xylion. “Commander, I want you and Armstrong to go back and get Dee. Get her back to the submarine where we can treat her injuries.”

He took a quick look at the ground around him and found his weapon which he quickly recovered. “Lieutenant, you're with me,” he said and set out after Jungo.

Nora followed him. “I shouldn't have let you go by yourself,” she said once they had cleared the city.

“Lieutenant, I'm not a child and you're not to blame. I would've had Jungo dead to rights if it hadn't been for—”

She threw him a quizzical look but then chose to concentrate on catching Jungo instead after realizing that he was not willing to explain himself further.

They reached the entrance of the cave soon after and slowed as they approached the collapsed part of the cavern. Voices were coming from ahead.

“He's got company,” he said and then gestured to Nora to quietly follow him climbing up the top of the rocks that were blocking their way.

They reached a spot that provided cover and a good view into the cavern below. Jungo was standing with his back to them. He was talking to three Ferengi.

A second, smaller submersible was sitting in the water next to *Pathfinder*.

Michael recognized the Ferengi in the middle. It was Brax, the man who had intervened in the fight in Pacifica City.

“I should've known,” he said.

“He was working for them all along,” said Nora and looked at the captain. “What do we do?”

Michael observed the conversation that Jungo was having with the Ferengi. He couldn't make out what they were saying but it seemed as if they did not agree on something.

“We might be able to follow them,” he said.

Jungo drew his weapon and shot the Ferengi on his left and then the Ferengi on his right. He had been so quick that the man in the middle was completely stunned. He reached for his gun but before he could even remove it from his holster Jungo had punched him in his face causing the Ferengi to drop onto his back and into the shallow water.

“Damn.” Michael reached for his phaser to open fire. The sudden movement caused a few rocks to come loose, warning his target of the incoming danger. Jungo managed to jump aside before the phaser beam could knock him out.

He then immediately returned fire, shooting blindly at the cave opening even as he rushed toward the small and ginger-colored Ferengi submersible.

Poorly aimed, his shots missed Michael and Nora and instead caused the already unstable cavern ceiling to rain down dust and debris, keeping them from returning fire.

“Move!” Nora pushed Michael and herself forward and over the rocks they had used for cover.

Not a heartbeat later, large chunks of the ceiling collapsed on the already piled-up stones causing the narrow opening to become even smaller. By the time they had made it to the other side of the cavern, Jungo had already entered the small craft and started up the engines.

Nora who had recovered from her tumble down the rocks first, was quickly back on her feet and ran toward the submarine, firing her weapon. She managed to land a few direct hits but the stun setting did nothing to the reinforced hull of the vessel and by the time she had a chance to adjust the weapon, it had already slipped back into the lake and disappeared.

Nora, by now waist-deep in the lake, stopped and angrily hit the surrounding water in frustration which only caused it to splash into her face.

One of the Ferengi had come back around and began jolting wildly when he realized that he was halfway submerged, comically struggling as if afraid he'd drown in the shallow beach. He finally managed to pull himself back onto his feet, soaked from head to toe. “This is outrageous,” he screamed when he spotted the two Starfleet officers. “This is completely outrageous. You are trespassing on private property. I demand an explanation for this outrage.”

Michael stepped up to the upset Ferengi, his hand once more balled to a fist. Brax, noticing this, quickly stepped back, trying to move away from the seemingly enraged Starfleet officer but found that the shallow waters made an escape difficult.

“I've got your explanation right here,” Michael said and delivered another right hook which once again found its target and sent Brax back into the lake with a splash.

And once again, he was immediately and painfully punished for the hit, as he futilely tried to shake away the pain. “I really need to stop punching people in the face.”

* * *

His first instinct had been to follow Jungo and try to catch up with him.

Unfortunately, the situation required him to re-prioritize. The city had suddenly become nearly inaccessible and he had an injured crewmember on the other side who required medical attention.

After having dealt with the Ferengi, he returned to the collapsed cavern and began to remove the rocks that blocked the path back into the ruins.

Nora in the meantime secured the three Ferengi on dry land and then quickly proceeded to assist him.

After a few minutes, they were helped by Xylion and Armstrong who had proceeded to clear the cavern from their side. Thankfully, the large and heavy rocks were mostly at the bottom and it didn't take them too long to widen a gap just large enough for the three stranded officers to pass through.

Michael was relieved to find that DeMara appeared to be doing fine even after her head injury. She was conscious, if a little unsteady on her feet, and the bleeding had stopped. His first priority was to get her back on *Pathfinder* and allow Xylion to treat her with the onboard first aid kit.

Once satisfied that she was being taken care of, he turned his attention to the three Ferengi, still mindful of the fact that they needed to return to *Poseidon* as soon as possible for Dee to be checked out by a doctor.

Brax had already come back around. He was noticeably still upset about the way he had been treated but this time he thought better of it than to air his grievances again. His two colleagues looked equally unhappy with the way things had panned out.

All their hands had been tied expertly behind their backs by Nora and they were sitting on a small rock near the cavern wall.

“Jungo worked for you all along,” said Michael as he looked them over carefully. “And you let us leave Pacifica City so we would lead

you here.”

The Ferengi did not answer. Brax’s facial expressions mirrored defiance and disgust.

“But something didn’t quite work out, did it?” he said, ignoring their silence. “What was it? Did he want more money?”

One of the Ferengi uttered a sarcastic laugh but quickly stopped when Brax threw him an icy, chastising glare.

“Let’s start at the beginning,” he said, fully aware that he had to find a way to get some information out of them because as it stood right now, he had pretty much nothing at all. Not a single lead to hint at the ultimate location of the Hyterian artifact.

Predictably, the Ferengi remained uncooperative.

He grabbed Brax by the collar of his water-soaked, extravagant shirt and pulled him to his feet. “Listen to me and listen very carefully. You’re going to start talking or I promise you this is going to become one of the most unpleasant days of your life.”

A look of fear flashed on Brax’s face. But it quickly passed to be replaced by a self-satisfying grin. “You’re Starfleet. You wouldn’t hurt me.”

Michael let him go so that he fell back onto the rock. “Hurt you? Of course not.”

Brax’s smile grew wider. He quickly looked at his colleagues, making sure that they had registered his triumph.

Michael looked back at the submersible. Nora and Armstrong were standing near it, observing the interrogation with great interest. Xylion was inside taking care of DeMara.

“I don’t have time for this,” he finally said and then turned away from the Ferengi and walked toward *Pathfinder*.

The Ferengi quickly began whispering to each other.

“Pack your things, we’re leaving.”

The two lieutenants nodded and mounted the submarine.

Brax made it onto his feet again. “What about us?”

Michael didn’t stop or turn around. “I don’t know, maybe you get lucky and somebody will find you here. If not, you better start to learn how to fish. Either way, I couldn’t care less,” he said and climbed into the hatch.

“You ... you can’t do that!” yelled Brax desperately. He stumbled forward, trying to run but lost his balance and fell into the lake.

Michael closed the hatch and soon after the engine of *Pathfinder* powered up.

Brax managed to get onto his knees. “No please!” he yelled. “You can’t leave us here. We’ll die.” His voice became increasingly more pleading. “Please! Take us with you. I tell you everything you want to know,” he screamed, almost crying now.

The submarine powered down and the hatch reopened.

When Michael stuck out his head he was smirking.

Brax knelt in the shallow waters, sobbing like a little child.

Michael stepped out and approached the Ferengi. “You better make this worth my while,” he said, quickly replacing his smile with a more determined expression. He picked up the short Ferengi and sat him back down on a rock. “Start talking. From the beginning.”

Brax needed a few seconds to recompose himself. “All we wanted to do was to make some profits from mining ore.”

The other two Ferengi quickly nodded to support their leader’s confession.

“A few months ago, Jungo came to Pacifica City and told us about an easy way to quadruple our profits.”

“Jungo came to you?” said Michael with apparent skepticism.

Brax nodded. “Yes. We had no idea but he told us that Deleana IV was once the home of an ancient and powerful civilization and that they kept artifacts of immense value here. At first, we didn’t believe him but then we made extensive surveys and we found several signs that a civilization had indeed existed here. So we started to look for artifacts. Jungo promised us that they had buried something incredibly valuable.”

“But you didn’t find anything?”

“Nothing more than worthless rubble and ruins. When we followed you here, we thought you had found what Jungo had been talking about. We were not supposed to meet here, Jungo was meant to come to us once he had obtained the artifact. But we were concerned about our investment.”

“I see,” said Michael. “Jungo played you. He needed your help to find the artifact for himself.”

The two Ferengi scowled at Brax for having been misled so easily.

“We put all our resources into finding that artifact. And now he's gone with the only thing that was worth anything,” said Brax.

Michael considered his story for a moment. He was certain he had left out a few details but it seemed to make sense on the surface. “You lost whatever you had. Jungo is gone and he took the only thing of any value with him. I suggest you cut your losses and leave Deleana for good. There's nothing left for you here.”

Brax lowered his head.

“Do you know anything about this Jungo? Where he might go or who his partners are?”

The Ferengi shook his head in resignation and Michael believed him. The interrogation was over, he decided. He led the three fooled and humiliated Ferengi into the submarine and quickly steered the ship back into open waters to rendezvous with *Poseidon*.

Home Invasion

“For what it’s worth, Captain, I’m thankful for your visit. I don’t believe the Ferengi will give us any more trouble now that we know what they were up to.”

Michael and his away team had returned to *Eagle* empty-handed.

He had left Brax and his accomplices in McLaughlin’s care and even though no official charges against them were filed, it was obvious that their search for ancient artifacts was over. For McLaughlin, this meant that things on Deleana IV would finally go back to normal, maybe even improve. Michael on the other hand couldn’t help but feel that this expedition had been fruitless. He had dismissed the idea of returning to the underwater city after Armstrong and Xylion had made clear that it would take weeks to uncover potentially helpful information from the ruins.

“I’m glad I could have been of help to you, Commodore,” he said. He was sitting at his desk looking at McLaughlin’s image on the screen in front of him. Even as he spoke, his mind was absent.

“Again I’m sorry that you didn’t find what you were looking for. Please feel free to return any time,” he said. *“Hopefully under better circumstances.”*

Michael offered a little smile. “Thank you for your hospitality, Commodore. Perhaps I’ll take you up on that someday.”

He nodded. *“Good luck, Captain. McLaughlin out.”*

The screen went dark and Michael leaned back in his chair.

“Leva to Captain Owens.”

“Go ahead, Commander.”

“Sir, we might have found something here.”

He stood and headed straight for the exit of his ready room to enter the adjacent bridge. “What do you have?”

Leva was standing behind the operations console looking at a computer readout. He turned to the captain. “We have identified three ships leaving this system within the last thirty minutes,” he said. “Two of them were freighters on scheduled departure times.”

Michael’s interest was immediately piqued. “And the third?”

“A small short-range shuttlecraft,” said Leva with a smile. “We have managed to isolate its warp trail.”

“Good work, Commander,” he said. Their luck appeared to be changing. Chances were good that Jungo had made his getaway on that shuttle. If they could catch him, a lot of questions could be answered.

“Set a course to follow that trail and let me know as soon as you find anything. I’m due for an appointment with Mister Xylion.”

Leva acknowledged and Michael left the bridge to head for the science lab.

* * *

When Michael entered the main science lab on deck five the first thing he noticed was how empty the room appeared compared to his previous visits. There were only a handful of scientists and technicians present, mostly sitting at computer consoles, studying readouts, or working on simulations.

Xylion and Armstrong sat by the main console in the middle of the room while DeMara was standing close by, concentrating her attention on a handheld padd.

Michael sought her out first. “How’re you doing?”

She looked up. “Wenera fixed me right up,” she said and subconsciously touched her forehead where she had been injured earlier and where now no sign of the wound remained. “Treated me for a concussion but said I’m good to go.”

He responded with a skeptical look.

“Fine,” she said, “She wanted to keep me in sickbay overnight for observation but I managed to talk her into a week of light duty instead.”

“You should be in your quarters resting.”

She frowned. “You mean the way you should still be in Doctor Wenera’s care?” she said and then shrugged. “Can’t fault your officers for following the example set by their captain. Besides you need me here. I can help figure out what we’re looking for.”

Michael knew she had given him little to argue about. Yes, by dismissing the good doctor's recommendation to stay in sickbay he had unwittingly set an example for his crew to emulate. And yes, he needed her insights into the Hyterians and this mysterious artifact they had left behind, especially since he was already down one officer.

Fortunately, Edison was well on his way to making a full recovery according to Wenera's latest report but even so, DeMara's science background remained extremely valuable considering the stakes.

He nodded slowly. "Light duties, then," he said and then headed over to where Xylion and Armstrong were working.

"Gentlemen, are we making progress?"

Both of them turned their seats to face him.

"Not much, I'm afraid," said Armstrong. "It's not for a lack of data. We've collected quite a bit across the various sites we've collected. But much of it is either not relevant, or still eludes us until we can establish a more reliable translation matrix."

Michael looked around the room. "Where is the rest of your staff? Don't tell me you've given up already."

"My department has been working on the Hyterians for an extended period without interruption. To avoid exhaustion, I have ordered the majority of my staff to take time for rest and relaxation," said Xylion.

Michael couldn't believe what he was hearing. "Commander, do you honestly believe that giving your people time off will get us any closer to finding this artifact?" he said making it clear that his question was but a rhetorical one. "In case you hadn't noticed, we are dealing with some seriously determined competition here and I'm pretty damn sure they're not pulling over to take a break, waiting for us to catch up to them." Michael had not noticed how loud his voice had become, not even when all the work in the room came to a sudden standstill and everyone turned to look at the clearly agitated captain.

DeMara stepped next to him and gently put her hand on his shoulder. "We're all tired. We've been working on this non-stop for days. A fresh perspective might make us find something we overlooked," she said in a soft, disarming tone of voice.

He considered her calm purple eyes for a moment and felt her calming effect almost immediately. It was only then that he realized how frustrated and angry he had been. And above all else, how tired he truly felt.

He nodded slowly and then looked back at Xylion. "I suppose you're right."

The Vulcan acknowledged with a small facial gesture but chose not to reply verbally.

Armstrong tried to redirect Michael's attention to the screen. "We have found something that you might find interesting, however," he said carefully.

Michael looked at him expectantly.

The archeologist turned to face his computer console and began entering commands into the workstation. "We have been able to decipher some of the Hyterian texts we found that concern their physical attributes. It is not much but we were able to create an approximate image."

The main screen in the center of the room cleared to display an image of an alien being. It was a tall and slender figure with talon-like hands and long bony legs. Its diamond-shaped face possessed almost no features. It had a narrow almost symmetrical mouth with no lips, two bright shining eyes but no nose or any ears to speak of. The creature had brown leathery skin and not a single sign of hair.

Michael took a step toward the screen. "That's not quite right," he said under his breath.

Armstrong was puzzled. "Sir?"

"Make her skin a couple of shades darker and give her blonde hair," he said and then turned to face the young science officer. "Straight blonde hair down her back and make it thick like ... like feathers," he added and turned back to the image before he could respond.

Armstrong entered the modifications with little hesitation and shortly after the image on the screen changed accordingly.

DeMara stepped next to him. "What is it?"

"Give her a white robe that covers her entire body except for her head," said Michael.

The image shifted once again.

Michael was looking at a figure that he had seen in his most recent vision. It wasn't an exact replica of the specter-like appearance but it was close enough. Her distinctly shaped face had stuck with him ever since he had first laid eyes upon it. Even now he could hear her voice in the back of his head.

"That's it. That's what she looked like."

"That's what who looked like?" DeMara said, but Michael was too focused on the image to pay her any attention.

When it was clear that he was not going to say anything further, Armstrong cleared his throat. "Sir, I'm not sure I understand—"

"Circle of Commencement," Michael said, interrupting the archeologist when he remembered the only words he had ever spoken that he

had actually understood. “Does that sound familiar? Did you come across that in your research?”

Armstrong looked at him for a moment and then at Xylion. The Vulcan’s face remained nearly expressionless. He turned back at Michael and shook his head. “I don’t think so.”

Michael found the stone artifact Edison and Nora had retrieved from the asteroid station. It sat safely under a protective glass shield on a small podium. He approached it and focused on the piece of rock. It was remarkably similar to the one he had held in his hands only a few short hours earlier.

“Commander,” he said but didn’t take his eyes off the podium. “You were right about what you said earlier. You and your team deserve some R&R for all the hard work you’ve put into this lately. I want your entire team including you and Mister Armstrong to take a break.”

“Right now?” said Armstrong, his voice echoing his surprise.

Xylion rose to his feet. “Sir, I do not require rest at this time. But I will instruct the rest of the team—”

“Last time I checked, Vulcans need to sleep, too,” he said, not giving his science officer a chance to protest. I expect you to follow your own best advice. Get some rest. Eat something, get a workout, go meditate, do whatever it is you do to recharge your batteries and you may come up with a fresh perspective on things yourself.”

Xylion nodded and gestured to Armstrong and the remaining science personnel to leave the room. After a few moments, only Michael and DeMara remained.

“That goes for you as well, Dee,” he said after realizing that she was making no move to follow the others.

Instead, she took a defiant step forward. “I’m not going anywhere. Call security if you want me out of here.”

He sighed. “You’ve got a real stubborn streak, you know that?” he said and turned back to the artifact.

“Look who’s talking.”

Michael deactivated the locking mechanism of the transparent dome that covered the stone artifact. “Whatever happens,” he said as he placed the dome to one side, “whatever I say or do, don’t interfere.”

“What are you doing?” she said, concern creeping back into her voice.

“Just trust me on this. Please.”

He took a deep breath, closed his eyes, and reached out for the artifact until his fingertips touched the smooth stone.

Nothing happened.

He opened his eyes again and curiously looked at the artifact in front of him with surprise. He reached out for it, taking it firmly into his hand, and lifted it from the podium.

A flash of light made him stumble backward. He was no longer in the science lab. Once again, all his surroundings had faded away to make room for an endless white nothingness. He felt different. He looked down and saw that he was still holding the stone artifact but his hands had changed. They had become slender talons. His skin had become darker and his arms and legs much thinner. He had become Hyterian.

He couldn’t move, he was glued to whatever ground he was standing on. When he looked up again, a familiar figure had appeared in front of him. She glided toward him, singing to him. And once again he couldn’t understand.

