

Domum Soli

Posted originally on the [Ad Astra :: Star Trek Fanfiction Archive](http://www.adastrafanfic.com/works/1626) at <http://www.adastrafanfic.com/works/1626>.

Rating:	Not Rated
Archive Warning:	Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Fandom:	Starship Reykjavik
Character:	Nandi Trujillo , Glal , Rachel Garrett , Curzon Dax , Ensemble Cast - REY
Additional Tags:	Crew as Family , Friendship , Drama , Angst , Mystery , The Lost Era (2293 - 2364)
Language:	English
Series:	Part 11 of Starship Reykjavik
Stats:	Published: 2024-06-16 Updated: 2024-09-02 Words: 38,252 Chapters: 13/?

Domum Soli

by [Gibraltar](#)

Summary

A diplomatic mission to an impossible planet brings one of Reykjavik's crew face-to-face with the demons of his past, as Commodore Trujillo and her people attempt to uncover the secrets of a world living in the long shadow of Earth's tortured history.

Chapter 1

* * *

Starbase 19

Tellun System

January 12th, 2323 - Stardate 4154.1

Commodore Nandi Trujillo's temporary office was situated just off the Tactical Holography Bay, the large compartment aboard the station dedicated to real-time tracking and display of the fleet formations participating in the strategic and tactical exercises being held here.

She stood, facing the officer in front of her desk, her features locked in an artfully neutral expression she saved for dressings down.

Trujillo was in her late forties, her below-shoulder-length black hair streaked with the gray that had begun to appear in her twenties. She possessed a broad, expressive face with a generous mouth and piercing brown eyes. Throughout the years some had incorrectly misinterpreted her features as suggesting softness, but the flinty eyes served notice of the strength and determination that lurked just below the surface.

Captain Henri Maurice Laurent stood at attention, yet somehow still managed to convey his disdain for his present circumstances. Of French ancestry, he was of average height, but carried himself with an aristocratic bearing that grated on Trujillo's nerves. He had well-kept wavy brown hair, hazel eyes, and nose that proved distinct without being either sharp or prominent. In his early forties, Laurent's hair had not yet begun to gray or, Trujillo suspected uncharitably, was being artificially colored.

The man's duty uniform was immaculately tailored to his frame, with every emblem, pip, squeak, and ribbon in its proper place. The professionalism on display with his uniform did not extend to his demeanor, however, and Laurent's facial expression was one of boredom mixed with studied insouciance.

Laurent was the commanding officer of the Atlantis-class starship *Kotarbiński*, a deep-space exploratory cruiser.

She mustered her most diplomatic mien, gesturing for Laurent to be seated across the desk from her. "At ease, Captain. Please, make yourself comfortable."

Whatever else might be said of Laurent, his manners were impeccable, and he waited for his superior to be seated before lowering himself into his own chair.

"Admiral Phoung wishes for me to convey his displeasure with *Kotarbiński's* performance in this morning's simulated attack on Objective Sigma," Trujillo began. "Your ship broke formation and nearly collided with the *Lo'Oako* and *Virgil*. You then abandoned your assigned target and made an unauthorized attack run on another squadron's objective."

"I did, sir," Laurent confirmed in his accented Federation Standard.

"May I ask why?" she inquired in a level tone, masking the edge that fought to claw its way into her voice. Trujillo prepared to dissect his responses with analytical intensity.

"It caused confusion among the threat formation, sir," Laurent explained. "They were unprepared for the maneuver and lagged behind in their efforts to counter my sudden course change." He motioned with his hands, using them to demonstrate his unorthodox move. "The target was caught unawares and neutralized with little difficulty."

"Squadron Three's target was neutralized, Captain. Again, that was not your group's objective. The threat forces guarding your squadron's objective gained a tactical advantage over Squadron One when you broke formation and scattered your fellow ships with your unauthorized maneuvers. Squadron One suffered losses and was forced to retreat with Squadron Two covering their withdrawal."

Laurent sat back, masking his agitation with a well-worn neutral expression that he was rumored to save for just such occasions. "Commodore Anderberg's tactics were predictable and uninspired."

Trujillo secretly agreed with Laurent's assessment of Anderberg's tactical acumen, but that was not the point.

She merely sat in silence, studying him as Laurent grew increasingly uncomfortable.

"With respect, Commodore, I know how to fight my ship. I have proven that on multiple occasions," he blurted finally, unable to stomach the lingering quietude.

"In one-on-one engagements, absolutely you have. You and your crew have proven wily opponents to any number of threat vessels since you took command. That, however, is not the point of these exercises, and you know it. Your ship has been assigned to patrol duties for the next eighteen months. We both know you'd much rather be out exploring, but this rotation it's your turn to guard the ramparts..."

He opened his mouth to interject, but she held him at bay with a raised hand.

"Captain, I have to know that I can trust you to do your part in any fleet or task force formation. I can't have you running off to play Captain Kirk because your commanding officer's strategy or tactics aren't inspiring enough for you. In actual fleet formations, the kind of stunt you

pulled this morning gets people killed unnecessarily.”

Trujillo held his gaze until he dropped his eyes, the defiance there flickering and dying in the heat of her stare.

“You are an able starship commander, and in the coming months and years you will undoubtedly have ample opportunity to cement your legacy as such. Though you may believe starship combat is a minor province in the overall makeup of a CO, a captain’s inability to operate successfully in a cooperative formation is more than sufficient grounds for relief or transfer.”

Laurent’s hung head jerked up at this, his eyes wide.

“There are other branches of Starfleet where captains are needed, of course. Command of a star-station, for instance, or chief of operations on a starbase? The administrative challenges of that position are formidable. Or perhaps a sector commander for Starfleet Logistics, overseeing the escort of convoys of merchant traffic to and from our more vulnerable ports?”

Laurent blanched, his hands tightening on the armrests of his chair. “That... will not be necessary, Commodore. Your point is taken. I will conform to the designated fleet formation tactics going forward.”

Trujillo sat back in her chair. “I’m pleased to hear that, Captain. I am certain Admiral Phoung will be similarly delighted.”

She stood, and Laurent rose as well.

“Thank you for meeting with me, Captain Laurent. You are dismissed.”

He departed without another word, his pride still warring with his sense of duty.

Trujillo watched him go, feeling an odd sense of kinship with the man. Not terribly long before, Trujillo would have been a prime candidate for just such a stern talking to. She pondered how quickly and dramatically situations could change.

After his departure, Trujillo remained standing, rolling her neck around and trying to release some of the stress of the past week. Her leadership of the Strategic and Tactical Exercises Conference was her first major flag-level assignment that did not involve command of an active task force. The administrative burdens of such a high-level exercise and the planning necessary to bring together dozens of vessels for a week and half of grueling simulated battles had been daunting, but she had found herself invigorated by the challenge it represented.

She began to collect her few belongings in preparation for her return to her ship which was at station-keeping near the starbase. The door chimed, and Trujillo tensed, expecting a second round with the willful young captain.

She was surprised to instead find the austere form of Vice-Admiral Obynaov Ch’tthannak standing on the other side of the transparent door panels.

Trujillo mustered a genuine smile and welcomed the older Andorian flag officer inside. “What a pleasant surprise, Admiral. What can I do for you?”

“I was already planning on coming to see you today,” the tall Andorian officer said, “but as it happens, in addition to my other reason for visiting, I now have a new assignment for you.”

Ch’tthannak was a towering figure, rail thin and possessing a commanding bearing. His face was a collection of deep lines and wrinkles which attested to his decades of service far more than did even the ‘fruit-salad’ of ribbons and citations affixed just below the combadge on his maroon wraparound uniform tunic.

Trujillo set down the case she’d shouldered in preparation for departing the office.

“Sir? The STEC doesn’t conclude for another week and a half.”

“Yes,” he said with a curt nod of acknowledgement. “Regardless, this situation and these orders take precedence. Commodore Anderberg will be taking over for you.”

She gestured to the sitting area, a couch opposite two comfortable chairs, with a low coffee table between.

Before they could be seated, Ch’tthannak stooped to set his briefcase atop the table between them. He opened it and retrieved a small case. He assumed a formal posture, and Trujillo followed his lead, appearing bemused.

“I know you eschew accolades and crowds, so I’ve done you the courtesy of presenting this in private.” He opened the case to reveal a pair of gleaming objects within.

“For your innovative and aggressive engagement tactics employed against the Tholian incursion in the Longlax-Teko system, a battle which undoubtedly saved countless lives in preventing a larger conflict between the Federation and the Assembly, Starfleet Command is proud to present you the Grankite Order of Tactics, Class of Excellence.”

He turned the case towards Trujillo so that she could see the medal contained within. Alongside it sat a small accompanying trophy for display in her quarters or ready room.

Her expression grew pinched, and she raised her hand as if in a warding gesture. "Sir, respectfully, I cann—"

"You *will*," Ch'thannak said forcefully, cutting her off as his antennae twitched with irritation. Then, in a gentler tone, he added, "This award also symbolizes the sacrifice of all those we lost in that battle, Nandi. To refuse it is to tarnish their memory, and I know you would never do that."

Her hand dropped to her side. "No sir," she agreed. "I wouldn't." She reached out for the box taking him from him almost reverently, moving to place it into her carryall. "I will make sure to display this in a prominent, *visible* spot, Admiral."

"You had best," he confirmed. "You most assuredly earned that, Commodore."

She turned back to him. "You said there was other business, sir?"

"Yes, another outbreak of piracy." He gestured to their seats and sat down, with Trujillo following suit.

He opened his briefcase yet again, retrieving a bottle and gesturing to the glasses sitting on a shelving unit next to the office desk. Trujillo obediently rose to collect two glasses, returning to eye the bottle appreciatively.

"Pappy Van Winkle?" she appeared openly skeptical. "They haven't bottled that in centuries."

"True enough," Ch'thannak affirmed, carefully opening the bottle. "This particular gem was confiscated from an Orion border runner, along with a dozen crates of Ae'leric-vintage Romulan Ale."

Trujillo smiled broadly. "Rank hath its privileges, eh?"

Ch'thannak poured two measures and handed a glass to Trujillo. "This bottle is my belated gift to you for your promotion. Of course, I was selfish enough to wait to present it so that I could have a taste."

She raised her glass, holding the liquid up to the light. "How old is this, sir?"

"Two hundred and sixty years, Commodore. It was casked two months before Earth's Third World War. The bottle is replicated, as the stuff was still in its oak cask when it was seized."

Trujillo's jaw dropped, causing Ch'thannak to smirk. "I never would have allowed you to open it!"

His smile broadened, his white teeth striking against the contrast of his blue skin. "I know. Drink up."

"Salud," she said, touching her glass to his before taking an experimental sip. A deep sigh escaped her as the warmth of the alcohol infused her senses. "It's as good as I've heard... better, in fact."

"I've also kept a bottle of the Romulan ale for you to present to Admiral Saavik. You're one of the few who know her tastes."

She cradled the glass protectively, examining her superior. "What aren't you telling me?"

He released an appreciative grunt at her keen observation as he settled back into his chair, swirling the whisky in his glass. "Both bottles are also my apology for putting a burning drum of *yerrth* dung in your lap."

"My new mission? The piracy?"

"Yes, the piracy. Though I'm fully aware of how much you enjoy a good scrap with marauders, this particular group is as troublesome as they come." He removed a small holo-projector from his briefcase and activated it via an accompanying data-slate.

The image of a 22nd century Klingon Raptor-class warship took shape in the air between them.

"These raiders are employing retrofit Orion and Klingon vessels, many of them well over a century old, but boasting serious upgrades to their weapons, shields, and structural integrity.

"This particular ship attacked one of our Starfleet flagged deuterium carriers some four-point-two parsecs spinward of Starbase 71. The CO of our ship was tempted to laugh when he realized the age of the Raptor. That reaction changed abruptly as soon as the vessel opened fire."

"Packed a punch, did she?" Trujillo asked with an ironic frown.

"Indeed," he continued. "She's obviously been substantially upgraded. The ship-to-ship battle was over relatively quickly, with most of the cargo ship's phaser banks knocked out within thirty seconds of the first shot."