“You’re Hyterian,” he said and surprised himself by the words coming over his lips. They sounded like his own but they were off somehow as if he was speaking a theretofore unknown language.

She stopped and looked at him curiously. Her song paused for a few seconds but then recommenced.

“I don’t know what it is you’re saying. You’re trying to tell me something but I don’t know what it is.”

She slowly raised her arm and pointed at the stone artifact he was still holding.

Michael lifted it. “The Circle of Commencement?”

The creature moved her head sideward. “Circle of Commencement,” she said in her musical voice.

“Yes!” he exclaimed, euphoric about understanding her words. “But what shall I do with it?”

The creature closed the gap. She extended one of the three talons that made up her hand and touched his. He felt a strange cold sensation shoot through his body. She simply smiled at him. Her song stopped.

“What do you want me to do?”

She didn’t reply.

“Tell me what you want from me.”

Her smile persisted even while she began to fade away.

“No! Don’t go! Tell me what you want me to do!”

“Michael!”

He opened his eyes and found himself face-to-face with an obviously upset DeMara. It took him a moment to realize that he was back in the science lab. He turned away from her and slowly set down the artifact he was still holding. “I’m sorry.”

She needed a moment herself. She had observed him go into some sort of trance after he had picked up the artifact. She had remembered what he had said about not speaking to him so she had stood still while he remained motionless for a few moments. Then he had begun to whisper to himself. He had turned around, a glassy look in his eyes, and started yelling at her. It was at that point that she hadn’t been able to bear her silence any longer.

“What’s happening to you?” she said and took a careful step closer. “You’re scaring me.”

Michael didn’t answer, didn’t even turn to face her.

“You’re having some sort of hallucinations, don’t you? The same thing happened to you on Deleana. Twice.”

He picked up the protective dome and secured it once again on the podium, covering the artifact.

“Xylion said that he found you nearly unconscious on the ground. You could have stopped Jungo but he got away. He got away because you’re not well.”

He whipped around. “It’s not a sickness,” he said. “At least I don’t think it is.”

“Then talk to me. You can’t just keep this to yourself. Something is going on with you and it’s time you let somebody in on it,” she said. Michael sat down on the steps that led to the upper part of the science lab. “I’ve been having visions ever since I came back from our dig site on Hyteria.”

She followed suit and sat on a chair opposite.

“At first, they were just dreams. Nightmares, I thought, but then I started to get them during the day and while I was on duty. Even when I was around others. I didn’t pay it too much attention at first. I thought it was something that would go away after a day or two.” He shook his head. “It didn’t,” he said and looked up and right into her purple eyes. “They are somehow connected to the Hyterians. I know it sounds crazy but they’re talking to me, trying to tell me something.”

She didn’t say anything. Instead, she simply looked at him for a moment. She had known him for too long to be willing to believe that he had gone insane. On the other hand, she couldn’t completely disregard the possibility that whatever he had contracted could have affected his mind as well as his body.

* * *

Nora Laas was sitting at a table in the upper part of the Nest, facing the large panorama windows that were on the other side of the spacious crew lounge. Lif Culsten was lending her company and enjoying a late lunch.

“So I hear your trip to Deleana IV was quite eventful,” he said and took a bite from his salad. “Ensign Rei told me that she heard that you entered a colony of outlaws and that you got into a firefight with about two hundred infuriated Nausicaans,” he continued and then paused just long enough to take a sip from his *karvino* juice. “I told her that surely that had been an exaggeration,” he added and laughed. “Ten’lar in astrophysics said that there were at least eighty Klingons down there as well. I told them both that they shouldn’t believe everything they hear coming through the grapevine. I know this Pacifica City was a bad place and that you barely got out of there in one piece but there is no way you faced two hundred Nausicaans, right?”

Nora did not reply.

“Of course, I’m not implying that you couldn’t have handled two hundred Nausicaans and eighty Klingons,” he said hastily when she refused to comment. “It just seems a rather unrealistically high figure, that’s all.”

The reason the security chief hadn’t answered was because her entire attention seemed to be focused somewhere else.

Culsten turned his head and noticed Barrington Spooner sitting at a table across the room, deeply involved in a conversation with a couple of female crewmembers. Judging from the chuckles and laughs emanating from that table they were having a pleasant time. Culsten turned back to his own table and continued eating his salad. “You’re not jealous, are you?”

She threw him a puzzled look. “Huh?”

“Spooner. He’s an all right kinda guy but he’s got nothing on Commander Edison,” he said with a smile.

Nora took a sip from her neglected drink that was sitting in front of her. "I have no idea what you're talking about," she said after a few seconds.

"Right."

Her glance wandered back to the table at which Spooner was sitting.

"How come we've been sitting here almost fifteen minutes and you have barely said one word?"

She looked at him as if seeing him for the first time. She didn't quite know why but he was beginning to annoy her. "Listen, I don't know what you've heard but there is absolutely nothing going on between me and the first officer."

"Okay," said Culsten and cheerfully chewed on his food. "Whatever you say."

"Just because I've been spending some time with him doesn't mean we are involved in any kind of romantic way. The entire notion, quite frankly, is preposterous. He's my superior officer which would make any such relationship entirely inappropriate. Now, we do have a very good working relationship but that's all. People need to stop reading anything into that."

Culsten just stared at her, not having expected such a heated response he was now at a loss for words.

At the other side of the room, Spooner had gotten onto his feet and was now heading for one of the exits.

"I don't even know why I'm having this conversation with you. I have to go," she said and stood up to discreetly follow Spooner out of the lounge.

"Great talking to you, too," he said to himself and then returned all his attention to finishing his lunch.

* * *

He couldn't quite account why exactly he felt so anxious about sitting in the captain's chair.

Perhaps it was because as fourth-in-command, he didn't get the opportunity to do so very often outside the night shift. Or perhaps it was because he had been given command while they were actively chasing down a lead to find what could turn out to become one of the most powerful objects in galactic history.

Or it simply may have been that the spicy *hasperat* soufflé he'd had for dinner didn't agree with him.

Whatever the reason, Lieutenant Commander So'Dan Leva couldn't quite deny a certain apprehension as he oversaw a mostly quiet bridge.

He was too much of a consummate professional to allow any of the younger officers around to pick up any clues as to his true thoughts.

He couldn't, however, avoid jumping ever so slightly upon hearing Ensign Lance Stanmore who was manning ops in Deen's absence when he piped up suddenly. "Sir, it's ... it's gone."

It took but a moment for the veteran tactical officer to rediscover his inner calm before he smoothly stood from the chair. "What is gone, Ensign? Be more precise."

"The warp trail, sir," Stanmore said. "It was there a moment ago and then it simply disappeared."

"Nothing simply disappears," said Leva. "They must have disengaged their warp drive."

"But there is nothing here," protested the young beta-shift operations officer. "No planetary systems, no bases, not even a stray asteroid."

"Mister Waldorf, take us out of warp. Full stop."

"Full stop," acknowledged Petty Officer Waldorf and entered the necessary commands into his console.

Seconds later *Eagle* came to a halt.

The doors to the bridge opened and Culsten entered. He quickly proceeded to his station and relieved Waldorf. The shift change took place without the need to exchange words. Culsten accessed the logs on his station and within seconds he was fully up to speed of what had transpired in his absence. "Sir, sensors are picking up a disruption in space forty-five thousand meters off our port bow," he said.

"On screen."

The image on the main viewscreen shifted but the change was so miniscule that an untrained eye would have missed it.

"I don't see anything," said Leva once he had focused on the image for a few seconds, "Magnify."

The view screen changed resolution but again the change was barely noticeable.

“Are you positive you have a sensor contact?”

Culsten quickly double-checked his readouts. “Positive, I’m running a level four sensor diagnostic now.”

“Sir,” said Trinik, the Vulcan ensign who was in control of the tactical station. “The disruption is moving toward us.”

“Yellow alert.”

“This is no disruption,” said Culsten. “It’s a starship with some sort of sensor deflection shield.”

Before Leva could give another order, *Eagle* was hit violently by an unknown force. The lights as well as most of the computer consoles fluctuated. The red alert klaxons came to life automatically.

“What’s going on?” Leva said.

“We have been hit by an unidentified weapon,” said the tactical officer. “I am registering system failures all over the ship.”

“Shields?”

“Are up,” said the Vulcan. “But the unknown vessel is within the shield perimeter.”

“Sir, I’m not sure if the sensors are right but if they are I’m detecting heavy transporter activity,” said Stanmore.

“We are being boarded,” Leva said. “Sound general quarters. Intruder alert. Prepare to defend yourselves.” He had already located the closest arms locker and approached it swiftly.

Stanmore shook his head. “Internal communications are down.”

Before Leva could reach the locker, a figure materialized practically right in front of him. Leva instinctively jumped aside. Just in time to avoid an energy beam that had been aimed at him.

The man who had fired was a tall, dark-haired human wearing civilian clothes. Leva reached for the man’s rifle and harshly pushed back it into his stomach, causing the intruder to double over in pain. He then ripped the weapon right out of his hands.

Without missing a beat, Leva used the rifle as a bludgeon and struck the attacker across the head with it. The man collapsed into a heap on the floor.

It was only then he realized that at least four more individuals had appeared on the bridge. At a quick glance—and that was all he was able to afford—they weren’t of any one species and wore no uniforms. They were mercenaries.

One of the attackers, a bulky, blue-skinned Bolian, had materialized at the back of the bridge. He had quickly knocked out a crewman who was working at the back and then opened fire at Stanmore at ops at the front of the bridge. He took the blast to his right shoulder and then dropped out of his chair, avoiding a second shot that blew out his console in a rain of sparks.

Another human attacker had appeared near the viewscreen and next to the conn. He had raised his rifle to fire at Culsten. But the mercenary had not counted on the Krellonian’s lightning-fast reflexes.

Culsten grabbed hold of his console and jerked it forward, driving it roughly into the attacker’s side.

He then leaped out of his chair and threw himself at the dazzled man and wrestled him to the ground.

The third intruder had also appeared at the back of the bridge.

Ensign Trinik at tactical had reached for a phaser attached under the console with little delay and opened fire at the massive green-skinned Orion.

But the weapon had been on its standard stun setting, not delivering nearly enough punch to knock out the two-meter-tall warrior. The man stumbled but instead of falling over, the man just smiled with apparent amusement.

The Vulcan readjusted the setting on the phaser but by the time he took aim again, the Orion had already stepped up to him and simply slapped the weapon out of the ensign’s hand.

The next blow was aimed at his head and connected with such force that Trinik nearly flew over the tactical console. The Orion’s massive hand took hold of the slender Vulcan’s throat and effortlessly lifted him off the ground.

He laughed as he began to tighten his hold in an attempt to choke the Starfleet officer to death.

To his credit, Trinik never lost control of his extremities even when his eyes threatened to close.

Through impressive willpower, he slowly raised one of his arms until his hand rested on the Orion’s shoulder.

The mercenary was far too amused with his apparently impending victory that he never stopped to consider the Vulcan neck pinch.

It wasn’t until he found his body going limp that the Orion realized what had happened. His eyes went wide and he dropped like a sack of stones.

Culsten in the meanwhile had won the upper hand in his own fight. During the short struggle, he had managed to climb on top of the attacker and punched him repeatedly in the face until the mercenary had passed out.

He grabbed his opponent's rifle and then rolled off him. When he got back on his feet, he noticed that the only threat remaining was the Bolian who had already disposed of Stanmore and was now taking aim at Leva.

Culsten brushed his long silver hair out of his face, took aim, and squeezed the firing stud. The Bolian didn't even see it coming and went down quickly.

Leva offered Culstne an appreciative nod.

Culsten mirrored the gesture and then slowly approached the Bolian to make sure he was out of the fight. He used the rifle to poke him a few times and found him unresponsive. But something rolled out of the unconscious man's hand and right up to the tip of Culsten's boot.

He looked down at the ball-shaped device curiously. "Lieutenant!"

Leva had already recognized the device.

Culsten looked down again. Too late did he realize what he was dealing with. He turned away to find cover but by then it was already too late.

A bright flash of light was followed by a violent shockwave that ripped him clear off his feet.

The world around him went dark just a heartbeat later.

* * *

"So let me get this straight," said Louise Hopkins, looking up from an engineering station with a smirk on her lips. "The captain kicked you out of your own lab?"

It had been a busy day for the chief engineer as several routine system diagnostics were due and the engineering section was currently undermanned. Many of her people had been reassigned to assist the science department ever since *Eagle* had discovered the remains of the long-lost Hyterian civilization. It had made her job considerably more difficult.

She understood the significance of the discovery and had to come to appreciate it even more after her visit to the alien space station. She still marveled at the things she had seen over there even if the harrowing experience had put her off trying to visit any other Hyterian locations for the time being.

For Louise and her team, the personnel reassignments also meant extra shifts in engineering to turn in their reports and finish essential maintenance diagnostics on schedule.

She couldn't quite help but get a small amount of glee from the fact that the chief science officer had now been placed into a similarly frustrating position.

Schadenfreude was not a noble emotion but it was a surprisingly comforting one.

"I believe it is an adequate metaphor," said Xyilion while he worked on a nearby station. After being asked to leave by the captain, he had decided that the best use of his unexpected free time was to join Louise in main engineering to assist with her backlog of work.

"There is something I don't quite understand."

He aimed an expectant look at her.

"Surely the captain knows that as a Vulcan you don't require as much rest as the others. Why would he order you to stop working as well considering how important it is that we find this artifact first?"

"That is a perfectly valid question, Lieutenant. I have been considering the captain's possible motivations but have not yet reached a satisfactory conclusion."

She left the console she had been working on and approached the Vulcan. She made sure nobody was in direct earshot before she spoke again. "You know they say that the captain has been acting rather strange lately, ever since he collapsed on the bridge for no reason. Some think he might have caught the Urodelan flu. What if it is something more serious than that?"

"I have noticed the changes in the captain's behavior as well. However, I have seen no indications so far that it is endangering the safety of the ship or crew."

"Maybe it isn't him. Maybe it's you," she said and returned to the console to continue her work. "You do tend to have an effect on people sometimes."

“Please elaborate.”

She turned, giving him a puzzled look.

“What kind of effect do I have on people?”

She mentally chided herself for having said what she had thought out loud. “It’s nothing, really.”

But Xylion's curiosity had clearly awoken and he stepped away from his workstation and approached the chief engineer. “I am curious to know how you perceive my relationship with the rest of the crew.”

“I don’t know what to say,” she said and returned her attention to the console she was working on. “Everybody considers you to be a resourceful officer and a skilled scientist.”

“That would be an entirely appropriate perception.”

She sighed.

“You are suggesting that there is more?”

She realized that he was not going to let this go. “You’re also third-in-command on this ship. It may take more to command than being a good officer and a great scientist.”

“Are you questioning my adequacy as second officer?”

She quickly shook her head. “No, not at all,” she said and moved on to another workstation. “I’m just saying that perhaps you need to... I don’t know.”

“You are not being very forthcoming.”

“Okay, this might be hard for a Vulcan but why don’t you try to lighten up a bit? Socialize with the crew more, be less direct and more, you know, friendly?”

His facial expressions were near puzzlement. For most of his life, he had lived and worked among Vulcans. He had returned to his home world after he had graduated from the Academy because he found emotional species too unpredictable and sometimes downright irritating. Until now he had never considered the possibility that he could be the one causing the irritation.

Without warning *Eagle* shook hard enough to cause Louise to lose her balance and fall to the floor.

Xylion who had managed to stay on his feet quickly walked over to her and helped her back on her feet.

“What happened?”

“I do not know.”

They did not have to wait long for an answer to her question. Within seconds several intruders appeared in engineering. They didn’t waste any time and immediately opened fire at the surprised technicians.

Assistant chief engineer Fernuc was hit instantly and collapsed to the floor. Lieutenant Katherine Smith was luckier as she managed to find cover behind her workstation just in time to avoid being struck by an energy discharge.

Xylion grabbed Louise by the back of her uniform and unceremoniously pushed her into an adjacent maintenance access room. He leaped into the room after her and quickly sealed it off by using the manual override.

“What the hell is happening?”

Xylion ignored her and walked to an auxiliary computer console.

Louise in the meantime moved back toward the sealed door. “They’re taking over my engine room.”

“That seems to be a logical conclusion,” he said while trying to activate the console.

“We have to do something,” she shouted and reached for the door panel.

“Do not open that door, Lieutenant.”

“But we have to do something,” she said, almost pleadingly. “We can’t just let them do this.”

Xylion took a few steps toward the engineer to ensure that she would not try to reopen the door leading into main engineering. “I agree but we do not know who we are facing. At this time, we are clearly outnumbered and outgunned. Returning to engineering now would be a mistake.”

“Do you suggest we just hide in here,” she said, angrily. “Do nothing?”

“I suggest that our best option at present is to stay in hiding until an opportunity presents itself. I also implore you to keep your voice down so we remain undetected.”

Louise didn't like what she was hearing. She was upset and at the moment she couldn't even think straight. Things had happened too fast and too unexpectedly and the full implications hadn't quite sunken in yet.

Frustrated, she leaned against the door and slid down to the floor.

* * *

Laas had followed Barrington Spooner to deck seven, the location of his quarters.

The first thing she had noticed was the fact that there were no guards following him even though the captain had explicitly ordered to have him escorted at all times.

She had no idea how he had managed to get rid of the security detail but she was determined to have a word with them later. It was completely unacceptable and she would make sure that somebody would get reprimanded over this oversight.

But for now, she felt that the situation might provide her with a golden opportunity. Spooner was up to something and if she caught him in the act, it would be easy to convince the captain to have him locked up in the brig for the remainder of his stay onboard.

As she had suspected, Spooner was heading back to his quarters. He was in a hurry and from what she could tell, he seemed concerned. He kept looking over his shoulder, trying to make sure he wasn't being followed. But he wasn't doing a particularly good job at it and for somebody who had honed her skills of shadowing a target during a brutal guerilla war, it wasn't difficult to remain undetected.

He reached the doors to his quarters and disappeared inside. She contemplated to follow him but that would mean to let him know that she was spying on him.

She didn't get much more time to consider her next steps. The ship shook hard suddenly and the lights in the corridor fluctuated. The alert klaxons began howling and the hallways lit up with dark red colors.