The image shifted to show an internal corridor adjoining an airlock. Several Starfleet crew members armed with hand phasers and rifles stood ready to repel boarders. The airlock hatch exploded inward, showering the corridor beyond with ricocheting shards of super-heated metal that scythed down several of the defenders. Armored figures rushed through the smoking breach with surprising speed and agility, cutting down the stunned survivors of the explosion with precise blasts from disruptor rifles.

"Good Lord," Nandi murmured with evident surprise, "that was fast *and* efficient. They'd put our Marine Recon and our Special Missions

teams to shame. You don't typically see that kind of skill and precision from pirates."

Ch'thannak enhanced the image, zooming in on one of the attackers. The person was clad in hardened, mat-black, articulated body armor with a helmet that completely obscured their facial features. The individual was wielding what appeared to be a Romulan disruptor rifle. A pistol-style disruptor was fastened to one hip, while an incongruous sheathed short sword was fixed to the other.

He drew the image back to its original magnification then switched the view to an adjoining corridor. The attackers surged into the passageway, darting and feinting with almost preternatural speed, blasting the defending crewmembers with their rifles or cutting them down with their swords.

Again, Ch'thannak zoomed the image, focusing on the bright blade of one attacker's sword in hand, the weapon glinting in the reflected light from the corridor overheads.

"Do you recognize it?"

Trujillo, an ardent student of military history, practically goggled. "It can't be."

"But it is, nonetheless," Ch'thannak countered.

"I'd thought they were Romulans, given their speed and armament," Trujillo said, still trying to wrap her mind around the implications.

"No, the disruptors are Rigellian knock-offs of Romulan weapons. The sword, of course, is a—"

"Gladius," Trujillo provided. "Carried by Roman legionaries on Earth for centuries."

Ch'thannak gave a curt nod, "And wielded to this day by the legionnaires of the improbable world of Magna Roma."

"They have FTL capability now?"

"So it would seem. Intel guesses they've purchased their ships from Orion or Lissepian intermediaries dealing in castoffs from Klingon breaking yards."

Trujillo sat back, appearing confused. "But what the hell could a technologically undeveloped planet like Magna Roma have that the Orions or Liss—" she trailed off, her eyes widening. "Oh, dear God... slaves."

The Andorian nodded slowly, his dour frown matching her own. "Yes, unfortunately. Slavery is still widely practiced on that world. They have more than enough enslaved peoples and political prisoners to sell many off-world to the Syndicate and others. We also believe the Orions discovered sizeable deposits of latinum on Magna Roma. They tried to hide the value of the mineral from the empire, but it appears the Magna Romanii sniffed out their duplicity. The Romanii are now effectively filthy rich and have begun using that wealth to purchase advanced technology. They've gone from the equivalent of late 20th century Terran technology to the 24th in the space of a few decades."

Trujillo reached forward to access the display control tablet, playing back the initial fight at the airlock and watching from several different camera angles as the Magna Romanii swept through the ship. "None of that explains their raw speed and power. I don't care how sharp their blades are, they're practically cutting our personnel in half. I could understand doing that with a long sword or a Klingon *bat'leth*, but a short sword designed for slashing and stabbing? Are their armored suits powered?"

Ch'thannak reached out to tab the console's interface. "Well spotted, and no, their suits are believed to be simple non-powered body-armor. As it happens, the attackers were unable to take the ship due to the captain engaging security lockouts, and they murdered him when he refused to give up the codes. They killed the rest of the crew then abandoned the ship, probably planning to destroy it, but the cruiser *Çatalhöyük* arrived and they were forced to flee."

"*Çatalhöyük* let them get away?" Trujillo asked, a hint of disapproval in her tone. "That doesn't sound like Abe Amaechi."

"The ship had red-lined her engines getting there and Captain Amaechi was left unable to pursue. They tracked the Raptor to the Vimra Cluster and lost her in the congestion near the trade stations."

"So, we still haven't identified the base of operations of the attackers?"

"No, but our forensic examination of the deuterium tanker turned up some rather startling results." The image shifted again, displaying a double helix of humanoid DNA, several segments of which were highlighted and labeled. "Blood and tissue residue were left behind," he explained. "Genetic analysis of those samples indicated that the attackers were of human stock but had *significant* alterations to their base genetic sequencing."

Trujillo's eyes closed and she emitted a heavy sigh. "Shit. Augments."

"Yes," he confirmed. "As yet we don't know if they stumbled upon that technology themselves or with the assistance of outsiders, but that's just one of the mysteries here we hope you and your people will be able to solve."

"Well, this just became much more complicated."

The old Andorian smiled thinly. "Which is why we're sending you. You and your squadron have proven adept at this sort of thing, and you

just so happen to have the only Magna Romanii officer in Starfleet as one of your senior officers.”

She was openly dubious. “You know what they did to him, sir? What he was subjected to by his own people?”

“I do, in fact. Hopefully, Lieutenant Helvia won’t have to set so much as a foot on that blighted world again, but he’ll prove an invaluable resource in helping you understand how his people think and act.”

Trujillo took a long sip from her glass of priceless whisky, lost in thought.

“Commodore?”

She started, her reverie broken. “Sorry, sir. I’m just trying to figure out how I’m going to tell Mister Helvia we’ll be visiting his homeworld.”

“Be direct,” he advised. “His people supposedly appreciate frankness.”

Her answering smile was equally thin and without humor. “When in Rome, eh, Admiral?”

* * *

Chapter 2

* * *

Lieutenant Titus Helvia entered her ready room at the commodore's beckoning. He came to attention, was ordered at ease, and sat when instructed.

He was a towering slab of humanity, a man whose uniform did little to hide his especially well-developed musculature. He was tall, just under two meters, and his blonde hair was shorn stubble short. He had a heavy brow, deeply set blue-grey eyes, and a pronounced jawline.

Despite the fact that he was her Security/Tactical Officer and an expert in hand-to-hand and close-quarters combat, Helvia was also one of the gentlest human beings she had encountered in her career. He could break you in half almost effortlessly, but he would feel genuine regret for having had to do so. If he could avoid physical violence when restraining someone in the line of duty, he did so.

Trujillo leaned in, placing her hands atop the desk, fingers intertwined.

"There's no easy way to say this, Lieutenant, so I'm just going to come out with it. Due to a series of raids by pirates believed to originate from Magna Roma, our squadron is being ordered to investigate. Part of our mission profile is to ferry an ambassador to your homeworld and attempt to open a diplomatic dialogue with their government. If that mission isn't successful, we'll be forced to hunt down the brigands and either capture or destroy them."

Helvia digested this in silence for a good ten seconds before saying, "I understand, sir." His expression had not changed one iota.

"I wanted to tell you in person, rather than have you find out in the midst of a senior staff meeting."

"I appreciate that, sir."

An awkward silence followed.

She observed him closely and refused to allow the following hush to prompt inanities to fill that silence.

Trujillo cleared her throat, "As we've discussed previously, Lieutenant, I can only imagine the horrors you survived on that planet. There is no reason whatsoever for you to set foot on Magna Roman soil during this assignment."

Helvia appeared to be choosing his words with care. "I appreciate your consideration, sir. However, if duty demands it, I must and will fulfill my obligations by beaming to the surface. I presume we will be sending a security escort with the ambassadorial party?"

"Oh, most assuredly."

"Then it would be appropriate for me to accompany them. I cannot hide aboard the ship in orbit and expect my subordinates to take my place."

She nodded. "Thank you. I trust you to know your limitations."

Helvia glanced down at the five golden links of chain that he wore just beneath his Starfleet emblem combadge. He had received special dispensation from Starfleet to wear the symbol, the mark of the outlawed Children of the Son, a religious sect deemed apostate by the Magna Romanii government.

"It would be prudent for me to remove this prior to any contact with the Romanii, sir. It could result in unnecessary... tension during any encounter."

"Fuck their feelings, Lieutenant," Trujillo said in an even tone that nonetheless startled Helvia. He had seldom heard her use profanity. "These people just slaughtered a ship full of Starfleet personnel. I'm not especially concerned with their spiritual hangups."

The merest hint of a smile tugged at the corners of the man's mouth. "Understood, sir."

"If, at some point during this mission, you change your mind about contact with the Romanii, please let me know. You will serve just as ably at my side as an advisor on local customs and potential strategies. The mission is my priority, but I also wish to honor your experiences... your losses... at the hands of these people."

Helvia leaned forward, his inscrutable expression yielding somewhat to allow a sliver of discomfort to bleed through.

"Again, I'm touched by your consideration, sir. I find it necessary to point out that where this planet is concerned, I am as much victimizer as victim. I owned slaves before my family's downfall, and I killed any number of good men and women in the arena during my time as a gladiator. I am not an innocent in all this. Magna Roma extracts a price from *all* its people, be they high-born noble or the lowest slave. If not for the collapse of my family's political fortunes, I would have remained a wealthy dilettante, playing at sword games and drinking myself into oblivion."

Trujillo took a moment to absorb that admission. "I believe I understand, Mister Helvia. Thank you for your candor. Nevertheless, my offer stands, should you feel you need it."

Another awkward silence followed.

Trujillo sighed, then stood, prompting Helvia to rise. "You're dismissed, Lieutenant."

As Helvia exited, the ship's executive officer, Commander Jadaetti Davula entered, a data-slate in hand.

The Bolian woman was of average height and had cobalt blue skin that seemed somehow even more prominent due to her baldness. A cartilaginous bifurcated ridge ran down the centerline of her body, dividing her facial features. Unlike some ethnicities on her world, she lacked the horizontal lines radiating outward across the top of her head from that central ridge. She had an open, expressive face, and bright hazel eyes.

"What do you have, Commander?" Trujillo inquired.

"Sir, we've received our departure orders and all ship's personnel have been recalled from the starbase. However, we're still missing our ambassador. Commander Glal mentioned that they were old friends, so I asked him to go and retrieve the ambassador. That was over two hours ago, and now Glal isn't responding to comms."

Trujillo had just resumed her seat, and she stared up at her XO, blinking. "You sent Glal... to locate the ambassador?"

"Yes, sir."

"Ambassador Dax?"

Davula cocked her head, smiling uncertainly. "Yes, sir. Am I missing something...?"

Trujillo dipped her chin, wincing as she rubbed the bridge of her nose with her thumb and middle finger. "I'm sorry, Commander, this is my fault. I should have warned you in advance." She presented a pained expression to the Bolian woman. "I'll need you to go and get them. Find the loudest, grungiest, most disreputable spacer bar on the station. That's where you'll find them. They are likely exceedingly drunk. If you end up needing a security team, call me directly and I'll arrange it. Do your best to keep it *quiet*, whatever happens."

"On it, sir," Davula said smartly, turning to attend to the duty immediately.

"Well," Trujillo remarked to her now otherwise empty cabin. "We're off to a great start."

* * *

There was a round of applause as Lieutenant (junior grade) Rachel Garrett entered the briefing room. The unanticipated attention caused her to blush fiercely.

The woman was still in her early twenties and had recently allowed her shoulder-length reddish dyed hair to revert to its natural, darker auburn color. She stood approximately one-point-six meters in height, and carried herself with a serious bearing that belied her age. Garrett had a willowy neck leading to a well-defined chin, a pert nose, dark brown eyes, and sensuous lips gracing a mouth that while rarely seen to smile, on those occasions did so with radiance. The collar of her uniform undershirt and shoulder flash were the gray of the Sciences division.

"Congratulations on your first formal published paper in the Journal of Federation Astrophysics, Lieutenant," Trujillo said, stepping forward to shake the younger woman's hand.

Davula, standing next to the commodore was next in line to offer her compliments. "It appears all our time spent nosing around in nebulae and planetary rings finally paid off for someone."

Garrett offered one of her uncommon smiles in response as she shook Davula's hand. "So it would seem, sir."

The rest of the senior staff offered similar tidings, proud that one of their own had distinguished herself and their ship so notably.

Trujillo called the meeting to order and took her seat, with the others following suit. The conference was broadcast via comms to *Reykjavik's* escort vessels, the Akyazi-class scout *Gol* and the Miranda-class light cruiser, *Zelenskyy*, for the benefit of the senior officers of those ships in their own briefing rooms.