Her first instinct was to follow protocol and head for the security office from where she'd be able to get a full report on the current situation. She turned to make her way to the nearest turbolift but froze instantly when she heard the distinct sound of weapons fire. It was coming from inside Spooner's quarters.

She quickly made it to the doors and instinctively reached for her hip to draw her phaser only to find that she wasn't armed. Up until a few seconds there hadn't been any reason to carry a weapon.

More noises were coming from inside the quarters.

Somebody was yelling, followed by a loud thud and the sound of smashing furniture. Without wasting another thought Nora entered the security override code into the door panel.

She braced herself as the doors parted and then carefully slipped inside.

Besides Spooner, there were two others in the room. From their weapons and clothing, she could tell that they were mercenaries or possibly pirates roaming the galaxy trying to steal valuable cargo to sell them to the highest bidder. Attacking a Federation starship seemed a rather bold move.

One of them was lying on the floor, surrounded by shards of glass and what remained of what had once been a coffee table.

The other was a tall and intimidating-looking human man with tattoos covering most of his body and part of his face. He was holding a rifle, threatening Spooner who had retreated into a far corner of the room.

Laas had a good idea of what had happened. The mercenaries had surprised him; he had managed to take out the first but had not counted on the other attacker. Neither Spooner nor the mercenary had noticed Nora enter the room.

"Come on Spoon, tell me where it is and I promise you I'll make it painless."

"You kill me and you'll never find it."

The attacker smiled and raised his rifle. "It'd be worth it."

Laas quickly considered her options. She could not reach the incapacitated mercenary's weapon undetected. If she wanted to intervene, she had to do so the old-fashioned way.

The man with the rifle increased the power settings on his weapon. "I wish I could say it was nice knowing ya."

Laas was out of time.

She charged the mercenary so quickly and so silently that he didn't spot the threat until it was already too late.

She tackled him low and at full speed, bringing them both to the ground instantly.

As soon as she hit the floor, Laas rolled to her side, trying to find the man's rifle he had dropped.

It was out of reach.

And her opponent had recovered from the tackle surprisingly fast. He was already back on one knee.

She decided to try and finish this quickly and followed up with a blow to his head. It connected with such force that his head whipped around as if it was trying to dislodge itself from his neck.

But he took it without going down.

He turned to face her slowly, his lips cracked and bloodied. "I'm going to make you regret that, girl."

She rolled her eyes. "If I had a slip of gold-pressed latinum for every time I've heard that."

And yet he caught her by surprise. He was back on his feet in a flash and within seconds Laas found herself pinned against the wall.

It was a short-lived victory. She found his kneecap and he went down hauling in pain after her boot nearly smashed the sensitive body part.

She straightened her uniform. "Had enough?"

His eyes burned with uncontained rage. He was not the kind of man who took being defeated by a smaller opponent lightly. And he wasn't going to give up, that much was clear when he tried to struggle onto his feet again.

He managed one unsteady step.

Then he was cut down from behind by a phaser blast.

He fell face-first onto the carpeted floor, not unlike a mighty tree being cut down in the forest. But this time he remained there.

Laas looked to the other side of the room where she found Spooner holding the other mercenary's rifle.

"I had things well under control," she said, annoyed.

"You're welcome."

"From where I'm standing, it's you who should be thankful," she said and took a step toward him. It was only then that she realized that the rifle was now pointed at her. She froze. "And that's how you plan to repay me?"

He lowered the weapon. "I'm extremely thankful, Laas. If you hadn't shown up when you did, I don't think I'd still be standing here. I guess I had you figured all wrong. You do care after all."

"Don't flatter yourself. While you're on board this ship, you're under my protection just like everybody else," she said and then noticed the silver suitcase at his side. His priorities were pretty clear. He had gone to retrieve the case before he had intervened in the fight. "Is that what they came for?"

He nodded. "And I'm afraid this is where we'll have to part ways."

"You're not going anywhere."

Spooner seemed to be thinking that over. "Tell you what. How about you join me? My smarts and your skills, I think we would make a great team. I'll let you in on all those secrets you folks are so eager to uncover and I even split my profits with you. Seventy-thirty?"

"You've got to be kidding me," she said and moved closer.

He raised his rifle again. "Sixty-forty? I promise we'll have fun together."

She already knew how this was going to play out. "Listen to me, if you do this, there won't be a place in this galaxy you will be able to hide. No matter where you go, I'll find you."

"In that case, I'll look forward to seeing you again."

"You won't enjoy it," she said, already resigned to what was going to happen next. She knew she was fast. Not fast enough to avoid a phaser though.

The energy beam struck her square in the shoulder even as she tried to dodge it. Her eyes opened wide just before she lost consciousness.

He was at her side to catch her before she could fall to the floor.

He picked her up and carried her across the room to place her carefully on the couch. Spooner knelt next to her and gently turned her face toward him.

"For what it's worth, I really didn't want to do this. I wish you had just said yes," he said as he considered her peaceful face for a moment.

He stood, quickly grabbed his suitcase, and hurried out of the room.

* * *

For Eugene Edison, the sudden attack on *Eagle* had been a very painful experience.

He had awoken from a long and restful sleep. His strength had finally returned and he couldn't bear lying down and being generally useless for one second longer. He desperately needed to stretch his legs and find something productive to occupy his mind with.

The fact that his overprotective doctor was nowhere in sight had encouraged him to try and escape her clutches. Make a run for it, as it were.

He had been in the middle of attempting to swing his legs over the edge of the bed when the ship suddenly jolted hard from side to side.

Gene immediately lost his balance and fell face-first onto the unyielding sickbay floor. The pain from the impact made him gasp out loud and he rolled to his side.

Under normal circumstances, getting up again wouldn't have been much of a problem but he still felt weak from the internal injuries he had sustained and so he decided it was for the best to stay exactly where he was until he was sure he had gathered enough strength to try and pick himself up again.

Doctor Wenera entered sickbay from her adjacent office and noticed the first officer on the floor. She couldn't quite keep a smirk off her face. "Do I need to restrain you to your bed to keep you from falling from things?"

Gene aimed the doctor an annoyed glare. "Your jokes are killing me, Doctor. Literally," he said. "What happened?"

She shook her head and walked over to him. "I have no idea."

The lights dimmed for a few seconds and some of the computer displays turned themselves off with only the emergency systems staying online.

"Now what?" she said as she reached out for the first officer.

"Edison to the bridge."

There was no answer.

She helped him sit on the bed and gave him a worried look when the bridge was not replying to his call.

"I better head up there," he said and got onto his feet.

Wenera didn't protest but stayed close to make sure that he could stand on his own.

But before they could even reach the doors, they parted to let an upset young crewman rush in. He had a nasty-looking cut on his forehead, covering his face with blood. "We're being boarded," he yelled. "They're on *Eagle*!"

"Who is?" Gene said.

But the crewman never even got the chance to reply.

An energy blast coming through the still-open doors struck him in the back. His eyes opened wide before he fell forward and collapsed right into Wenera's arms.

The shooter revealed himself a moment later. The short and angry-looking Dopterian entered sickbay with his rifle at the ready.

At about the same time Leila Adams, Doctor Wenera's head nurse walked in from an adjacent room, startled by the sounds of weapons fire. "What's going on?"

Too late did she notice the intruder.

The Dopterian, startled himself, turned and fired at the nurse.

The shot had been rushed and missed Adams by about a fingerbreadth.

The young woman screamed in surprise and dropped to the floor.

The shooter sighed with annoyance at his lousy aim and then took proper aim to finish the job.

"Hey!"

The intruder turned to find the source of the voice. But even before he could take notice of Gene Edison, he had to try and dodge the incoming beaker that was flying through the air and directly toward his head.

He was too slow.

It smashed against his forehead, causing him to stumble backward. The liquid it had contained now dripping down into his eyes.

Gene didn't let up. He quickly stepped up to the distracted mercenary and punched him hard in the face, causing him to topple. But even as he fell, he managed to hit the triggering stud on his rifle.

Gene never had a chance.

The proximity of the blast pushed him away from the Dopterian, and slammed him painfully into the bulkhead where he slid down to the floor.

The mercenary jumped back up onto his feet after he had realized that the tables had turned and approached the semi-conscious Starfleet officer. "That was pretty stupid, human," he said and changed a setting on his weapon before he pointed the emitter cone at his head. "This is it for you."

The merc had failed to notice Wenera who had used the distraction to retrieve a device and then quietly moved up right behind the Dopterian. Within a heartbeat, she had brought the hypo up to his neck and emptied its content into his bloodstream.

The powerful sedative took immediate effect and the man lost his motor skills instantly. He watched with disbelieving eyes as his rifle simply slipped out of his grip. Then his legs gave out and he gracelessly dropped to the floor. Moments later he was out cold.

Wenera stepped over the neutralized intruder and knelt next to Edison. She opened a medical tricorder and ran a quick scan. What she found was not comforting.

"Leila," she said, turning to her nurse. "Prep the surgical unit. We need to perform an emergency procedure. Double time."

* * *

"I want my engineering room back."

Louise Hopkins had placed both of her palms against the door separating her and Xylion from the occupied control room as if she meant to push them open by force.

She needed to get the intruders out to regain control of the ship and ensure that her people were all right. Unfortunately, she didn't have the slightest idea how to accomplish this feat. Planning counter-terrorist operations were well outside her range of expertise.

Xylion hadn't said much over the last minutes they had been hiding in the small maintenance access room. Instead, he had worked at an auxiliary control console with little interruption.

The Vulcan's silence had only added to her aggravation. Predictably, he had remained calm and collected, showing not the slightest sign of irritation or frustration over their situation. She was thankful, of course, for his quick actions. He had immediately understood that if they had stayed when the intruders attacked, they would have ended up as prisoners or worse. He had wasted no time on second thoughts and facilitated their quick and undetected escape.

Louise wished his tranquil demeanor would somehow rub off on her but in truth, she found that it only added to her frustrations. She had wanted to yell at him to take charge and find a solution to their problem.

She took a deep breath instead.

"As long as these people are holding main engineering, they're basically in control of the ship. We need to find a way to remove them and we have to do it now," she said, surprising herself by the firm tone in her voice.

"I cannot establish a comlink with the bridge or any other part of the ship," said Xylion without looking away from the console. "My initial and admittedly brief impression of the intruding force leads me to the conclusion that our chances of success in retaking main engineering without additional assistance are less than three point four percent."

"Goddamn your logic."

He turned to face her, raising one of his eyebrows.

Her face flushed and she immediately regretted those words. She didn't know exactly where all this anger had come from. She was usually the quietest voice in the room and not prone to expressing her frustration in quite such strong words. But then again, she had never been placed in such a position either. Her engines and everything that went with them were probably the one thing in her life she held most dear. Now she had been forced away from her natural habitat, her home. It was a completely unacceptable set of circumstances.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean that," she said and avoided eye contact. "It's just... we have to do something. As long as these people hold engineering *Eagle* is in serious danger."

"I am open to suggestions, Lieutenant."

She sighed heavily. The one thing she didn't have were suggestions. She turned back to face the door and focused on it so intently one might have thought she could look right through the solid material. The truth was that she had never been a particularly brave person. Especially not when dealing with the unknown. She'd walk into a burning warp core without hesitation if she knew she could fix it but she couldn't fight off a dozen armed mercenaries.

And then the beginning of a thought crossed her mind. "We can't force them to leave but what if they had no choice?"

"Please, elaborate."

She turned to face him. "What if we could fake an emergency? Something that would appear so dangerous that they would have to evacuate immediately?"

"What kind of emergency do you propose?"

"I don't know," she said and sighed. "A coolant leak perhaps, a containment failure," she added but began losing faith in her own idea even as she spoke. As an engineer, she could think of no way to make the computer believe such a scenario. And if the computer didn't buy it, neither would the intruders.

"We do not have the means to initiate a simulated emergency from here," said Xylion, spelling out what she already knew to be true.

Louise leaned against the wall. Disillusioned and deflated.

"However," said Xylion, "it would be possible to cause an actual emergency." He turned slightly to focus on a very specific spot on the opposite bulkhead.

She followed his gaze and realized what he was looking at. Behind that wall plate ran one of the main power lines that led to the warp core.

Her eyes widened. "That would be suicide."

Xylion did not answer.

Her mind was racing. She did not want those invaders in her engineering room or on *Eagle* for that matter for another minute. She realized that the captain would probably rather destroy the ship before surrendering it. But she could not make that decision and the last thing she wanted was to lose *Eagle*. She looked at him. His facial expression was as neutral as ever. It was impossible to know what he was thinking.

"If we were to overload the main EPS manifold the warp core will become unstable within a few minutes."

Xylion simply nodded.

"*Eagle* would be destroyed," she said.

"Correct."

Louise walked over to the computer console almost shoving Xylion aside. She began entering commands into the console but she found that many were not accepted due to the limitations of the auxiliary unit. She didn't let that slow her down.

"What if," she said. "What if we eject the warp core before the overload reaches critical levels? With any luck the sudden drop of temperature and pressure will prevent the core from breaching and we'll be able to salvage it afterward."

"We will not be able to eject the core from here."

"I know," she said and turned to look at the Vulcan. "We'll have to do it in engineering. We'll sneak in—they won't even notice us in all the confusion—we eject the warp core and afterward, we can activate force fields to lock them out."

Xylion took just about a second to think over her suggestion while she anxiously awaited his judgment.

"It is a sound plan. We should attempt to implement it as soon as possible."

A smile came over her lips. For a mere second, she believed that Xylion was trying to return it but even before she could be sure he turned away to access the EPS conduit running behind the bulkhead.

“Owens to Bridge, come in.”

There was still no response. For minutes now he had tried to contact the main bridge unsuccessfully. The ship had been hit by something and power had started to fluctuate throughout the science lab. Michael had known immediately that an outside force was at work. But that was all he knew for sure. The fact that communications were down was not a good sign. Something or someone was disrupting ship operations for what reason he did not know.

The doors were jammed shut, trapping them inside the lab. DeMara had managed to get one of the consoles to work and tried to access the sensors to see what was happening.

He joined her. “Any progress?”

She shook her head, her fingers tirelessly dancing over the control panel of a flickering console. “I’m trying to get access to the external sensors but whatever happened to *Eagle*, it is causing havoc to all systems.”

He sat down in a chair next to her. “Theories?”

“It seems clear that we have been affected by an outside force. I cannot tell if the cause is natural or artificial in nature,” she said without interrupting her efforts.

“Considering our mission, I think it’s a safe bet we’re dealing with an attack.”

“Pretty bold assaulting a Starfleet ship like this,” she said. “Wait, I think I’m getting something.”

The screen in front of her shifted to show a view of the space surrounding *Eagle*. The image was distorted by static but just clear enough to reveal a small ship sitting close to the outer hull.

Michael recognized it immediately. They had encountered the ship once before and at the time it had escaped.

“How the hell did they get so close?” said Michael and stood. “I should have been on the bridge.”

“Considering their rather unconventional style of attack, I doubt that would have made much difference.”

He shot her an icy look and she decided to let it go. “Do you think we may have been boarded?”

“Try to access internal sensors.”

She nodded and went to work. “I can’t access the main sensors but I can monitor the internal sensors for this section.”

The screen changed to display a schematic of the deck they were on. Two blue dots were representing the two of them. Not far from their position six gray dots appeared, moving slowly toward their position.

“They’re coming this way,” he said and turned to look at the Hyterian relic. “They’re after the artifact.”

“That makes sense. These are the same people who were after Spooner presumably to learn whatever it is he knows about the Hyterians.”

“There is no way we can fight off six of them without weapons,” said Michael and walked over to the only exit. The door mechanism was dead but with enough effort, it would have been possible to push the doors open.

“They’ll be here any second,” she said and looked at him. “What do we do?”

Michael looked around the room, desperately trying to find something to use as a weapon. Metal piping coming out of the wall caught his eye. He quickly walked over to it and began tearing it off.

She stood. “You must be kidding, there are six of them.”

Part of the pipe came loose. The meter-long piece was made out of a light metallic alloy but was strong enough to cause some serious damage.

Michael took a practice swing with it. “What do you suggest we do?”

She took two steps toward him. “I don’t know but getting out of here would be a good start.”

He shook his head. “I’m not going to run away. Not on my ship.”

“Michael,” she said softly. “Consider the odds. Six mercenaries, most likely heavily armed against the two of us, and that ... stick.”

He looked at the improvised weapon and then back at her. He hated to admit it but she was right, of course. But he was sick entirely at playing the victim. He desperately needed to be proactive for a change.

The odds not being in their favor didn’t bother him as much as the idea of putting DeMara into needless danger. He knew she was a decent enough shot with a phaser but her unarmed combat skills were nothing to write home about and certainly not sufficient to take on half a dozen armed pirates.

“There is a Jeffries tube access in this room,” she said “We can easily slip out of here before they manage to open those doors.”

He lowered his weapon in resignation. "Take the artifact."

She gave him a skeptical look.

A noise outside the door caught their attention. Somebody was trying to pry it open.

"Now, Dee. You've seen what happened last time I touched it," he said as he headed for the maintenance access hatch.

She acted quickly. She walked over to the stand, removed the protective dome, and carefully took the stone piece before joining him.

The invaders' efforts were beginning to show results. The two panels parted just enough to create a narrow gap.

Michael opened the hatch and gestured for her to crawl inside.

She hesitated.

"I'll be right behind you."

She nodded and climbed inside.

Michael took another look at the doors. Numerous thick fingers had reached through the gap and were trying to force the two halves open. And successfully so. It was going to be a matter of seconds until they had gained entry.

He turned away and slipped into the Jeffries tube.

* * *

Louise had always been at her best when faced with tough engineering challenges and attempting to blow up the ship without it actually blowing up was one of the toughest she had ever attempted.

Surprisingly, it was Xylion who spurred her on. She found him to be the ideal partner for this undertaking. His pragmatic approach and deep scientific knowledge did not come as a surprise but his encouragements and fresh ideas that smoothly complemented hers she had not expected.

For a short while she came to enjoy their efficient working relationship so much that the fact that they had set out on an undertaking that could easily be their last had slipped her mind entirely.

"That should do it," she said as she finished reconfiguring the final circuit within the cramped Jeffries tube.