Seated next to the commodore in the space normally reserved for the XO was Ambassador Curzon Dax, one of the Federation's foremost diplomatic experts. A member of the Trill species, Dax was a joined being, a humanoid paired with a slug-like symbiote that not only shared consciousness with its host, but which contained the memories of all its previous hosts. This gave the joined individual several lifetimes of knowledge and accumulated experiences.

Curzon was approaching his late fifties, a tall, thin man with a shock of unruly, tightly curled brown hair that was only now beginning to gray and recede. A pattern of dark blue spots began at his temples and ran down the sides of his head and neck, disappearing beneath the high collar of his Nehru-style tunic.

His features suggested a mischievous nature, and Dax was widely rumored to be a larger-than-life figure, boisterous, flamboyant, and occasionally arrogant. He was an inveterate gambler and ladies man, seemingly a throwback to the machismo of earlier centuries. He was undeniably brilliant, one of the Federation's top negotiators, typically dispatched to flashpoints across the quadrant to represent the Federation's interests with often antagonistic foreign powers.

"For those of you unfamiliar with him, I want to introduce Ambassador Curzon Dax. The ambassador has been assigned to assist us with our mission to open a diplomatic dialogue with the Magna Roman government.

"Our primary task will be to stop this recent wave of piracy through diplomatic channels, if possible, and by force if necessary. Our secondary mission is to try and uncover how the Romanii came to possess the genetic engineering expertise necessary to create Augments."

Trujillo nodded to Dax, inviting him to speak.

“It’s my honor to assist you in this endeavor,” he said in a deep, resonant voice. “This was an unexpectedly rapid deployment for me, so I’ve not yet had the opportunity to brush up on Magna Romanii culture, languages, and history, but I’ll be using our transit time to rectify that deficit.”

Dax looked around the table, committing the faces of the senior officers to memory. “There are some new faces since I was aboard last. Two years ago, then Captain Trujillo and *Reykjavik* came to my rescue when I was taken hostage during negotiations on Ardana. I know what this crew and this ship are capable of, and I could not have asked for a more able vessel from which to operate.”

Nodding in the direction of Helvia, Dax continued, “My part in our assignment will be to try and negotiate an end to these undeclared hostilities with official representatives of the Magna Romanii. For all we know, these pirates may be unaffiliated with their government, though I suspect that only a planetary military organization would have the resources to operate these vessels and have access to augmented soldiers.

“Let’s hope they are amenable to diplomacy, as the alternatives would be most unfortunate. There is also the possibility of influencing them through their relationships with intermediary species such as the Orions who are likely responsible for equipping them with their ships and more advanced technology.”

“Agreed,” Trujillo said. “We’ll have eight days in transit, during which we’ll need to prepare multiple contingency plans for a variety of potential outcomes.”

Lieutenant Jagvir Shukla, the ship’s turban-clad Sikh Operations officer, gestured his desire to speak and Trujillo signaled her consent.

“Sir, when you say, ‘by force if necessary’, what exactly might that entail?”

“If our diplomatic overtures are rebuffed, we will track down and either seize or destroy the Magna Romanii fleet, such as it is.” She turned slightly in her chair to lean forward, forearms atop the table. Her face remained carefully neutral, but her brown eyes sparkled with an intensity born of profound anger. “They’ve attacked and seized several non-aligned vessels in recent weeks and have now attacked two Federation freighters in short order. In their most recent raid, they murdered the entire crew compliment of the deuterium carrier *Mosinee*. Forty-two of our brothers and sisters in uniform butchered as they fought hand-to-hand to defend their ship. That’s an act of war.”

Dr. Bennett raised a hand, prompting Trujillo to acknowledge him next.

“Sir, based on the reports I’ve read, the Romanii have achieved sufficient advancement in medical knowledge and technology to have successfully altered their genome. Granted, there’s a substantial difference between basic gene editing and the level of enhancement we’re talking about with augmentation as we understand it. Based on the scans of the tissue samples I was provided by Starfleet Intelligence, it appears a higher level of technical expertise is at work here. The sophistication of these augmented genetics bears greater similarity to the work of Dr. Arik Soong of the 22nd century than that of the researchers in the mid-20th century that produced Earth’s first generation of so-called Supermen.”

“You suspect alien influence, Doctor?” Davula asked.

“I do. Unless we arrive to find that they’ve made some incredible advances on their own in the medical sciences, I can’t realistically attribute this level of work to them.”

“Sir, I—” Garrett began, then blanched when she realized that she had not asked for, nor received permission to speak.

Trujillo waved her off, “Out with it, Lieutenant.”

“Well, I...” she paused, looking down the conference table to where Helvia sat, as silent and impassive as statuary. “I’m sorry, sir, it’s just awkward talking about a people in broad generalities when one of them is in the room.”

Trujillo cast a glance in Helvia’s direction. “Any objections, Mister Helvia?”

“None, sir,” he replied with what looked suspiciously like the hint of a self-deprecating smirk.

“Okay, then,” Garrett began. “I’ve been looking up everything we have on the Magna Romanii, to include *Enterprise*’s original contact reports. The most comprehensive information I’ve been able to get my hands on has been the debriefing of Mister Helvia’s family after they were granted refugee status by the Federation.”

Trujillo nodded, “I’m sensing there’s more?”

“Yes, sir, on multiple fronts, actually. Firstly, I stumbled across scholarly citations indicating that the Federation Cultural Contact Survey Group had a covert sociological survey team embedded on Magna Roma for over two decades, most of the 2270’s and 80’s. I’ve made multiple attempts to get access to their mission’s extensive database, but all records are listed as classified by the order of the Federation Science Council.”

Trujillo appeared nonplussed and threw a look in Davula’s direction. “Commander, given that you’re our First Contact expert, how unusual is that?”

“Highly, sir,” Davula replied, her eyes widening as she considered the ramifications. “I could see Starfleet Intel compartmentalizing certain information about advanced near-peer technology, but at the time of that cultural survey the Romanii were at the equivalent level of Earth in the late 20th century. And for the Science Council itself to lockdown the comprehensive findings of a decades long survey mission... it’s nearly unheard of.”