Xylion sat beside her and quickly inspected her work. "Interesting. Your attempt to reroute power from the auxiliary EPS grid has improved our chances of reducing a fatal warp core breach by twelve-point five percent."

She rubbed her hands to clear them of dirt and grease. "I wouldn't have thought of this if you hadn't suggested the auxiliary grid in the first place."

"There will be plenty of time to congratulate ourselves for our ingenuity later," he said as he began to head for the ladder that would lead them back to the small room adjacent to main engineering. "It is time to implement the plan."

"Right," she said and followed him. "Maybe we should try to run another simulation," she added as she followed him down the ladder.

"I don't believe that to be necessary. The outcome of our plan hinges on our ability to eject the core within seventy-two seconds. As we do not know what exactly to expect in main engineering, a simulation would be of no further assistance."

They both stepped back into the small room.

"I don't like it."

"You should not overly rely on computer simulations, Lieutenant. There are always unpredictable factors one must contend with."

She gave him a little smile. "And that coming from you of all people."

"I am not suggesting that simulations are not invaluable. However, overreliance on them may lead to a false sense of security."

"Maybe," she said as she stepped to the console that would be able to start the sequence they had prepared. "But usually it's people who are unreliable, not computers. That's why I tend to prefer machines." She shot him a look over her shoulder. "Present company excluded."

He gave her a nod.

She focused on the controls in front of her. "All right, once I initiate the overload we have about thirty seconds before the computer detects the

malfunction and will sound a general warning.”

“Thirty-two seconds.”

Louise took a deep breath and then entered the necessary commands. “Here goes nothing.”

Xylion walked over to the door that led into the engineering room.

Once she had made sure that the computer was processing her request she turned away from the console and got herself ready.

The next few seconds seemed to last forever. Her mind was racing.

It was only then that it truly dawned on her what she had done. She had willingly set events in motion that could lead to the destruction of *Eagle* and her own death. One mistake, being just a few seconds late would mean the end of eight hundred souls.

And it was all going to be her fault.

Suddenly this plan seemed like a terrible idea. She glanced at the console behind her. There was still time to stop this, she thought. She could still find another way out of this.

Alarm klaxons interrupted those thoughts, followed by the calm feminine voice of *Eagle's* computer: “*Warning, critical warp core instability detected. Warp core overload imminent. Evacuate, evacuate, evacuate.*” Louise's heart felt as though it had stopped cold. Those were the kind of words that haunted her in her nightmares. The kind of words she had never wanted to hear.

There was no going back now.

Xylion waited only a couple more seconds and then stepped up to the doors and easily pushed them open.

They were greeted by a choir of panicked voices.

At least two non-uniformed persons ran by, too distracted to notice the Vulcan and the chief engineer as they hurried for the closest exit.

Louise had to go in the opposite direction.

She gathered all her courage and stepped into main engineering.

The automatic safety systems were already releasing a thick white fog-like cooling substance to slow down the warp core breach in process. It had the side effect of drastically reducing visibility which in this case worked in her favor as it added to the chaos in the room.

The mercenaries were clearly at a loss as to what was happening and most had decided that sticking around wasn't worth the risk. Most of them were desperately looking for a way out.

The Starfleet technicians who had been taken hostage scrambled to their feet and to the nearest computer consoles to find out what had happened and what could be done to stop it.

Hopkins of course knew exactly what needed to be done.

She found the angrily pulsating warp core still visible through the thickening fog and approached it.

“*Warning, warp core overload imminent.*”

She managed just two steps before she was roughly grabbed by a massive Nausicaan pirate, easily two heads taller than her.

“What have you done?” he cried angrily. He didn't appear particularly interested in a reply. Instead, he shook her very much like a child would handle a doll.

Louise tried desperately to free herself but she might as well have tried to pry open a duranium vise, so forceful was his grip.

Xylion provided the distraction she needed to slip out of his grasp.

“Go,” he said while the angry mercenary focused his attention on the Vulcan.

She hesitated.

“Now!” he managed to say just before the Nausicaan attacked viciously, the blow causing him to be thrown across the room. And he wasn't finished yet.

Louise didn't want to leave Xylion but she knew she didn't have a choice. He had intervened to allow her to get to the controls to eject the warp core. And if she didn't get there in time, *Eagle* was doomed.

She turned away from the ensuing struggle with great difficulty and continued for the warp core but found it difficult to stay focused with all the distractions around her.

Adding to that, the cooling fog was now so thick it was nearly impossible to make out anything far or near. She had always believed that she was so familiar with her engineering room that she'd be able to get around blindfolded but she had never put that theory to the test. Until now.

Twice she nearly ran into other armed mercenaries but luckily, they were too concerned with their own safety than to worry about her.

When she finally made it to the controls, she froze.

One of the armed soldiers was already working on them. He turned to look at her. "You, what the hell is going on here? How has the core containment field been destabilized?"

She couldn't believe her bad luck. There just had to be one tech-savvy engineer among the pirates.

He pointed his rifle at her. "Tell me how to stop this or I'll blow that pretty head of yours all over your damned ship!"

* * *

After six meters the constrictive Jeffries tunnel merged into a small service room that also functioned as a junction for various horizontal and vertical crawlways.

"The bridge is four decks up," said DeMara and pointed at a vertical shaft.

But Michael wasn't paying her any attention. Instead, he had remained at the opening of the Jeffries tube they had climbed out of, intently focused on the hatch that led back into the science lab.

He had purposefully left it cracked open. Now he was certain he could hear the voices of the mercenaries who had forced themselves into the lab. One man, presumably the leader, was doing most of the talking and he didn't seem happy.

"We should go," she whispered.

"Something isn't right," said Michael, keeping his voice equally low. "I think they didn't find what they were looking for," he added and then glanced at the Hyterian artifact still in her hands.

She held it up. "Even more reason to get this to safety."

Michael strained his ears. "I think they're leaving."

She shook her head when she began to suspect what he was thinking. "We can't go back."

He nodded. "You're right. I'll go back. You take that thing up to the bridge and keep it safe."

His mind was made up and he tightly clenched the metal pole still in his hand as he crawled back into the conduit leading back to the science lab.

The room had fallen quiet again, giving further credence to his theory that whoever had entered the lab had since left. He still approached the hatch with care, trying to remain as noiselessly as possible.

He used the pole to carefully push open the hatch a centimeter or so.

"How long will this take?"

He froze.

"I need to get access to the mainframe systems first. The transfer itself will take only a few minutes."

"Then hurry up. Starfleet ships make me queasy."

Michael moved closer to the hatch which was just wide enough for him to spy into the room.

Two men had remained in the lab. A green-scaled, lizard-like Saurian with disturbingly large and bright yellow eyes was impatiently hovering over his comrade who Michael believed to be a young, fire-red-haired Xindi Primate, working at a computer console.

They were both so focused on the monitor, they didn't notice when he crept out of the hatch and then slipped back out of view behind a bank of processing units. He had left the hatch once again slightly ajar.

He used the metallic pole to tap against the nearby bulkhead.

The Saurian instantly pulled free his blaster and turned to look toward the source of the unexpected sound.

"Stay here," he hissed to his comrade and then slowly moved toward Michael's hidden position. He found the opened hatch and leaned down to investigate. It was then that he felt something tap him on his large shoulder.

As a Saurian he was generally not one of the more graceful beings in the cosmos. He turned very slowly and by the time he realized the danger it was already too late.

“Get the hell off my ship,” said Michael as he swung the pole like a baseball bat, aiming it squarely at his head.

If his target had been human, the force of the blunt object might have caused the skull to crack but in this case, it was just about sufficient to cause the lizard-like man to stumble and then fall onto his back. He lost consciousness before he had hit the floor.

Keenly aware of the second intruder in the room, Michael rolled away and as it turned out not a moment too soon.

A phaser blast whizzed past his head, close enough that he thought it had singed a few hairs.

He found the Saurian’s weapon even while he was still completing the roll, grabbed it firmly, and came up firing.

He was right on target on the first attempt.

The Xindi went down hard.

Michael had no time to look over his handiwork. He jumped back onto his feet and headed straight for the doors.

He heard the footfalls even before he had reached them.

The human woman running into the room, alerted by the commotion, did not wear a Starfleet uniform and that alone was enough reason for Michael to fire again.

She collapsed before she had even set one foot into the lab.

He hardly paused for a second as he continued to the doors. Pushing himself against the bulkhead, he leaned out into the corridor just far enough to make sure no other enemies were standing watch nearby. When he was satisfied that the air was clear, he grabbed the mercenary blocking the threshold by her arms and pulled her inside. Then he went back to the manual door release to once again shut the panels tight. It wasn’t enough to keep anybody out permanently but it would buy himself some time if he needed to escape again.

Only then did he allow himself to take a breather.

“You certainly clean up well.”

Michael turned to see that DeMara had emerged from the Jeffries tube and was now looking over the three bodies he had left in his wake.

“I got lucky.”

The Saurian was beginning to stir. Clearly, his skull had been even thicker than Michael had expected.

“This one is about to come around,” she said.

He stepped closer. “There should be a pole lying on the floor somewhere.”

She shot him a you-got-to-be-kidding-me look.

He regretted the words as soon as he saw her face. He knew, of course, that as a Tenarian, raised on a peaceful and harmonic world, she abhorred violence and the notion of hitting an already injured person went against everything she believed in.

But perhaps the real reason she was so shocked was because it was supposed to go against everything he believed in as well. And normally it did. But it was difficult to argue with the adrenaline that was still coursing through his veins and the satisfaction from fighting back against the people who had dared invade his ship.

He walked closer, took aim at the big green reptilian—having made sure the weapon was on a stun setting—and fired.

From the frown on her face, it was clear that she was not happy.

“What?”

“You might have wanted to ask him a few questions first.”

Michael looked down at the now slumbering Saurian and realized that she was absolutely right. But the thought had never even occurred to him. Now that anger and adrenaline were slowly subsiding, he could see the wisdom in her words.

He ultimately shrugged it off. “He’ll come back around.”

“In the meantime, we might get some answers from this,” she said as she took a seat at the console the Xindi had been working on. She found that he had attached some sort of external device to give him unrestricted access to *Eagle*’s memory databanks.

Michael joined her. “What were they doing?”

“Transferring data.”

“About the Hyterians?”

She nodded. “It would appear that way. They have established a link between our computer core and theirs. My guess is they’re trying to supplement their own information by downloading from our database.”

He studied the screen. "Is the link to their computer core still intact?"

She operated the console. "Yes."

"Time to turn the tables," he said. "Copy whatever they've got to our database."

She nodded and went to work.

"Warning, critical warp core instability detected."

He looked up. "Now what?"

* * *

"You're the chief engineer," the mercenary growled. Apparently, besides having a basic understanding of starship engineering, he could also read the rank insignia on her uniform.

"Yes," she said and surprised herself with how firm her voice sounded, considering that the man was pointing a phaser rifle at her face, not to mention the warp core a few meters away was about to unleash all kinds of hell in just a few seconds.

"Good," he said and stepped away from the station. "Shut this off, now."

She didn't know where the sudden courage came from but she defiantly crossed her arms in front of her chest instead. "I won't do anything until you lower your weapon and surrender. You shoot me and we all die."

She watched with satisfaction as a panicked expression crossed his face.

Her apparent victory didn't last long. He spotted another crewmember, a young woman cowering on the floor, and roughly pulled her up onto her feet only to point his rifle at her. "You will stop the breach now or I'll execute her," he said and changed the settings on his weapon. "And I mean execute."

"It can't be stopped."

"Warning, fifty-five seconds to warp core breach."

"I don't believe you," he said, his voice breaking slightly now that he had come much closer to a sudden and violent death than he had expected. He practically stabbed the frightened crewmember with his rifle. "I'll kill her and then go on killing everyone else on your staff until you find a way."

And he was going to do it, she could tell.

"All right, all right, nobody needs to die here. I can try to eject the core but I'll need her help."

He hesitated for a moment and then grabbed the crewman by her arm and slung her toward Louise. "Get to work."

She caught her easily. "Prepare the core for ejection," she said.

To her credit, the young officer immediately went to work, now that she had been given a direct order by a superior.

Louise turned to a computer station to initiate the sequence but within seconds she felt the phaser rifle jab her painfully into the back.

"I'm watching you. Any tricks and you'll be the first one to go."

"Warning, thirty-five seconds to warp core breach."

But Louise couldn't concentrate with the deadly phaser pushed into her back and the frightened pirate was not letting up, on the contrary, the pressure was increasing and she was getting the distinct impression that he would pull that trigger, no matter how this was going to end.

And that realization paralyzed her.

"Get rid of the damned core, now," he yelled and stabbed her again, this time so hard she moaned in pain.

"I can't ... not like this."

But he wasn't interested and only jabbed her harder

Then the pressure was gone.

Surprised she turned to look over her shoulder just in time to see his blank eyes looking back at her. A hand was resting on his shoulder.

It belonged to Xylion who stood right behind him and watched as he lost consciousness almost instantly and then dropped to the floor. He looked back up at the chief engineer. "Do you require assistance?"

"What kept you so long?"

"I was detained," he said and wiped green blood off his face.

"Warning, fifteen seconds to warp core breach."

"I neutralized the threat and my injuries are minor. I suggest we concentrate on completing the ejection of the warp core," he said and moved smoothly next to her to get access to the controls.

She nodded. With the distraction gone, her fingers were now flying over the console.

"Warp core is standing by for ejection," he said.

"All right, hang on, everyone. Ejecting, now," she said, pressed one final panel, and then took hold of her console.

Xylion did the same.

Behind them, the tall blue column that was responsible for providing the entire ship with the massive amounts of power it required, dropped with a loud swish until it was completely gone.

"Ejection completed successfully. Sensors confirm that all matter/antimatter reactions within the core have ceased. There is no apparent damage to the reaction chamber," said Xylion.

"I'm setting up force fields around engineering and other sensitive areas of the ship now," she said, and then when she was satisfied that everything had gone according to plan, she turned to look at Xylion at her side, a large smile plastered on her face. "We did it."

"So it would appear."

"I have the overwhelming urge to kiss you, Commander."

He cocked his eyebrow. "I would suggest you suppress that particular urge, Lieutenant. It could be construed as an inappropriate gesture."

Her smile grew wider.

"We should immediately reroute all command functions to engineering and attempt to reestablish communications with the bridge and other parts of the ship," he said and then, when Louise refused to react, went back to work himself.

She just couldn't manage to wipe that smile off her face and she didn't even care if anybody else had noticed. Surprisingly the usually stoic Vulcan had not explicitly stated that he believed kissing him was an inappropriate gesture, merely that it could be interpreted that way.

The thought wouldn't leave the back of her mind even as she began to check on her engineering room and her shaken-up staff.

* * *

So'Dan thought he had things under control. At least the few things that he actually could control.

Only moments earlier, he had made the difficult decision to evacuate *Eagle* when the computer had detected a warp core breach in process. Unfortunately, the ship-wide systems blackout had made it impossible to alert the rest of the crew.

The disaster had been averted in the nick of time, though he didn't know how or why.

In fact, at this point, he knew very little since most basic functions were still unavailable.

Two bridge officers had been injured during the attack. Ensign Lance Stanmore had been shot by what had turned out to be a low-intensity phaser blast and was already on his way to recovery.

Lif Culsten had stood just a few short meters from a stun grenade when it had gone off. He was still unconscious but apparently not seriously injured.

"If I'm reading this right, and there is a good chance I might not, I think somebody just stole a shuttle," said Stanmore who had since returned to his damaged station.

"You think?" So'Dan said.

"Internal sensors are fading in and out but it looks as if shuttle bay two is reporting an unauthorized manual shuttle launch," he said.

So'Dan stood and walked over to ops. "Who would steal a shuttle now?"

Stanmore shook his head. "I don't know but there is nothing I can do to stop it."

"Sir."

So'Dan turned to face Trinik. The Vulcan was standing next to where Culsten was sitting. "He is regaining consciousness."

Realizing that there was nothing else he could do about the stolen shuttle he redirected his attention to the young Krellonian helm officer who was slowly opening his eyes.

"How do you feel, Lieutenant?"

"Like I've been run over by a steamroller."

"Close. You were catapulted halfway across the bridge. It looked as if you broke every single bone in your body."

"It sure feels that way," he said and tried to stand.

"Easy," said So'Dan and steadied him. "I'm not sure you should be on your feet again. There isn't much you can do at the moment anyway."

"Don't worry, Commander. We Krellonians are known for our dense bone structure," he said and took a step. It turned out it was one too many and he nearly collapsed had it not been for So'Dan catching him. "On second thought, maybe those stories are slightly exaggerated."

"You should rest."

He nodded. "I might as well do so at my post."

So'Dan offered a small smile, admiring his sense of duty. "Trinik, help him over to his station."

The Vulcan nodded and carefully led Culsten back to the helm.

It was then that the computer screens all around them stabilized, returning to their normal operating status.

"Sir, we're getting power back," said Stanmore. "It appears engineering managed to wrestle back control and drive the attackers out. They're transferring command protocols to the bridge now."

"Finally, some good news," said So'Dan.

"Captain Owens to bridge."

So'Dan felt relieved to hear the captain's voice come over the speakers. "This is Commander Leva. It's good to hear your voice, sir. Are you all right?"

"Lieutenant Deen and I are fine. We're in science lab three. What is your status?"

"The bridge is secured and engineering just restored power—"

The bodies of the mercenaries they had captured were beginning to dematerialize.

"Sir, the invaders are retreating to their ship."

"We've established a data link with their main computer to transfer information relevant to the Hyterians. Try to keep Eagle in range of the mercenary vessel for a few more minutes."

"Understood, sir."

"I'll be on my way to the bridge shortly. Owens out."

"The mercenary ship is moving away," said Stanmore.

The viewscreen had come back online as well and So'Dan could see the small ship up close now. It was turning away from *Eagle*.

"Ensign Trinik, raise shields. Bring weapons online."

The Vulcan nodded and quickly proceeded to the tactical station.

"Mister Culsten, plot a pursuit course. Stay with them."

"Yes, sir," said the helmsman and began operating his console.

"Shields up, weapons are at your disposal," said Trinik once he had reached his station and entered the necessary commands.

"Target their engines and fire at will."

Eagle opened fire at once. But the small ship was maneuvering too fast for *Eagle* to land any effective hits.