Trujillo typed notes into her data-slate atop the table. “I will find you some answers, Lieutenant.” She looked up, focusing on the young

science officer again. “You said multiple fronts?”

“Yes, sir.” Garrett made another furtive glance down the table at Helvia. “To be perfectly blunt, sir, the more I dig into the little available information I can access, the less sense the overall picture makes.”

Trujillo redoubled her focus on Garrett. “Meaning... what, exactly?”

“Nothing about that planet or it’s people makes any logical sense, Commodore,” Garrett said, evident frustration bleeding through in her tone. She looked guiltily towards Helvia. “I mean no disrespect, Lieutenant. I’m speaking from a purely scientific standpoint; I’m not disparaging your people’s culture.”

Trujillo looked towards Davula, then shifted her eyes back to Garrett. “Explain.”

“The planet itself is nearly identical to Earth. Not only its overall mass, gravity, and atmospheric composition, but the land masses and oceans show only a sixteen percent variation from Earth’s physical layout. That’s not just improbable, it’s statistically impossible.”

Shukla smiled uncertainly at Garrett’s seeming outrage with the planet’s improbability before realizing what he was witnessing was genuine professional ire. He sought to offer an explanation with, “*Enterprise*’s science officer cited Hodgkin’s Law of Parallel Planetary Developme—” he began, only to have Davula try to interject.

Garrett waved them both off impatiently. “Respectfully, Hodgkin’s Law is a theory observing generalities among humanoid civilizations. It’s concerned with social and cultural attributes, not the physical composition and comparative geology of planets. Commander Spock later recanted his application of that theory in his subsequent after-action reports.”

Trujillo observed Garrett quietly for a moment, having never seen her this professionally flustered. “What are you trying to say, Lieutenant?”

“As unlikely as this sounds, sir, every standing theory I’ve come across trying to explain the existence of Magna Roma and its people has crumbled with shockingly little scrutiny. Some researchers early on hypothesized that perhaps an alien species abducted Romans from Earth millennia ago and seeded them on a planet they terraformed for just that purpose.”

“That’s the theory I’m most familiar with,” Trujillo said. “You’re saying that doesn’t hold water?”

“Not a drop, sir.”

Trujillo brought her hands up off the table in a gesture of abeyance. “Let’s put a pause on this for a moment, Mister Garrett. I fully intend to hear you out, but let’s finish our mission brief first.”

Garrett nodded weakly, appearing deflated, her anger abating. “Of course, sir. I apologize.”

The remainder of the briefing went by the numbers, with recitations of departmental readiness, logistics updates, and navigation information on the region surrounding the fourth planet of System 892, also known as Magna Roma. The viewscreen was activated and the senior staffs of both *Gol* and *Zelenskyy* offered similar reports.

Trujillo concluded the briefing, terminating the transmission to the other ships and dismissing the rest of the senior staff. She indicated that Davula, Helvia, and Ambassador Dax should remain.

“Okay, Rachel. You have my full attention. Please tell me what’s got you so upset.”

Garrett took a steadying breath, determined to rein in her roiling frustration. “Commodore, I’m a scientist, trained in the scientific method and qualified in data analytics. Every time I dive into the information available on this planet and culture, the prevailing theories fall apart like day old sandcastles. I’m looking at reports that read like fiction, as if the scientists writing them just... gave up... took the easy way out and decided to offer up the most ridiculous, unsupported drivel to explain away all the inconsistencies they encountered.”

The young science officer toggled the LCARS interface set into the tabletop in front of her, calling up a representation of Magna Roma on the briefing room’s viewscreen set into the bulkhead. “Let’s take that theory you cited, sir, about ancient aliens abducting Earthers from in or around Rome two millennia ago and transporting them to a terraformed duplicate Earth. Given that the Magna Romanii are genetically identical to Terran Humans, if you took a sample group of let’s say five hundred people and plunked them down in roughly the same spot on Magna Roma, we can easily calculate the population growth that would be expected.”

Davula smiled slightly, nodding. “The numbers don’t add up, do they?”

“Not even close, sir,” Garrett agreed. “By now, their population should be somewhere in the vicinity of two-point-one billion, once we factor in a lack of genetic variety in a homogeneous population, ecological impacts, localized overpopulation stressors, disease rates and endemic warfare. The actual population of Magna Roma at present is hovering somewhere in the vicinity of six-point-three billion. “

“And if that’s what happened, how do you explain all the other racial and ethnic groups we know to exist on Magna Roma, just as they do on Earth? Did our mystery aliens abduct hundreds or thousands of people from every racial group on every continent, and drop them onto the analogous regions on their duplicate Earth? This supposedly happened what, less than twenty-five hundred years ago? So, well within recorded Human history. How is it that we have no stories or fables about the night people disappeared from cultures all across the planet?”

“Alternately, I’ve found no evidence of any historical documentation from Magna Roma indicating people waking up on a suddenly depopulated planet.” Garrett turned to Helvia. “Lieutenant, growing up, were there any historical accounts or fables about ancient Romans waking up to find most of the population of the city of Rome missing?”

Helvia shook his head. “Not to my knowledge, no.”

Garrett pointed to the screen as she focused on Trujillo. "And what about the animals? Millions of species of animals and insects, all completely identical to those on Earth, to include fossilized skeletons of the same extinct species that evolved on Earth and then went extinct. You're telling me whoever terraformed Magna Roma went to all the trouble to infuse *fossils* into the rock strata?"

Trujillo was on the cusp of replying when Garrett abruptly continued, "And that's just one of nearly a dozen different crackpot theories that have been generated over the decades. None of them stand up to any serious scrutiny, making me wonder what the hell the Science Council could be hiding."

Trujillo nodded slowly. "I'm beginning to understand your frustration, Lieutenant. I'll pull some strings to see if I can get that data declassified so you can have access to it."

"Thank you, sir."

Trujillo looked from Garrett to Davula, a former science officer herself. "You two are my science cadre, and you've never let me down. I want to know everything there is to know about this planet and its people by the time we arrive. Forget everything Federation science *thinks* it knows; I want the two of you to start from square one with Mister Helvia's assistance."