"They're moving away," said Culsten while he tried to adjust *Eagle's* speed.

"I'm reading a power surge in their warp engines," said Stanmore.

"Photon torpedoes, now."

Eagle fired and three bright projectiles crossed the viewscreen, homing in on the mercenary vessel. It jumped away a mere second before the torpedoes would have ripped their engines to pieces, leaving them to find nothing but empty space instead.

"Follow them," said So'Dan and stepped closer to the screen, the urge to get some sort of retribution for their cowardly attack spurring him on.

Culsten set out to do just that but immediately realized that there was no way for *Eagle* to stay with them. He swiveled around in his chair with frustration written all over his face. "We can't."

So'Dan gave him a puzzled look.

"Our warp core is floating around two kilometers off our starboard bow," he said and then turned back to look at the now empty viewscreen. "We're not going anywhere."

* * *

With the exception of first officer Eugene Edison, all the senior officers were gathered in the briefing room on deck two.

Michael who had called for the meeting entered the room and quickly took a seat at the head of the table. Not much time had passed since the mercenary ship had escaped and there were still several questions to which he had no answers.

He turned to Xylion. "First of all, good job, Commander. Without you taking back engineering we would probably still be under siege."

The Vulcan nodded. "Thank you, sir, but the credit must go to Lieutenant Hopkins. It was her plan and her initiative that led us to successfully drive out the attackers," he said and looked at the chief engineer.

Hopkins blushed slightly. But she also smiled. So much in fact that it became infectious.

"I will make sure that your actions will be noted in my log. What is the current status of our warp drive?"

"We're in the process of retrieving it as we speak," she said. "From our initial scans, there is nothing to indicate any serious damage. With any luck, we have it up and running within the hour."

Michael nodded and then turned to the chief medical officer. "Casualties, Doctor?"

"Besides Commander Edison, none."

"None?" said Leva surprised.

Wenera nodded. "Our attackers, whoever they were, used non-lethal force only. We have several people who have been shot but their weapons were set to a stun mode. I'm treating a few crewmembers for mild phaser trauma and bruises but nothing serious."

"I guess they did not want to risk killing Starfleet officers. They knew that they would be hunted down," said DeMara.

"That doesn't make it all right," said Michael angrily. "They attacked and boarded a Federation starship and stole from us. It is entirely unacceptable."

"I'm sorry, sir, but there was little I could do," said Leva who clearly felt that it was his fault that the mercenaries had boarded *Eagle* in the first place. After all, it had transpired under his watch. "They used a cloaking device to fool our sensors and then got close enough to activate some form of disruption beam that deactivated most of our systems."

"I reviewed our sensor logs," said Xylion. "It seems as if their tactic was well planned and executed. It appears unlikely that we could have prevented the attack."

Michael sighed. The news didn't change the fact that he felt that he should have been on the bridge when the attack had taken place and he had a hard time forgiving himself for not being there. He might have been able to do something that would have stopped them even if he couldn't think of anything specific he could have done that would have changed the outcome. "You did all you could, Commander."

Leva nodded but didn't reply.

"I'm afraid I have more bad news," said Nora. She had been quiet and unusually reserved so far, seemingly paying little attention to the briefing.

“What is it?”

“Spooner. I let him escape.”

The officers in the room turned their attention to the Bajoran security officer.

“It was entirely my fault,” she said quietly to herself, her glance cast low.

“What happened?” said DeMara softly.

“I followed him to his quarters. Two of the mercenaries were waiting for him there. They were going to kill him so I intervened but he—

“He what?” said Michael when she didn’t continue.

“The bastard betrayed me,” she growled angrily. “I saved his sorry butt and he shot me.”

For a moment nobody spoke.

“You did the right thing,” said DeMara. “You couldn’t just let them kill him.”

“Yeah? Well, I’m not so sure about that anymore.”

“Something tells me we haven’t seen the last of him,” said Michael.

“I hope so, I really do,” said Nora and leaned back in her chair again. Michael had a pretty good idea of what she was going to do when she met Barrington Spooner again. He suspected that Spooner was not the only reason for her bad mood.

Before the briefing, Doctor Wenera had shared the news that Edison had been badly wounded during the attack. Due to his previous injuries, his condition was now quite serious. She had performed an emergency operation but he had not yet regained consciousness.

She had told Michael and the others that the next twenty-four hours would be critical and that there was nothing else she could do for him now but wait and hope that he recovered. Nora had seemed especially devastated hearing this. As was her wont, she had chosen to express her feelings as pure anger.

“Dee, how do we stand on that data you downloaded from the mercenary vessel?” said Michael, deciding to move on.

“We managed to download at least half of the content of their computer core before they jumped to warp,” she said. “I think we really struck gold this time. We’ve obtained a map that corresponds to the star charts that we found on the Hyterian colonies.”

“The mercenaries possessed a part of the map the Hyterians left behind. Using the fragments we had already collected, we were able to extrapolate a possible location for a Hyterian colony of significant importance,” said Xylion.

“Significant how?” said Michael.

“We are not sure yet,” DeMara said. “But the name of the colony is mentioned in several texts we’ve been able to translate and it appears to be more prominent than the other locations we have visited.”

“Where is this colony supposed to be?”

“In the Heredes system,” Xylion said. “At warp nine we could reach it in eight hours and twenty-four minutes.”

Leva turned to Michael. “The mercenaries also accessed our computer core. It is quite possible that by now they’re aware of this colony as well.”

“And that means that they’re already on their way there,” said Michael. “Mister Xylion, Lieutenant Deen, I want you to keep working on the data you collected and I expect a complete briefing at fourteen hundred hours.”

The two officers nodded.

“Let’s get that warp core back online, set a course to Heredes, and make your speed warp nine point five. Dismissed.”

Deep Within

Nora Laas was having an exceedingly bad day.

There was of course her most obvious failure as the chief of security. She had allowed mercenaries to board *Eagle* and take over vital areas of the ship. And while the captain had not singled her out for the blame, it hadn't stopped her from blaming herself. After all, internal security, including repelling hostile boarding parties was part of her job description.

The only silver lining here was the fact that the mercenaries had not been entirely successful. They had not found what they had been looking for as Owens and Deen had been able to remove the artifact in time.

Hopkins and Xylion had wrestled back control of the ship after a daring attempt involving a warp core emergency and in a surprising turn of events the boarding attempt had provided them with information that could prove pivotal to complete their mission successfully.

And if that had been the end of it, maybe Nora Laas would not have been as devastated and angry as she felt.

Even though it paled in comparison to the bigger picture, her failure of being bested by Barrington Spooner still lay heavy on her shoulders. She had since replayed the scenario a dozen times in her mind, trying to find a way in which she could have avoided both Spooner getting away and stopping the mercenaries from killing him. She hadn't found one yet.

But by far the worst result of the raid was the one and only casualty. The news of the first officer being once again in critical condition was the foremost thing on her mind.

It surprised her.

She had always been a strong believer in putting duty before anything. A trait she had acquired while fighting for independence on her home world. The cause had always come first and now that she served in Starfleet, she had never let personal feelings come into the way of what had to be done.

These new feelings that were swirling around in her belly had been unsettling and they had only become stronger.

She had finally decided that she had to see him and she prayed that she would find him in sickbay laughing and joking and fixing her with one of his infectious smiles.

But when she walked into the room, she found that he wasn't there. Most beds were empty again. When she had woken here a couple of hours earlier, sickbay had been filled with patients who had been injured during the attack.

She noticed Doctor Wenera standing over one of the few remaining patients, administering a hypospray.

"Doctor?"

"Laas, how do you feel?"

"Much better."

She gave her a skeptical look and for a moment Nora Laas was afraid that the doctor could tell exactly what was on her mind.

"You might be the toughest person I've ever come across," she said with a small smile. "But you can't fool me."

The Bajoran averted her glance.

Wenera picked up a hypospray. "Everyone who has been struck by the mercenaries' phasers has been complaining about tension headaches."

Laas aimed her a surprised look and before she could say anything the chief medical officer had already injected her with an analgesic.

She sighed with relief for more than one reason.

"How was that?"

"That did the trick," she said honestly.

Wenera smiled. "Anything else I can do for you?"

Laas looked around sickbay once more even though she was sure the person she was looking for wasn't there.

"He is in the intensive care section," said the doctor.

"Any change?"

Wenera sadly shook her head. "No. He's still on the fence and to be honest, right now, it could go either way. His body has absorbed a lot of punishment over the last few days and never had a chance to properly heal itself."

Laas looked visibly distraught.

“He’s a tough guy, Laas. I’m optimistic he’ll come through.”

“There must be something else you can do for him.”

“I really wish there was,” she said. “His body must fight this battle on its own. I gave him all the medical help I could. Why don’t you go and talk to him?”

Laas gave her a confused look. “Me? What can I do if you can’t help him?”

“Just be there for him. Talk to him.”

“What would that accomplish?”

“It has been shown that talking to a patient in a coma can help the recovery process.”

“I wouldn’t know what to say.”

“It doesn’t matter what you say, what matters is that you’re talking to him,” she said. She smiled at her. “It can’t hurt, Laas.”

She nodded and slowly made her way toward the intensive care section. She almost dreaded the idea of seeing him this way. The last time she had seen him in such a condition she had hardly been able to bear it. But she knew that if there was anything she could do to help him she had to try.

She entered the room and found six beds but only one was occupied. She approached and found that the closer she got the harder it became to breathe. Gene Edison was calmly lying on the bed. His eyes were closed and his breathing seemed regular. It was as though he was simply sleeping. A glimpse at the overhead status display revealed that his brain activity was minimal and his body was barely working.

She looked down at his tranquil face and then took his hand. It felt warm.

“Please,” she said in an unsteady tone of voice. “Please, don’t do this to me again.” She squeezed his hand, somehow hoping that he would feel it and wake up.

“I don’t know if you can hear me,” she said. “Doctor Wenera seems to think that it might help if I talk to you.”

Laas looked around nervously. She felt embarrassed. Once she had made sure that nobody was near, she returned her glance to the unconscious first officer.

“I’m not sure what’s going on with me. I almost died when I found you on that ice planet. I was so scared you’d be dead and I didn’t know what I would do if you were. And now here we are again. I don’t know I just can’t bear the thought of losing you.”

She held onto his hand tightly. She looked up at the ceiling when her eyes became wet to keep the tears from streaming down her face.

“I cannot lose you,” she said, once more looking down at him. “I just can’t. Gene I –“, she interrupted herself, surprised by the sudden clarity of her feelings. She bent down and lowered her head until it was right next to his. “I love you,” she whispered and moved her head up a bit and to the side until their faces were just inches apart. Her lips made contact for just a few seconds and she liked the sensation.

She smiled at him. “I love you, Gene, and I have for some time. I want to be with you. You have to wake up because ... because I love you.”

She stared at his unmoving face for a while, mentally cursing herself that it had taken her so long to realize what her friends had long suspected. She loved him and she wanted him.

“There is this place,” she said after a while. “I think Lou showed it to me once. It’s called Avalon Prime and it has the most beautiful sunset I’ve ever seen in my life. If you stand at the beach, at just the right spot and just the right moment, you can see all three suns reflecting in the ocean at the same time. It only lasts for a few heartbeats but it is the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen,” she said and swallowed. “I want to see it again. I want to see it with you.”

The doors of the room opened and a nurse entered the intensive care section. As if she had been caught stealing Laas quickly let go of his hand and stepped away from the bed.

The nurse gave her a quick, innocent look, and then checked the read-outs of the status display before attending to other duties.

Laas simply stood next to the bed petrified. It took her a full minute until she managed to turn away and head for the exit. But before she reached the doors she stopped and turned around once more.

“Please,” she whispered under her breath.

Eugene Edison remained motionless.

She wiped away a single tear that had escaped her left eye and quickly exited the room.

At fourteen hundred hours sharp, Xylion, DeMara Deen, and Toby Armstrong entered the captain's ready room to brief him on the progress they had made over the last few hours. Both Armstrong and Xylion had pushed their people hard to get answers. They were both aware that time was running out fast and that it ultimately might have been up to them to prevent a hostile force from gaining access to an artifact of immense power. If they failed, the entire Federation was potentially put at risk.

"The data we collected from the mercenary vessel was very useful," said Armstrong who had begun the briefing. He sat next to his two colleagues on the other side of Michael's desk. "Not only did it confirm several of our speculations we also managed to extrapolate new information by analyzing their data and comparing it to ours."

"Such as?" said Michael.

"What we know with certainty at this point," said Xylion, "is that the Hyterians were technologically extremely advanced. They possessed technologies supporting space travel and creating colonies located a significant distance from their home world. They had contact with other races and it is not unlikely that they created the foundations for several other civilizations that are much more familiar to us today."

"We also confirmed what we already suspected," said DeMara. "They were a very spiritual people."

"Not just religious, Captain," said Armstrong. "But deeply spiritual in every way. Their daily lives were guided by their belief and their worship of Fen'dera, God of light and righteousness."

"Light," said Michael, and his gaze wandered off as he was remembering a returning motif in his visions.

The three officers looked at him curiously.

"Light," he said again. "That is a central theme in the Hyterian culture."

The scientists nodded.

"Yes, absolutely," said Armstrong surprised. It hadn't been the first time that he had been startled by Owens' surprising insights into the Hyterians.

"Light and darkness are a repeating pattern in their society. All the colonies we have visited were constructed with the idea of exposure to light sources in mind," said the archeologist.

Xylion continued. "We haven't been able to completely understand their technology but the Hyterians were able to create power sources that would function almost indefinitely as well as extremely durable building materials and computer systems that require little to no external maintenance."

"That explains why their sites have been so well persevered," said Michael.

"Exactly," said Armstrong. "But we believe what we've been seeing isn't merely a showcase of their technological prowess. Their technology and what it could achieve was extremely important to them."

"I think I understand," Michael said. "Is it possible that they were dependent on technology? On light?"

DeMara nodded. "We believe so. Consider their greatest deity, Fen'dera. The god of light. Pretty much the essence of light. It was essential to them. As essential as say air is to us."

"We need air to survive. Did they need light?"

The three scientists exchanged looks. Xylion spoke. "It is a possibility. Many humanoid and animal races require light to allow their bodies to function, although most do not require direct exposure for short-term survival. We do not have enough biological and anatomical data to determine if light was a more immediate necessity for the Hyterians."

"But it's possible," said Michael.

"What are you thinking?" said DeMara when he didn't elaborate further.

"Let's assume that they needed light to survive. By that logic, darkness harmed them. Right?"

"It's feasible, sure," she said. "There are many forms of life that require direct exposure to light to survive and would die without it. Most metaphytic life, plants for example, depend on photosynthesis."

"Do you remember the entrance to the cave on Deleana IV? It was completely dark, light absorbent even. Maybe it was meant to keep others away. Hyterians themselves may not have been able to pass through it," said Michael. He noticed that his unsubstantiated theories were beginning to worry his officers and he decided to switch gears. "How did you find out about the Heredes system?"

Armstrong reached for his desk computer. "May I?"

He nodded.

He turned the computer so that he could access it. He entered a few commands and then turned it back for Michael to look at. The screen showed a circular star map divided into four equal quadrants.

“The upper left one is the map we recovered from Dentura I. At the time we had already suspected that it was part of a larger chart. We confirmed that assumption when we found the lower left part in the asteroid base.”

“After reviewing the data Lieutenant Armstrong was able to record on Deleana IV we found the third part of the map,” said Xylion.

“And the last part we were able to get thanks to our invaders,” said DeMara with a smile. “When we put all the pieces together and compared the final product with current star charts it revealed the locations of all Hyterians colonies in this sector.”

Michael looked at the screen. The quadrants moved together and merged. The map shifted slightly to account for the many centuries that had passed since its creation. Then it rotated to show a three-dimensional representation of the map. When it stopped again, the most central part of the diagram was highlighted.

“If the Hyterians were hiding something important then that is where we’ll find it. It is the only point on the map that can only be calculated with all four parts in place,” said Armstrong.

Michael leaned back in his chair. “Very good. What about that stone relic the mercenaries were after? Have you been able to make any progress on that?”

“The artifact is still mostly a mystery to us,” said DeMara. “The inscriptions we found are incomplete and so far we haven’t come across any other references in our material that could hint to its purpose.”

“It is entirely possible that it does not have a specific function,” said Xylion.

Michael shook his head. “I don’t believe that.”

“All we can tell for sure is that it’s a fragment of a larger object,” said Armstrong. “It is very similar in size and design to the artifact we found on Deleana IV. It’s difficult to say with certainty what it was without being able to study the other parts but from what I’ve seen, my best guess would be that it was some sort of ring-shaped artifact.”

“The Circle of Commencement,” Michael said quietly to himself.

DeMara looked at him curiously. “You’ve said that before. What does it mean?”

He immediately noticed the concern on her face. “I don’t know,” he said and realized that neither of his officers appeared satisfied with his answer. He didn’t want them to mull over his words for too long and stood. “That’s all for now. You’ve done a good job here. Now you better get ready for another away mission. I’m certain that I’ll require all of your services again before this mission is over.”

The three officers left their seats.

Xylion and Armstrong nodded and proceeded to leave the ready room. DeMara remained.

She waited until the others had cleared the room before she spoke. “You know more than you’re letting on. It has to do with those visions of yours, doesn’t it?”

He didn’t answer. He sat in his chair again.

“What did you see?” she said when he refused to answer.

He looked up to meet her glance. He couldn’t quite tell what she was thinking. She seemed to be fascinated but at the same time greatly concerned. He could tell that she wasn’t entirely convinced that he hadn’t gone crazy. He wasn’t entirely convinced himself.

“In the beginning, it was just random images and voices. I couldn’t understand them and yet they sounded so familiar,” he said. He couldn’t manage to keep looking into her eyes and averted his glance. “When I touched the stone artifact on Deleana I felt a connection. A connection with a real flesh and blood person. As if she was right there with me,” he said and then looked at her to judge her reaction. “What do you think?”

She took her seat again. “You already know what I think.”

“I can’t afford to have myself checked out right now. If they find anything wrong with me, Doctor Wenera would have me locked up for days.”

She sighed when she realized that he made a halfway decent point. “Fine but let me ask you this. Are you planning on leading this next away team again?”