The two women departed with Helvia, leaving Trujillo alone with Curzon.

The older man smiled at her, his eyes twinkling with merriment. "A genuine mystery, eh? As if this assignment weren't complicated and delicate enough already."

She shook her head fractionally. "Leave it to Starfleet to give us only half the critical information we need because some bureaucrat someplace likes keeping secrets for secrecy's sake."

Curzon's smile expanded. "It'll just make our success all the sweeter, Commodore."

"I hope to hell you're right, Ambassador. We have far too many blind spots where the Romanii are concerned, and in this kind of scenario, blind spots get people killed."

"You're an incorrigible pessimist, Commodore, do you know that?" He noted with a laugh.

"I'll celebrate when the job's finished," Trujillo countered. "If we somehow pull this off, you and Glal can save me a spot in that ratty spacer's bar you two so adore."

* * *

Chapter 3

* * *

City of Rome, Magna-Roma, System 892

The office of the First Consul was decorative and ostentatious, befitting the ruler of a planetary empire. The room sat high atop a tower overlooking the Forum, with the Curia and the Temple of Saturn just visible from this vantage. This building was a recent addition to the skyline, one of the only glass and tritanium structures that had been allowed within this meticulously curated ancient city.

The sky was hazy, the clouds heavy with the ash thrown up by Mt. Vesuvius some two-hundred kilometers distant. Even the nearby Mt. Terminillo smoked menacingly, though it had yet to erupt thanks to the intervention of the Lissepians and their geo-stabilization technology.

Hrabanus Macer, First Consul of the Roman Empire, entered the chamber, escorted by four lictors, two proceeding, and two following him.

He was of average height for one of his species, clad in a light tan tunic and pants under the purple edged ceremonial toga praetexta of his office. His face was narrow, almost hawkish in its angular intensity. His light blue eyes appeared to move constantly, indicative of a mind in continuous motion, and the crest of white hair limning the sides of his head spoke to decades of service to the empire.

The Orion envoy acknowledged Macer with a deep bow. "First Consul. Thank you for seeming me on such short notice."

"*Ahmet-surah* Vantiquis, welcome," Macer said in a conversational tone. "To what do we owe the honor?"

Vantiquis, a large, thick-necked Orion noble with emerald-green skin and sporting a jewel-studded skullcap, turned from his inspection of the capital city. He was clad in a sleeveless shirt and vest made from the finest Tholian silk, the garments appearing to change both their color and texture depending on the light and from which angle they were being viewed.

"The Lissepians are leaving," Vantiquis announced without preamble.

Macer, to his credit, appeared surprised at this news. "What? Are you referring to their diplomatic or trade delegations?"

"All of them," Vantiquis clarified. "They've evacuated all their personnel from their embassy on the surface and from your *Stella Gradus* station. All their ships will be gone from your system by this time tomorrow, First Consul."

Macer gestured to the chair across from his large and ornate desk, his expression now radiating curiosity and concern. "Please take your ease, *Ahmet-surah*. Can you explain this sudden exodus?"

The Orion stepped before the desk but did not sit. He hooked his thumbs behind the decorative breastplate woven into his tunic. "Despite our warnings, your military has continued with its raids on shipping in this and adjoining sectors. Despite our *explicit* caution not to do so, your ships attacked multiple Federation trade vessels and have now drawn the attention of Starfleet."

"I fail to see the problem," Macer said with a dismissive wave. "We haven't had dealings with the Federation in more than five decades, and even then, the worst they could do was cause the lights to flicker."

Vantiquis frowned, irritation shimmering at the edges of his features. "The Federation is not just a single planet, First Consul, but an alliance of worlds, hundreds strong, and presently expanding at an alarming rate. Their Starfleet numbers in the thousands of vessels. In your last encounter with them, their laws forbade any obvious interference in your society, and so tied their hands. Those laws no longer apply."

Macer turned in his chair to fill two glasses with diluted wine from a decanter, sliding one of them across the desk to Vantiquis. "What has changed that nullifies these laws they seemed so wed to last time?"

"You were, by their standards, primitives, and they were worried about polluting your society with knowledge of other species and the wider galactic community. This is their so-called Prime Directive. The moment that we and the Lissepians made formal contact with your people, that cultural contamination became irrevocable and voided their Prime Directive."

Macer took a long draught of wine, while Vantiquis' sat as yet untouched. "What will they do?"

"Hard to say, First Consul. They are dispatching a squadron to hunt down your ships. I would guess that your vessels, few as they are, will be confiscated or destroyed. They will likely attempt to open negotiations with you, as that is their way."

The consul sat back in his chair, examining the Orion over the lip of his chalice. "You know this how?"

"We have operatives within Starfleet," Vantiquis replied. "Not as many as we would like, but sufficient to give us some measure of forewarning when Starfleet moves against our interests."

"What can we do to defend ourselves?"

"Against a Starfleet squadron? Not much, I'm afraid. This is why we warned you to leave them be."

Macer tapped at a small, desktop computer. "What if we were to accelerate our purchase and refit process with your people? We could bring more ships online prior to their arrival."

Vantiquis shook his head. "It would ultimately make no difference, and it would implicate my people far more than is wise. Your people have been piloting spacecraft for a little over two decades, while Starfleet itself is nearly two centuries old. Even if you were to somehow overwhelm their first squadron, they would simply send a full fleet the next time. I told you, their Starfleet dwarfs even the collective might of all the Orion Houses."

"We needed those ships," Macer said, an edge creeping into his voice. "The Federation trade ships were massive, larger than anything we'd previously seen."

"As we have explained; we can provide such transports, it will simply take time for our dockyards to expand their existing operations to provide the vessels you require, First Consul. We were also planning on subcontracting with the Lissepians and others to meet your quota."

"It was too few ships, and too long a wait. You well know our requirements."

Vantiquis nodded. "I do, just as I know full well that you need the Lissepians and their geothermal regulators and seismic dampers. With their departure, who will operate these advanced systems?"

"You have scientists, do you not?" Macer snarled as the consequences of the Romanii's recent actions settled upon him.