He leaned back in his chair. “It’s not as if I have a choice. Even if Gene were here, I don’t see how I could not go. Something is going on with me and it is related to the Hyterians. I must find out what it is. And we must find this weapon before anybody else does.”

“What scares me is that this has become personal.”

“It scares me, too,” said Michael and looked into her sparkling purple eyes. This time not even that gave him much comfort.

“*Entering the Heredes system,*” said Lif Culsten from the helm.

Most of the senior officers were present on the bridge, including Lieutenant Nora and Armstrong.

“Slow to impulse,” said Michael who, with Commander Edison still in a coma, was occupying the command area all by himself.

Culsten acknowledged and *Eagle* dropped out of warp.

Michael stood and turned to look at his chief science officer who was sitting at his usual post at Science I. “What do we have, Commander?”

“Our databanks contain only very limited information on this system. Sensors confirm one single planet orbiting an orange K-class star.”

“Then that’s where we need to go,” said Armstrong.

DeMara shook her head. “I don’t think so. It’s a gas giant.”

“On screen.”

A large crimson and amber planet appeared at the center of the main viewer. From a distance, it didn’t look much different to many other planets but Michael knew that this particular one had no stable surface. Similar to a star, this planet was composed of dense, super-heated gasses that made life all but impossible.

Armstrong took a step toward the screen. “I don’t understand. How could there be a Hyterian colony on a gas giant.”

“There is no reason to believe that the colony is on that planet,” said Xylion.

DeMara turned from her station. “He’s right. It could be anywhere in this system.”

“But if not on a planet, where could it be?” said Michael.

She turned back to her station to perform a more thorough scan of the star system.

“One of their outposts was inside an asteroid,” said Nora. “Maybe it’s the same here.”

“Negative,” said Xylion after he had checked the readouts of his station. “There are no asteroids of sufficient size or density in this system.”

“I can’t find anything, either,” said DeMara. Her voice was evidence of her frustration. “Unless they have some sort of cloaked facility we can’t detect, there’s nothing here.”

Michael was not willing to give up yet. Not after coming so close. “We’ve been here before, people,” he said. “There has to be something. Maybe it has changed over time. Mister Xylion, can you detect any significant astronomical shifts that occurred in this system over the last centuries?”

The Vulcan went to work straight away. It took only a few seconds for him to get the results. “I can find no evidence of any significant changes within this system.”

Michael sighed. “It must be something else then. Mister Culsten, get us deeper into the system.”

“Direction?”

“Head for the gas giant, half impulse.”

“Half impulse. Aye, sir,” said the helmsman and began piloting *Eagle* in the desired direction.

“Give me a schematic of the system,” said Michael.

DeMara went to work and a moment later a detailed diagram of the Heredes system was displayed on the main screen with a large star at its center and one single planet in orbit.

Nora walked closer to the screen to get a better look. “What’s that small speck next to the planet?” she said and pointed at the tiny dot on the screen.

“Magnify that section,” said Michael.

The image shifted until the gas giant filled the entire screen. And indeed, there appeared to be a very small dot right next to it. Even with the magnification, it was barely more visible, almost as if it wanted to stay hidden.

“It appears to be a sensor malfunction. I’m receiving no clear readings from that location,” said Xylion.

DeMara tended to her controls. “Running sensor diagnostic now,” she said and then shook her head. “There is nothing wrong with them. But there is a lot of gravimetric interference caused by the gas giant. It appears to be prevalent throughout the system.”

“Could it be a moon?” said Michael.

The Vulcan offered a short nod. “It is not impossible but sensors are unable to confirm that there is any mass at that location at all.”

“Captain,” said Armstrong and walked down to the command area of the bridge. “What if this interference has been here all along? What if the Hyterians knew about the problems sensors would have when trying to scan this system? If they had something to hide that they didn’t want anyone else to find, then this is exactly the place where they would have put it.”

Before Michael could even consider the archeologist’s theory a shrill warning sound from the helm console caught his attention.

“I’m reading massive gravimetric distortions ahead,” said Culsten.

“How close?”

Eagle shook so suddenly that it felt as if it had hit a wall in outer space. Armstrong lost his balance and fell. Nora managed to hang on to the back of DeMara’s chair to prevent the same happening to her.

“Dead ahead.”

“Full stop.”

Culsten reacted quickly and *Eagle* came to a halt. The bridge shook again with a few aftershock-like tremors but then settled down.

Nora walked over to Armstrong and helped him back up. He was uninjured.

“Damage report?”

“Minor damage to the navigational deflector,” said Leva from tactical. “No reports of injuries as of yet.”

DeMara turned to face the captain. “I think there might be something to Toby’s theory. Consider a star system with naturally occurring, minefield-like spatial distortions that not only prevent easy access but also seem to function like some sort of sensor deflection shield, making it almost impossible for instruments to gather accurate data. There’s no better place to hide something valuable.”

Michael nodded and then looked at his helmsman. “Lieutenant, any way you could get *Eagle* through these spatial distortions in one piece?”

He shook his head. “I’m good but not that good. Sensors are unable to pick them up except at extremely close range and they appear so dense that *Eagle* would simply be too big to pass through them without taking damage.”

“Undoubtedly exactly what the Hyterians intended,” said Armstrong once he had recovered from his fall.

“And we are too far to use the transporter,” DeMara said and then turned back to her station to think of other options.

“Even if we could use the transporter, we wouldn’t know where to go,” said Michael. “That moon might not even be there.”

“It has to be,” said Armstrong and looked at the screen. “We need to find a way to get to it.”

“Well,” said Culsten with a playful smile. “*Eagle* is too big but I might be able to get us there in a shuttle. It’d be a bumpy ride but I’ll say the odds are that I can do it.”

Nora glared at the helmsman. “Oh yeah, and what are those odds exactly?”

Xylion turned from his science station. “Twenty-one point five six to one,” he said. “Plus/minus point zero two percent.”

Lif Culsten shrugged. “I guess. If you’d had to put a number to it.”

Nora turned to look at the captain. She didn’t have to say anything, it was clear what was on her mind.

“The bottom line is, we have to find this artifact and at the moment all signs point in one direction. And there seems to be only one way to get there,” said Michael and then glanced at his helmsman. “Prep a shuttle, Mister Culsten. We’re about to put your skills to a test and beat those odds.”

* * *

Minutes later the shuttle *Agincourt*, transporting Michael Owens and the away team, cleared *Eagle*’s shuttle bay. It didn’t take long for the effects of the distorted space to manifest. The small craft was heaving and shaking while slowly making its way toward the massive gas giant.

An especially strong eruption almost slung Nora to the floor. Xylion grabbed her just in time to avoid a painful encounter between her head and the bulkhead.

“Do you think it might be possible for you to *not* hit every single disruption?” she said with not-so-subtle annoyance in her tone.

“I told you it was going to be bumpy. The spatial distortions are extremely close. You should thank my piloting skills that—” he could not finish his sentence. Yet another powerful hit forced the shuttle to swerve sharply to the left and the pilot momentarily lost control of the spacecraft.

“So much for your piloting skills,” said Nora who had now decided it to be much safer to sit down.

“Stay focused, Lieutenant. Get us there in one piece, that’s all that matters,” said Michael who was sitting behind the Krellonian.

“Yes, sir.”

Michael turned to the Vulcan at the opposite side of the cabin. “Are we close enough to scan the moon?”

Xylion’s hands darted over the controls. A stream of data scrolled across his console. “Sensors are now confirming a mass approximately three-hundred fifty-six thousand meters from Heredes I but they are unable to scan the surface of the planetoid.”

“They shielded it to sensors,” said Armstrong. “We know that they had the capabilities to do that.”

“It is more probable that the natural composition of the satellite and the intensity of the gravimetric field are the cause for our scanner’s inability to get an accurate read,” said Xylion.

Michael focused on the viewport at the front of the shuttle. Culsten had managed to get them expertly through the gravimetric disruptions without any more incidents and the small ship was now approaching an increasingly growing planetoid. The moon was not much to look at. It was devoid of an atmosphere and the reddish surface was dotted with meteor craters of all sizes. And yet there was something about the red globe that made it different from any other moon he had ever laid eyes upon. He could not define what set this one apart; it was more of a gut feeling. Had the circumstances been different, he might have dismissed this sort of distraction outright but considering the events of the last few days, he knew there was something more to this place.

DeMara noticed his fixation with the empty rock. She got up from her chair and walked up next to him. “What is it?”

“We’re in the right place,” he said without ever taking his eyes off the viewport.

She followed his glance. “But where do we go?”

“I can see numerous deep craters on the surface,” said Culsten as he took the *Agincourt* into a tight orbit. “Some of them might lead deeper inside.”

“That would be consistent with what we have learned about the Hyterians,” said Xylion.

Culsten steered the shuttle along the moon’s surface.

“Commander, can you locate the largest crater?” said Michael. “It might be the entrance.”

He consulted his instruments. “Change your heading to one seven seven mark four eight.”

Culsten entered the new course and within a few seconds, the shuttle was approaching a massive crater, easily fifteen times the size of the shuttlecraft. The small ship passed the outer rim and came to a halt above the huge, dark opening.

“Sensor data is inconclusive. It is not clear if it is an entrance or a crater,” said Xylion.

“Feels like we’ve been here before,” said DeMara and moved closer to the viewport to get a better look.

Toby Armstrong joined her. “It’s possible that the Hyterians are applying the same clocking technology that they used on Deleana IV.”

“Yes,” said Nora, “or there truly is nothing there and we’ll crash right into the moon.”

“Only one way to find out,” said Michael. “Take us in, Mister Culsten.”

The young helmsman nodded and activated the shuttle’s engines once again. Slowly the ship began its descent toward the dead center of the crater.

Everyone held their breath as the shuttle approached the barrier of darkness. Not unlike the ocean world they had visited days before, the ship’s external lights were simply swallowed by the darkness. There was no disturbance and no sign of a physical barrier. The shuttle simply moved through the gloom undisturbed.

“Sensors are not registering anything,” said Xylion with little surprise.

Michael had trouble describing what he felt as the shuttle became engulfed by the darkness. His first emotion had been pain but there were so many others competing for his attention. There was an odd familiarity, almost like a feeling of *déjà vu* which, of course, made little sense. Not only had he never been here before, but he also hadn’t seen anything yet that could have triggered any kind of familiarity. But whatever it was that he felt, his curiosity was growing by the second.

Tensions were high amongst all the members of the away team but nobody dared speak while the ship was traveling through what felt like an endless void.

And then finally the darkness began to fade to reveal a massive underground structure that was without doubt artificial in nature. Well-

illuminated from no place in particular, the entire facility looked like a tunnel leading deeper inside the moon. Huge support beams span across the structure, making it somewhat of a challenge to steer the shuttle safely around them.

“Amazing,” said Armstrong. His enthusiasm and sense of astonishment were not easily curbed by the fact that the Hyterians were becoming almost predictable in outdoing themselves.

Michael smiled. He couldn't help but continue to admire his youthful spirit of discovery. He was impressed as well, as were the others, but somehow he hadn't expected anything less.

“Sensors are now registering our surroundings. I cannot get a clear reading on what lies beyond this tunnel, however,” said Xylion.

“Over there,” said DeMara and pointed at a platform ahead. “We could set the shuttle down and try to proceed on foot.”

“Do it,” said Michael.

Culsten nodded and changed their heading. Within a few seconds, the shuttle hovered over the platform and began a slow descent. It touched down gently on the large surface.

A sudden noise reminiscent of a power surge startled the shuttle's crew.

“What was that?” said Nora.

Armstrong got out of his chair to move closer to the window. Some sort of energy barrier had been erected around the platform, completely engulfing the shuttle. “We're trapped.”

Xylion quickly accessed his console. “Sensors are registering an oxygen-nitrogen atmosphere directly outside the ship.”

“This is no trap,” said Michael. “It's a welcoming sign.”

Nora stood up as well. “I wouldn't be so sure.”

“Come on, Laas, lighten up,” DeMara said with a smile. “You see an ominous threat around every corner.”

The Bajoran security chief retrieved a phaser from the equipment locker. “You would too if you had been on that Hyterian space station. Trust me, these people knew how to defend themselves against intruders,” she said and turned to the captain who was getting out of his chair as well. “I take it you're planning on exiting the shuttle.”

He offered her a boyish smirk. “That's why I'm here.”

“Of course,” she said with an ironic sigh.

Soon after the away team set foot on the platform. The shuttle occupied less than a sixth of the space available. It had been built to support much larger craft. The energy barrier pulsed with a blue and white light all around them. Beyond the barrier, he could see the massive conduit that seemed to lead further into the moon. The tunnel was impressive. With at least five hundred meters in diameter, it was a structure so large it could have accommodated *Eagle*.

Armstrong, who had strapped on a small black backpack before leaving the shuttle, had immediately activated his tricorder to begin gathering data. He was carefully approaching the only wall bordering the platform. At its very center, he discovered a large crease, running about eight meters high.

The others joined him.

“A door?” said Michael.

“I'm not sure,” said the young archeologist. “The readings are inconclusive.”

“How do we open it?” said Culsten who was approaching it carefully. Besides the crease, there was no sign of an entrance or any other mechanism for that matter.

“Maybe we should just knock,” said DeMara

Nora stepped up to it and touched the surface. She knocked against it, and the loud, hollow sound seemed to echo ominously throughout the entire tunnel. She turned to look at her.

“It was a long shot.”

Michael stepped next to the Bajoran and traced the crease with two fingers. The floor shook for a second, causing everybody to instinctively jump back. Then a bright light began emanating from the crease. Not a moment later the wall started to part and a light draft blew sand over the threshold. The wall opened almost to the entire width of the platform.

DeMara looked at Michael with amazement. “How did you do that?”

“I have no idea,” he said and walked into the opening. The others followed, suddenly finding themselves under a clear blue sky and a hot and bright sun. Behind them lay a large mountain range into which the door had been integrated, not unlike a holodeck portal.

They had stepped onto warm sand that seemed to stretch out in every other direction; there were dunes and small rocks and bits of vegetation that had survived under the extreme temperatures. Once again most of the officers were awestruck. They had stepped into a different world,

separated only by a doorstep.

Michael turned to Xylion. "Could this be a holographic image?"

"Unlikely. I can detect no photons or other projection systems. The quantum signatures of the surrounding matter are consistent with those of standard matter."

DeMara took a knee to pick up some of the loose sand at her feet and then let it drip through her fingers. "It feels real."

"A self-sustaining biospheric environment within a planetary body. This is by far the most impressive Hyterian creation we've seen," said Armstrong. He walked up one of the nearby dunes. Many kilometers away he could spot the horizon, unobstructed by any form of technology or structures. There wasn't the slightest indication that they were in fact deep within a celestial body.

"It figures though," said Nora.

DeMara gave her a quizzical look.

"We've been to a jungle, an ice world, and a planet covered by oceans. We didn't have a desert yet," she said and began removing her jacket. "I just wish I had packed some hot weather fatigues."

"I do not believe this environment was constructed as an arid region," Xylion said as he studied his tricorder. "According to my scans, this environment has gone through significant climatic shifts over the last centuries."

Armstrong returned to join the others. "Technology is not flawless, not even the Hyterian's. After thousands of years, it might have started to malfunction."

"Lieutenant, I want you to stay here by the shuttle," said Michael to Culsten.

The helmsman nodded. He managed to hide his disappointment, clearly understanding the necessity of leaving somebody with the ship.

Michael turned to the others. "Let's go find the artifact."

Nora had removed her jacket and shirt, attached the combadge to her gray tank top, and pushed the discarded clothes into Culsten's hands. "I'll take point," she said and turned to lead the way.

* * *

Eugene Edison stepped out of the turbo lift and entered *Eagle's* bridge. The first thing he noticed was the bright red moon on the screen. By its relative size, it was clear that the ship was keeping its distance.

He had been informed even before he had set out for the bridge that an away team had left *Eagle* in a shuttle to explore it. He had been advised by Wenera to stay in sickbay and rest after he had awoken; after all, he had just survived a risky and complicated operation. But once he had heard that the captain himself had been part of the away mission, he simply couldn't stay put. Besides he had spent so much time there over the last few days that he desperately needed a change of scenery.

As he walked into the command area of the bridge, Leva who had been left in charge rose from the captain's chair, a wide smile on his face. "Commander? You're back on your feet."

Eugene smirked. "You almost sound as if you expected any different."

"Of course not. Nora will be glad to see you," he said with a knowing smile. "It's good to have you back."

"Thanks, it's good to be out of sickbay," his smile faded as he looked at the viewscreen again. "Do we have any communications with the away team?"

Leva shook his head. "None. There is too much interference from the spatial distortions," he said and headed back to his station.

Gene took his turn to sit in the command chair, very much relieved not having to stand any longer.

"Sir," said Stanmore at operations, "I'm detecting a faint energy signature near the moon."

"Can you identify?"

The relief ops officer entered several commands into his console. "Not with complete accuracy but it seems to be some sort of starship. Possibly Romulan or Klingon."

Gene leaned back in his chair. "I guess our competition has arrived."

The away team had been walking through the wasteland for over an hour with no indication of getting anywhere.

The technological skill and resources that had been necessary to create a world inside a celestial body remained impressive but the initial excitement was tainted by the fact that there was very little to look at within the biosphere.

Xylion had estimated that hundreds of years ago their surroundings had been filled with all kinds of life and lush green forests similar perhaps to those they had found on Dentura. But now very few signs remained to hint at what had once inhabited a space Xylion believed to be the size of the North American continent on Earth.

Life had become almost completely extinct as far as the away team could tell. The few animals they encountered were crawling insects that seemed to live underneath the dry and sandy soil. Only the most resilient form of plant life had been able to survive the extreme heat and lack of moisture.

Xylion also speculated that whatever had caused the artificial environment to malfunction also affected the away team's scanning instruments. None of their tricorders seemed to function properly, rendering them virtually useless in their search for the Hyterian artifact.

The unrelenting heat coming from the artificial sun in the equally artificial blue sky and the lack of any designated trails added to the challenge of finding the powerful relic.

DeMara had followed Nora's example and removed her jacket which she now wore strapped around her waist. "We need to get out of this heat," she said as she opened the zipper of her mustard-colored shirt. "Most of us are not accustomed to these temperatures." She looked around but found little support for her grievance. Nora was too far ahead to overhear her comment, Armstrong seemed to be so excited about the possibility of finally discovering the artifact that nothing else seemed to be able to dampen his spirits, and Xylion, as a Vulcan, was quite comfortable in this environment that was not too dissimilar to his home world.

Michael had hardly spoken a single word since they had set out on their trek through the desert. But now he stopped suddenly and turned to consider her, his face mirroring an expression of incomprehension. "What did you say?"

"It's hot. It's very hot," she said slowly, surprised by his reaction.

But it hadn't been her voice that had startled him. Somebody else had spoken to him and as he looked at the faces of his officers, he soon realized that he had been the only one who had perceived it.

"Something the matter, sir?" said Nora from up ahead when she noticed that he had stopped walking.

Michael turned to her but didn't reply. It hadn't been her voice either. But it had definitely sounded female. And he knew he had heard those lyrical tones before.

"Michael, are you--"

He gestured for DeMara to stop.

For a moment all he could hear was the almost non-existent breeze of hot air that brushed gently across the desert. All eyes rested on him.

And then he heard her song again. This time there was no denying it. He knew instantly who the voice belonged to. She had talked to him before; she had come to him in visions. He wasn't sure what she was saying but he did not doubt that she was calling out for him now. Whoever she was, she wanted him to find her. He knew he had no choice but to do as she asked.

He abruptly changed direction. "This way," he said and began walking at a more determined pace.

The others simply looked at each other with confusion. They did not speak. Each of them had by now realized that something strange was at work and for whatever reason; Captain Owens seemed to be the catalyst. Most of them had served under him for almost two years and even though he had never behaved similarly before, the trust and loyalty that had been formed during that time was not easily questioned.

They followed him with little further hesitation as he led them determinedly through the wasteland. After an utterly quiet twenty-minute power walk, their faith in their commanding officer paid off. Not unlike a desert mirage, a large white structure appeared out of seemingly thin air.

"It's another Hyterian temple," Armstrong said as he recognized it, being the first to break the long silence.

The five officers stood at the top of a small dune, looking down at the structure in the valley below. Its similarities with the previous Hyterian buildings they had encountered were undeniable. Albeit this temple was the largest single structure they had encountered so far. Easily twenty meters high, it stood like a castle of old with tall and solid walls and massive gates, adorned with statues of predatory animals.

Michael didn't give his people much time to admire the building. After a short break from their exhausting march, he once again picked up his previous pace, this time heading straight for one of the gates leading into the structure.

Just before they entered Nora managed to slip past him and drew her weapon. She was not surprised to find herself in a brightly lit corridor.

"I am reading erratic signs of an unknown energy source," said Xylion after checking his tricorder. "It seems immensely powerful."

Armstrong quickly referred to his scanning device. "I've never seen this before. It must be created by the artifact."

After a few minutes, they reached a fork in the road and Nora stopped. Michael didn't. He turned left and kept walking.

The interior of the building seemed to resemble a maze. Many intersections followed the first but every time Michael kept his pace as if he had been here before, as if he knew exactly where to go.

"Michael," whispered DeMara, staying close behind him. "Where are we going?"

"I'm not entirely sure," he said without slowing down. The voice in his head, however, was becoming clearer the closer he got.

"How do you know where to go?" she kept her voice low. She didn't want the others to catch on to her concerns.

"I just know."

"I was afraid you'd say that."

Not soon after Michael stopped for the first time since they had entered the labyrinth. The corridor had very abruptly ended. In front of them was nothing but a solid wall. He had led them into a dead end.

Nora turned to the captain, "Sorry, sir."

"We should turn back and find another way," said Armstrong. This latest obstacle had clearly not diminished his enthusiasm.

"It will consume considerable time to explore all the routes in this structure," said Xylion, as usual pointing out the more realistic aspects of the current situation.

One by one the away team members turned to begin backtracking their steps. All but one.

Michael remained. He slowly began to approach the bright white wall he was still facing.

DeMara noticed that he was not following and stopped.

He reached out for the wall and when his hand made contact with the stone it silently and obediently slid out of his way. So silently that the others did not even notice the miraculous opening.

"Hang on," said DeMara to the others and then followed him, along with the rest of the surprised away team.

They found themselves in a large, oval-shaped room containing almost no features except for eight broad columns arranged in a circle near the center. The walls were covered with Hyterian inscriptions.

"Is this it?" said Nora. "Is this what we're looking for?"

She did not get a reply.

Xylion and Armstrong immediately began inspecting the inscriptions while Michael walked up to the center of the room and then froze. DeMara joined him.

"What is it?"

He looked slowly around the room until his gaze came to a rest on her. "It's gone."

"What is?"

"The voice."

Nora had discovered three other entrances to the room. After she had checked each one, she returned to the center to join Michael and DeMara. "I recommend we grab this artifact and return to *Eagle* as quickly as possible."

"In case you hadn't noticed," said DeMara. "There's nothing here."

"No, it's here," he said.

"Where?" Nora looked around but discovered nothing noteworthy.

Armstrong turned away from the wall he had been studying. "There is a lot of information here. I think this is a detailed history of the Hyterian people, right here on the walls," he said and gestured at the inscriptions.

"Anything concerning the artifact?" said DeMara.

Xylion answered. "Inconclusive. It will take time to translate a volume of this magnitude."

"Time I'm sure we do not have," said Nora.

Michael knelt and lowered his head to the floor, ignoring the puzzled looks of his officers. He blew across the stone floor. A layer of millennia-old dust dispersed to reveal an engraved circle. He traced his fingers slowly along the well-defined crease.

DeMara joined him and scanned the circle with her tricorder, frowning when the data did not yield any satisfying results. “Yet another mystery?”

* * *

Gene was not happy.

His first hour back on duty after days in sickbay and there was not much he could do. To make things worse, there was no way to contact the captain and the away team and the threat of an attack was increasing by the minute.

It was an altogether rather unfamiliar feeling. He was not used to sitting in the big chair while an away mission was in progress. Under normal circumstances, it would’ve been him in the thick of the action and he didn’t much care for the feeling of sitting on the sidelines. It did give him a new appreciation for how frustrating Owens’ job was at least half the time.

It did not, however, dull his ambitions to one day command a starship of his own. But he was in no rush. For now, much more important matters required his full attention.

“I’m reading a third ship, holding position just outside sensor range,” said the relief operations manager.

Within the last half hour, at least one more ship had appeared in the system. It wasn’t hard to guess who it could be. By now, the competition for this intergalactic treasure hunt had been well-established.

“More of our friends, no doubt,” he said. “We’ll hold our position. I’m sure they already know we’re here. Not much else we can do until they make a play or we hear back from the away team.”

* * *

“What do you think it is?” said DeMara while examining the circle on the floor.

“The on-switch,” he said, pressed his palm flat against the floor and pushed. It gave away easily, retracting deep into the floor below, leaving behind an empty hole about one foot in diameter.

“Once this is over you need to tell me how you know all this,” she said while inspecting the hole, unable to spot the bottom.

“I wish I could. Stand back.” Michael stood and took a step backward. She looked at him curiously but then quickly followed suit.

Xylion and Armstrong, both now intrigued by the discovery, joined them.

They all watched with fascination as a small column rose from the hole until it reached the height of Michael’s hips. The top of the column began to unfold like paper-thin fabric, creating a circular platform that proceeded to rise another few centimeters. This in turn formed a large, ring-shaped impression on the previously smooth surface.

“The Circle of Commencement,” said Michael.

Xylion raised an eyebrow. “Interesting.”

“What’s next?” said DeMara and looked at the captain.

Armstrong stepped closer. “The size of that shape. It looks to be just the right size.” He removed the backpack he was wearing, placed it on the floor, and opened the lid. Inside was just one item. The stone artifact they had recovered from the Hyterian space station.

He picked it up and carefully walked it over to the platform.

The others watched with anticipation. Even Nora turned around to see what was happening.

Armstrong placed it into the circle. It fitted perfectly. But it did not fill the entire ring. Pieces were missing.

“I think we take it from here.”

Nora recognized the voice behind her immediately. She spun around to come face to face with Barrington Spooner. Her reaction was almost instantaneous. She had her phaser out in a flash, reached out for the man’s neck, and roughly pushed him into the closest wall with such

force, that the air exploded out of his lungs. Her phaser was hovering by his neck as if it was a razor-sharp knife.

But Spooner hadn't been alone.

Six mercenaries of various races including Jungo stepped into the chamber. They were well-armed and their weapons were quickly pointed at the Starfleet officers.

Michael, DeMara, Xylion, and Armstrong returned in kind by drawing their phasers but quickly realized that they were outgunned.

Nora had noticed it, too. "Drop your weapons or Mister Spooner here will find himself a head shorter."

"Maybe we got off on the wrong foot here," said Spooner and tried a little smile, very much aware that a phaser blast at that proximity would probably result in exactly what she had suggested.

"You need to learn to shut up," said Nora and jabbed the phaser cone against his neck.

Jungo stepped forward. "Go ahead, kill him," he said. "All it'd mean to me is that my share gets bigger."

"Those guys are mercenaries, Laas," said Spooner. "They're not exactly in this for the most noble intentions. Their only loyalties are to the financial reward," he said.

Nora moved closer until she could smell his breath. "Then I'll do it purely for the fun of it," she said with a vicious smile.

"You could," said Jungo. "But that would mean that we'll kill you and your people next. Seems kinda messy," he said and then looked at Michael. "What will it be, Captain?"

He focused on Jungo and then lowered his weapon. "Stand down."

"Sir?" Nora protested. "We can't let them have the artifact."

"It's all right," he said. "Trust me."

Nora shot Spooner one last, icy glare and then, very reluctantly, stepped away from it.

"Smart move, Captain," said Jungo as he watched his people collect all the weapons and equipment from *Eagle's* away team.

Then the mercenary leader noticed DeMara and he gazed at her intently. "Perhaps there is more profit here than we thought," he said. "A Tenarian female would be priceless on the Orion slave market."

DeMara caught the man's insidious look but kept her facial expressions so neutral it was impossible to tell if the comment angered or frightened her.

Nora, however, took a defiant step forward. "You lay one finger on her and I swear you'll regret it for the rest of your miserable, short life."

Jungo pointed his weapon at the Bajoran. She never even flinched. She had been threatened so many times, she had lost count.

"Oh, don't worry, I didn't forget about you. I'm quite sure you'd be quite profitable as well."

She tensed up, ready for a fight.

Spooner stepped next to Jungo and lowered his accomplice's weapon. "This is not why we're here," he said.

This caused Nora to direct her scorn back at Spooner. The last thing she wanted was for him to act as her protector.

Jungo relented. "Something tells me you'd be more trouble than you're worth, anyway."

"Stand down, Lieutenant," said Michael.

Both Jungo and Nora reluctantly stepped away from each other.

"It doesn't surprise me in the least that you would be involved with such scum," said Nora as she rejoined the captain and the rest of the away team.

"It's just business. A necessary partnership," he said with an easy shrug. "Don't think less of me because of the company I keep."

Nora laughed. "At this point, it'd be pretty near impossible for me to think any less of you."

"Enough of this," Jungo said, impatiently. "Let's get on with it."

Spooner tended to the silver suitcase that he had brought with him. He opened it and then looked at the platform.

"I see you've already uncovered the means to activate the device," he said and revealed two other stone artifacts. One of which Michael thought he recognized. He had held it in his hands just a day earlier.

"May I inquire as to your plans regarding the Hyterian artifact," said Xylion.

"We'll donate it to the Daystrom Institute for the advancement of scientific study," Jungo said and laughed out loud as if he had made a

terrific joke. “What do you think?”

Armstrong slipped closer to the captain. “Sir, we cannot allow them to get the artifact,” he said in a tone no louder than a whisper. “They’ll sell it to the highest bidder.”

But Michael did not reply. Instead, he continued to observe Spooner as he inserted the two pieces into the platform. The circle was still not complete.

Spooner turned to Jungo. “We might have a problem here.”

* * *

“The mercenary ship and the Cardassian *Galor* are coming right for us.” Stanmore’s agitated voice had betrayed his relative inexperience. He had managed to identify the two vessels only a few minutes earlier but at that time they had been happy to engage each other at a safe distance from *Eagle*. Now they were bringing the battle their way.

“Red alert,” said Gene and promptly stood. A little bit too promptly he soon realized. He became dizzy for a moment but regained his focus quickly enough.

Eagle instantly went into full combat mode. The flashing crimson lights and the alarm klaxons an obvious reminder.

The small mercenary ship raced passed *Eagle* without slowing down and the Cardassians in hot pursuit didn’t seem to care much about the presence of the Federation ship, either. With guns blasting, *Eagle* could not move fast enough to evade all the energy bursts being slung into their general direction.

Eagle’s bridge trembled under the incoming fire.

“We’re getting caught in the crossfire,” said Leva. “Shields are holding.”

Gene turned to the helm. “Ensign, new course, two four one mark one two, full impulse. Get us out of here.”

“Full impulse, aye sir.”

Eagle turned, trying to put some distance between them and the two battling starships. They didn’t get far.

“New contact, decloaking dead ahead,” said Leva.

On the main screen, the silhouette of a Klingon *Bird-Of-Prey* attack ship came into view. Within seconds it was fully revealed. Its disruptor cannons blasting away instantly.

Gene wished he hadn’t left sickbay in such a hurry.

* * *

Not unlike a startled dog, Xylion turned his head toward one of the exits. “Somebody is approaching,” he said.

Nora shot him an icy stare. “Now you tell us.”

The mercenaries overheard the Vulcan. One of them made it over to the entrance Xylion was looking at. The man quickly regretted his careless approach when he suddenly found himself face-to-face with a seven-foot Klingon warrior. The Klingon struck out and the mercenary was thrown across the room and impacted painfully against the far wall. His body slumped to the floor.

Three more Klingons stepped into the Hyterian chamber; all of them dressed in heavy body armor and wielding razor-sharp *bat’leth* swords.

The other mercenaries reached for their weapons but failed to notice the Cardassians who had entered from the other entrance behind them. Only when they heard their weapons powering up did they realize they had been surrounded. Seeing no other choice, they dropped their weapons and raised their hands.

One of the Klingons and one of the Cardassians removed all the weapons from the mercenaries, including the Starfleet equipment.

The Cardassian commander stepped forward. “Looks as if we came just in time,” said Gul Renek.

“Now that is an unlikely alliance,” said DeMara once she had observed the Cardassians and Klingons working together. The two powers had always been immensely distrustful of each other. In fact, not too long ago they had been engaged in all-out warfare with each other.

“On the contrary,” said the Cardassian Gul. “It has been extremely productive.”

“What shall we do with the prisoners?” said the strongest-looking Klingon.

Nora stepped forward. “Here is an idea,” she said, quickly approached Barrington Spooner, and flattened the unsuspecting rogue with one powerful punch to his lower jaw.

Renek couldn't hold back his laughter.

“I guess I had that coming,” said Spooner, rubbing his bruised chin.

“That and more.”

A Klingon grabbed the much smaller Nora Laas from behind and lifted her clean off the floor. The giant, muscle-covered man held her tightly and Nora didn't even attempt to fight him. She knew she was in no position to do any damage and for now, she relished the sight of Spooner before her feet.

“I don't think there is any need to harm them. At least not yet,” said Renek.

The Klingon looked surprised but proceeded to put Nora back down.

“Return their equipment.”

“That would be a mistake,” growled the Klingon.

Renek picked up one of the Starfleet weapons and removed the power cell, effectively neutralizing the weapon. He then tossed it over to Michael who caught it easily. “I'm no monster, Captain. We have fought side by side against the Borg. If it hadn't been for you, we'd all be drones by now. Consider us even.”

Michael simply nodded.

The other Cardassians returned the rest of the equipment to the Starfleet officers but only after each of their weapons had been rendered useless.

Nora harshly ripped her disabled phaser from a Cardassian's hand and tucked it away. “Great, now we've come to trusting Cardassians.”

“Better than fighting them,” said DeMara.

“Speak for yourself.”

But it wasn't the Cardassians DeMara was worried about. Instead, she focused on the captain who had remained uncharacteristically quiet and detached in response to the rapidly changing situation. That wasn't like him at all.

Michael continued to watch passively as the Cardassians and Klingons were taking over, almost as though he was nothing more than a distant and uninvolved spectator.

Renek stepped up to the platform and inspected the circle with the artifacts. He waved over one of his men who quickly produced another relic. Like the others, this one too was a perfect fit.

“Only one missing,” said the Cardassian commander.

“Who has it?” shouted the Klingon and stepped into the room. He brought up his *bat'lethsword* and carefully regarded each and everyone present. The glare in his eyes left no doubt that he burned with the desire to rip out somebody's heart and it mattered little which one.

The question, however, was not answered by anyone presently in the room. A faint yet familiar humming sound filled the chamber. Everybody turned to spot the six columns of green light appearing out of thin air out of which half a dozen figures materialized, each clad in broad-shouldered, gray uniforms.

The Klingons raised their swords. “Romulans,” the leader spat. “I should have known.”

“Keep your vile blood hounds at bay,” said the Romulan woman with noticeable smugness lining her voice. She was carrying the remaining stone piece and slowly proceeded to the platform.

“This could get real ugly,” said DeMara quietly, “real fast.”

But Michael didn't even appear as if he had heard her speak at all.

Sub-commander Sentar carefully put the stone piece into the platform, finally completing the circle. She then took a step back.

All eyes in the room were now glued to the platform with great anticipation.

With a sudden hum, it began to spin. Some form of brilliantly white energy leaked onto the platform like liquid, filling out the creases between the individual pieces. Within seconds they melted together to form one solid ring. This in turn activated a mechanism that retracted the column along with the platform.

The soft hum gradually increased until it was a droning screech so loud and insistent that everybody in the room was forced to cover their ears.

Everybody but Michael Owens.

Both column and platform disappeared as they were swallowed up by the floor once more. A bright white light shot out from the remaining hole. The concentrated energy created a perfectly round pillar of light that reached to the high ceiling above.

As if in a trance, Michael stepped toward it. The others were still too distracted by the noise and the light and hardly perceived his movements at all.

He closed his eyes and to the astonishment of everyone around him, he was lifted off the ground until his body was perfectly positioned between the floor and the ceiling at the dead center of the chamber.

Michael took a deep breath and opened his eyes. His surroundings had changed. He was standing in the Hyterian capital on their home world a thousand years in the past. Right in front of him stood the now majestic-looking temple he had visited before. Yet the experience remained surreal, everything around him shimmered in a white, unnatural bloom.

There were no people except for one. The Hyterian he had met before. She was standing in her simple gown on the steps leading up to the temple. He took a few awkward steps toward the elegant figure.

"You have come," she said in her song-like voice.

Michael approached slowly, surprised that for the first time, he could understand her clearly. *"You have brought me here. Why?"*

The Hyterian body remained still and her mouth did not move when she continued to speak. *"You know why."*

His eyes were transfixed, he could not look away. *"The artifact, it's not a weapon, is it?"*

She moved her head so slightly that he almost missed it. He took the gesture as a nod. The apparition then turned on the spot, her long golden hair flowing freely over her shoulders.

He followed her inside the temple.

"You are the reason for the visions I've had; you somehow connected with me when I first came to Hyteria."

"You were not—" she hesitated for a second, looking for the right words, *"compatible,"* she said while gliding down the hallway. *"Your body. Fought me."*

"It's a form of telepathy," said Michael intrigued.

"Yes. But so much more."

They entered the main chamber, similar to the one inside the moon. It was dark inside and the moment the creature entered, she uttered a short shriek of pain.

"The darkness hurts you."

"That is why we created it. Why we created Eternal Flame."

A pillar of light appeared at the center of the chamber, strong enough to illuminate the night sky. And yet it didn't blind him. It was pleasant to look at, almost calming.

"Eternal Flame," he said.

"We sought to banish the demons in the dark. Forever. We created a source of unlimited light, unlimited hope."

"But something went wrong," he said recalling his previous visions.

Another nod.

The pillar of light began to pulsate. It was losing its harmonic qualities and became chaotic and disturbing. Michael began to feel sick just looking at it. He wanted to turn away.

"We were foolish. It contains the gift of gods. It had the power to bring light to entire worlds. To forever cast out the shadows. Too late we understood. Without darkness, there can be no light."

Michael had to shield his eyes; it was beginning to blind him. *"It's unstable."*

Then a shockwave gripped his body. It was so strong that it should have crushed him like an insect. It didn't. Something protected him from it. When he opened his eyes again the light was gone and so was the city around him. He was still standing in the same spot as before but there was nothing left but ruins. The Hyterian moved silently to the center of the chamber, fading away slowly.

"Wait, I still have questions."

But it was too late. She was gone. Michael walked over to where the Hyterian had stood only moments before. But as soon as he had reached the center of the room, he found himself once more engulfed by the light. He was back in the chamber inside the moon, his body

descending slowly until his feet touched the ground once more.

As he stepped out of the center, he realized that the humming was gone. Everyone was now staring at him as if he would provide all the answers they had been seeking.

When he turned back, he found the pillar of light an exact duplicate of the one he had seen in his vision only moments before, glowing in almost hypnotic harmony.

DeMara took a careful step towards him. "What happened?"

"I'll tell you later," he said. "Let's get out of here."

"What?" Armstrong looked at the captain with confusion. "We can't just leave the artifact to them."

One of the Klingons discarded his sword in favor of a menacing disruptor pistol. "Nobody is going anywhere. Where is the artifact?"

"You're looking at it," said Michael. "But it isn't a weapon. It's a failed experiment. A device the Hyterians created to attempt to illuminate entire worlds, to create an unlimited source of light. For them, light was the ultimate source of life and happiness. But it didn't work."

DeMara nodded along slowly when she finally thought she understood. "They wanted too much, too quickly."

"Yes," said Michael. "It turned out to be unstable and uncontrollable. They tried to warn me about their mistakes but I didn't understand. Until now. We have to get out of here before it rips this entire place apart."

"You expect us to believe these creatures created nothing more than an overpowered light bulb?" said Jungo with apparent skepticism. "How stupid do you think we are?"

"It's a trick," said the lead Klingon, pointing his disruptor at Michael.

"No, I believe him," said Sentar and then reached for her weapon. "But a source of unlimited light is a source of unlimited energy. Energy we can harness. We will lay claim to it."

Michael shook his head. "Think about this. The Hyterians with all their advanced technology were not able to control Eternal Flame and it destroyed their civilization. If you try to harness its power you're dooming yourself to the same fate."

Gul Renek did not care for that answer. "The Cardassian Science Ministry will find a way to make it work," he said and raised his weapon.

The lead Klingon shot Renek a glare. "Cardassian Science Ministry? That was not part of our agreement."

"I'm changing the agreement," said Renek and pointed his weapon at the Klingon.

"You honorless *petaQ*!"

That's when Jungo saw his opportunity. As both the Klingons and Cardassians were distracted, he jumped to his feet, attacked one of the Klingons who was supposed to watch him and managed to relieve him of his weapon.

What he didn't realize was that Nora Laas had been watching him like a hawk this entire time and just as Jungo was about to turn and find the nearest target of opportunity, he was stopped dead in his tracks by a vicious roundhouse kick to his stomach. He instantly doubled over in pain.

Another mercenary, inspired by Jungo's initiative, sprang to his feet. This caused the Klingons to open fire at the mercenaries. In turn, the Cardassians opened fire at the Klingons and the Romulans started shooting at everything and everyone that moved.

Everybody scrambled for cover.

"We've got to get out here, now," said Michael. Not only were they defenseless without working phasers but he knew that even if they survived the firefight, they were not going to survive what came next.

Nora was still preoccupied with Jungo who she had efficiently disarmed and who was now staring down the barrel of the disruptor rifle he had wielded moments before.

DeMara grabbed her by the arm. "Laas, let's go."

Nora raised the rifle closer to his face and watched him squirm with delight as he anticipated being shot at point-blank range.

She used the butt of the rifle to strike him against the side of his head with such force he went down immediately. "That's for considering selling us into slavery. Consider this your lucky day."

The chamber was quickly beginning to fill with smoke from the relentless weapons fire. So much so that it was difficult to make out any targets. Everyone with a working weapon was now shooting more or less blindly. The only thing that remained unmistakably clear was the bright pillar of light at the center of the room. But that too was slowly beginning to change.

As Nora followed DeMara toward the exit, she spotted a Romulan taking aim at an unarmed Barrington Spooner. He had him dead to rights and Nora knew that Spooner wouldn't survive the blast.

For about half a second, she considered doing nothing at all and leaving Spooner to his fate. Until she convinced herself of a very

practical reason why she wanted him alive. She cut down the Romulan with the rifle she had swiped earlier and quickly approached the rogue.

When he realized who his savior had been, he gave her a wide smile. "I always knew you felt something, too. We share a connection and it's--"

"Shut the hell up and follow me," she said. "We're getting out of here, now."

"Yes, ma'am," he said and did as he was told.

In the meantime, Michael had escaped an energy blast by mere centimeters. He quickly looked around to make sure his away team had reassembled around him before he pointed to the entrance they had come from.

"Sir, are you absolutely sure about this?" said Armstrong. "You really want to leave this behind?"

"There is nothing here for anyone to claim," said Michael and pushed him toward the exit. He took one last look back at Eternal Flame. Just like the one he had seen in his vision, this one too was beginning to break up. What had appeared tranquil and comforting moments ago was quickly beginning to pulsate with anger and raw, uncontainable energy.

Without another thought, he turned and followed the others.

* * *

"Shields are down to twenty-three percent. The warbird has changed its attack vector. It is now approaching port side," said Leva while *Eagle* was taking a beating.

Three ships had now opened fire on the Starfleet vessel. Fortunately, none of them seemed to concentrate their fire solely on *Eagle*. Gene had tried his best to keep the ship out of harm's way but the other vessels did not seem to take a liking to *Eagle's* presence in the system.

"Continue random evasive patterns," he said after having taken a seat in the command chair again. "Keep firing phasers."

"Commander," said Stanmore. "I'm reading a massive energy surge originating from the moon."

"On screen."

The viewscreen shifted to show the small satellite again. It now seemed to be glowing. A sight Gene had never seen before. It was eerily beautiful but very disturbing at the same time.

"There is another vessel approaching," said Leva from tactical.

"That's just what we need."

Leva smiled. "It's our shuttle. They're hailing us, audio only."

"Put it on."

A familiar voice echoed across the bridge. "*This is Owens. Prepare to bring us in and then jump out of the system immediately after.*"

"Excellent suggestion, sir," he said and turned to the helm station. "You heard the captain."

* * *

The *Agincourt* banked sharply to the side to avoid a Cardassian phaser blast that had been meant for the Romulan warbird.

Inside the shuttle, the occupants had to hold on tight to stay in their seats.

The trip back to the *Eagle* had turned out to be a great deal more perilous than the journey to the moon hours earlier. Not only did they have to contend with the spatial distortions but also with three powerful starships that had engaged in full-out combat with each other.

They were too busy to focus on the shuttle but that didn't mean they were out of danger. On the contrary.

Culsten had his hands full, throwing the small ship into another sharp turn that had the unintended side-effect of moving them away from

their mothership instead of toward it.

"Maybe you could use a hand at the controls," said Spooner who had been brought on board by Nora and who hadn't taken her eyes off of him since they had left the hollow moon. "I know a little bit about piloting myself."

The Bajoran leveled her rifle at him. "Fat chance."

"Hey," he said with a shrug. "You save my life, I save yours. That's the game, remember?"

"I brought you along so that you can answer for your crimes," she said. "Not to give you another chance to escape."

But Michael noticed the sweat pearls on the young Krellonian's focused face. He was having trouble keeping up. "Lieutenant, can you get us back to *Eagle*?"

He responded without ever taking his eyes off his instruments. "I can do it but to be honest, I wouldn't mind an additional pair of hands."

Michael glanced at Spooner and nodded.

Nora sighed but said nothing when the rogue merchant shot her a beaming smile and then swiftly took the co-pilot's chair.

He stretched his fingers theatrically. "Okay, I'm going to boost power to your ventral thrusters that should give us more maneuverability for some tighter turns."

Culsten nodded. "Good idea."

For the next two minutes, the pilots took the *Agincourt* to the very limits of her capabilities by performing one breakneck maneuver after the next.

The ship and the occupants survived the hellish trip and soon found themselves with the much-welcomed view of *Eagle*'s open and waiting shuttle bay.

"Home sweet home," said DeMara.

Spooner glanced at the pilot "Manual landing?"

Culsten nodded. "*Agincourt* to *Eagle*, we're coming in hot. Stand ready for emergency landing."

"Copy that, *Agincourt*."

Armstrong leaned forward, his entire body tense. "You've done this before, right?"

The Krellonian flashed the archeologist a toothy smile. "Hundreds of times."

That seemed to relax the young man somewhat.

"On the holodeck," added Lif Culsten under his breath.

Nora could tell something was wrong just by looking out the forward viewport. "Aren't we coming in a bit fast?"

Spooner rolled his eyes. "You find a backseat driver anywhere," he said. "I suggest everybody find something to hang on to. This might not be pretty."

"What did you just call me?" Nora said, ready to get out of her chair and beat some sense into the man.

"Brace for impact."

She quickly changed her mind when she caught another glimpse of the viewport. She had been absolutely correct. The shuttle bay was approaching way too fast, almost as if they were sitting in a missile designed to rip into the ship instead of landing in it.

In the end, she did the only thing she could. She followed the other's example and held on tight.

The shuttle hit the landing deck and bounced off it like a rubber ball.

Emergency force fields shot up to catch the shuttle and slow it down.

They did their job.

The second time the shuttle hit the deck it stayed there but it spun around on its axis and slid along the floor causing an awful shriek of rending metal.

It finally came to a standstill when it bumped into another force field designed to arrest its momentum.

When Michael looked up, he noticed that the shuttle had made a one-hundred-eighty-degree turn and the forward viewport was now facing the open shuttle bay doors again.

In the far distance, he spotted the glowing moon.

A bright white flash of light reached out for him.

He was hardly surprised to find himself transported to a different place.

He was back on Hyteria Prime but this time the city was bustling with activity. It was no longer a ghost town.

All around him, Hyterians were going about their business in peace and harmony. He caught glimpses of children playing in lush green fields. And it was just the right day for it. A pleasantly warm and sunny afternoon with a subtle breeze of refreshing wind blowing gently through his hair. He was standing on a grassy hill near the center of the city.

The female Hyterian that had spoken to him before was slowly approaching him.

“What happened?” he said.

“*Eternal Flame is no more,*” she said. “*Your destiny. Fulfilled.*”

“You wanted me to destroy it all along?”

She nodded ever so slightly. “*It was necessary. We could not allow others to repeat our mistakes.*” She reached out her hand.

Michael hesitated for a moment but then reached out as well and touched the alien being. A powerful shockwave shot through his body as he made contact. Images began flooding his mind. Images of the Hyterians, the way they had lived, how they had worked, how they played, and how they had died. Hundreds and hundreds of memories were becoming one with his. The sensation was almost overwhelming. But once he understood what she intended, he gave up all resistance, and the images and memories began flowing through his mind like a pleasant river.

She smiled at him. “*Don’t forget.*”

And then the creature and everything else faded away and he was back in the shuttle as suddenly as he had left. Just in time to see the moon break up into large fragments. Not a second later *Eagle* jumped to warp and just like that, it was all gone.

“I won’t.”

DeMara turned to him and saw him smile.

Barrington Spooner stood from his seat. “Well, I guess congratulations are in order,” he said and looked at Culsten. “To the both of us.”

He nodded. “Those were some neat tricks. This would have been a lot tougher without your help.”

Spooner found Nora. “Please tell me you heard that?”

“Yeah, impressive,” she said and tapped her combadge. “Security to the main shuttle bay on the double.”

He frowned. “I save the day and that’s the thanks I get?”

“I’m placing you under arrest for assaulting a Starfleet officer, theft of Starfleet property, kidnapping, and conspiring with pirates,” she said as she brought her rifle up once again. “And I’m sure I can come up with half a dozen more charges.”

Spooner looked at Michael. “Captain, surely there are some mitigating circumstances here that could be considered.”

“Maybe,” he said, “but to be honest, I’m far too tired to think of them at the moment. For now, I’m afraid you’ll be enjoying our hospitality for a while longer.”

“Sir?” said Nora.

“In the brig,” Michael added.

That put a smile on her face and she gestured for Spooner to disembark the shuttle. “Let’s go.”

“All right, I’ll cooperate,” he said as she pushed him along. “But you have to promise that you’ll be the one to interrogate me.”

“Give me a break,” she said.

DeMara smiled as she watched them leave the shuttle. “I think Laas might have finally met her match,” she said and then turned to Michael. “Are you okay?”

He nodded. “Yes, I think I’m fine.”

But Toby Armstrong still seemed confused about recent events. “Sir, was it true what you said? Was it really nothing more than a source of illumination? An overpowered light bulb?”

“Yes and no,” he said. “But for the Hyterians light meant life. They were an incredibly advanced race but they made one fatal mistake. All their wisdom and technology couldn’t prevent it. They tried to play God and it led to their doom. I think there is a powerful lesson there for all of us.”

Xylion looked at Michael. “I still fail to fully understand how you have arrived at your conclusions, sir.”

He smirked. “A friend of mine told me,” he said and noticed the asking expressions. “Let’s just say I’ve been privileged to some pretty solid insider information from the very beginning. It took me a while to understand it. Much of it still eludes me even now.” Michael glanced at the confused Armstrong. “Don’t worry, I’ll share everything I’ve learned. And I’m sure the wealth of knowledge left behind by the

Hyterians together with my experiences will give you and the entire scientific community a lot of fascinating opportunities to learn much more about them. Cheer up, Lieutenant, you're about to become a very busy and sought-after man."

"Sir?"

"You along with Commander Xylion are now the foremost experts on the Hyterians. Don't be surprised when you hear the Federation Science Council come knocking at your door," he said as he exited the shuttle.

Outside he found Nora Laas handing Spooner over to two security guards. But the lieutenant looked anything but pleased when she noticed that he had already struck up a conversation with the female specialist escorting him out of the shuttle bay.

Nora Laas' disposition changed instantly when she saw Eugene Edison enter.

"Sir, it's good to have you back."

"Good to have *you* back, Commander," said Michael.

"Gene!"

Nora rushed toward him and without another thought immediately proceeded to hug him tightly "I'm so glad to see you," she said, seemingly oblivious to her audience.

"I'm glad to see you, too, Laas."

And then it suddenly hit her. Her captain was standing only a few meters away, silently watching the unusual display with great interest and curiosity. She quickly ended the embrace. Her face bright red from embarrassment.

Michael looked at both of them for a few seconds as they stood at attention like two cadets on the parade grounds. Edison was fighting off a smirk.

"You two are—"Michael tried to think of his next words. Then he looked at DeMara who had stepped up next to him. But she had no comments to offer except for a large, knowing smile on her lips. He glanced back at his first officer and security chief. "Dismissed," he finally said once no other words would come to mind.

Edison and Nora nodded duly and then proceeded straight for the exit.

"Somebody needs to fill me in on what's going on around here," said Michael as he watched them depart.

"You really weren't paying much attention over the last few days, were you?"

"I've been having the strangest thoughts lately," said Gene as he and Nora Laas stepped into the corridor outside the shuttle bay.

"Oh really?"

"Yes. For some odd reason I have this very strong compulsion to go and see a sunset," he said.

She gave him a wide smile. "A sunset?"

"On a planet called Avalon Prime. The strange thing is, I don't think I've ever even heard of that place."

"Don't worry Commander, I know exactly where to find it."

Back in the shuttle bay, Michael began to head for the exit as well.

"You know, you have a lot of explaining to do," said DeMara, following him. "How about you tell me about it over a cup of tea?"

"To be honest Dee, I feel exhausted, like I haven't slept in a month. Rain check?"

She nodded. "Sure. After all this, you deserve a good night's rest. I'll make sure you're not going to be disturbed for the next twenty-four hours."

They both stepped into the corridor.

"Make that forty-eight," he said and began walking down the corridor and toward his quarters with nothing left on his mind but catching up on a whole lot of missed sleep.

DeMara remained by the open shuttle bay doors. "Oh, and Captain."

He stopped to look back at her.

"Sweet dreams."

Michael Owens returned her smile. "Tonight, I'm counting on it."

the adventures will continue ...

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