"Not enough, and certainly too few in the areas of geology and terraforming. That's why we invited in the Lissepians, if you'll remember."

Macer scowled into his cup. "May I assume that we cannot expect military assistance from the Orions?"

"Open warfare with the Federation?" Vantiquis scoffed. "No. Dead men and prisoners enjoy no benefits of latinum, women or wine. We are businessmen. We have few soldiers, as we typically hire mercenaries when open force-of-arms is needed."

Macer looked up, his eyes gleaming. "Yes, good. Mercenaries then. We'll pay handsomely, and the Orions will be awarded a finder's fee for facilitating the transactions."

"Such actions will only forestall what is to come, First Consul," Vantiquis warned.

"The empire's fate has turned on such moments many times in the past, Orion."

Vantiquis radiated somber acceptance. "This was avoidable, First Consul. We asked you not to provoke the Federation or the Klingon Empire. What was so unclear about our warnings?"

Macer closed his eyes briefly, exhaling. "Our Consectetur... they have become increasingly difficult to manage. They have a habit of exceeding their mandate."

"We warned you about that, as well. Superior abilities and intellect breed superior ambition. You've fallen into the same trap as so many species before you."

The Roman leader finished his wine and glanced at his computer terminal. "I have another meeting in just a few moments, *Ahmet-surah*. Please convey the particulars of whichever mercenary groups you contract with to our military liaison. I will confer with the Senate over providing the necessary funds."

Vantiquis bowed. "As you wish, First Consul."

As he departed the office, Vantiquis weighed the dangers of remaining entangled with the Magna Romanii against the vast profits he and his house were squeezing from this venture. Three decades of commerce with this increasingly blighted world had made him wealthy beyond his wildest aspirations, but even he shrank from the idea of a direct confrontation with the Federation Starfleet.

Just a little longer, he told himself. Desperation breeds profit, and Vantiquis was determined that the impending collapse of this world could provide his house with the riches and leverage to become a leading power among the Syndicate.

* * *

"I'm sending you hunting, Mister Glal," Trujillo said across the subspace channel to the escorting *USS Gol*.

The pugnacious Tellarite commander smiled from within his unkempt beard, his tusks quivering with excitement. "Don't think that I'm not eager to run these bastards down, sir, but is it wise to split our detachment? That only leaves you with *Zelenskyy* for backup should the Romanii decide to engage you in-system."

"True enough," she agreed with a smile. She secretly missed working with her irascible former XO on a daily basis, but his talents as a commanding officer were undeniable. "I'm betting that they'll think because we're in their home system that their ships can maraud freely elsewhere. I'd like you to disabuse them of that notion."

He held her gaze with his piercing green eyes, his expression suddenly serious. "What are my rules of engagement, sir?"

“Issue challenge upon encountering one of their ships, and if they refuse to heave-to and surrender, engage them with the intent to disable. Failing that, destroy them.”

“I’m not excited about the prospect of bringing Augments aboard as prisoners,” he growled. “I’ve seen the recordings of their boarding party, and I’ve read their bio-scans. They’re incredibly dangerous. The odds of even a handful of them being able to take the ship are too high for my taste.”

“I’d recommend beaming over canisters of neurozine gas and a liberal application of stun grenades. Hell, once their shields are down you can stand off and rake their vessel with shipboard phasers set to stun. Once they’re neutralized, you could place them in a specialized containment unit aboard their own ship. Fit the ship with explosives so that if they were to break free, you can detonate it remotely. Yes, they’re strong and ferocious by human standards, but strength-wise they’re on par with Vulcans, Romulans, and Klingons. As long as we’re taking rational precautions...”

“Understood, sir,” Glal said unenthusiastically.

“Glal, they’re still people. It’s not like they’re androids or some other manner of artificial life form. Knowing Magna Romanii society, it’s a good bet none of them volunteered for these enhancements. I certainly can’t condone the crimes they’ve committed, but we have to take the high road here. We can’t espouse the benefits of a rules-based galactic community to the Romanii while we’re slaughtering their soldiers without a fair trial.”

Glal raised a Vulcan-like eyebrow. “That may be the most admiralty thing I’ve ever heard you say, sir.”

She raised a hand, fully aware of the irony of her statement. “I know, I know. It appears that even I am capable of growth and change, my friend.”

Glal’s grin had returned. “You’re just sending me off to keep me away from the ambassador, aren’t you?”

Trujillo closed her eyes as if pained. “I had to hand over a vintage bottle of Tarkalian bitters to get the two of you out of the brig and get the whole incident deleted from the station’s security log. It’s too expensive for me to allow the two of you miscreants to roam around unattended.”

“The man does know how to throw a party,” Glal laughed.

She shook her head in mock consternation. “Speaking of Curzon, I have a diplomatic prep session with him in twenty minutes. We’ve learned more about the Romanii in the past six days than I learned about the Romulans in four years at the academy.”

“Send him my regards, and please let him know that I’ve been exiled due to his Flannigans.”

“Shenanigans,” she corrected with a resigned sigh. “And good hunting, Captain,” she added, terminating the channel.

* * *

“Magna Romanii culture, as I’ve noted previously, is overwhelmingly traditional and conservative,” Lieutenant Helvia said, instructing many of the senior staff in *Reykjavík’s* windowless briefing room.

“New ideas, new technologies, and new cultural trends are all looked upon with deep suspicion,” Helvia explained. “Even when new technologies were reluctantly adopted, it was almost exclusively for military applications. The Romanii weren’t traditionally disposed to modifying such inventions for mass production or usage by the general public. The kinds of labor-saving household items popularized in Earth’s 20th century were considered unnecessary in a society where such mundane tasks were handled by slave labor.”

Garrett frowned, gesturing to the viewscreen where a large anti-aircraft missile system was displayed. “They’re clearly not still in a pre-industrialized state, Lieutenant.”

“No, but Romanii technological advancement has been driven by necessity. The Eastern cultures on Magna Roma, what on Earth would be considered China and Southeast and Southern Asia, were the first to create such technologies as gun powder, cannons, and later, aircraft. The empire was forced to adopt and adapt these inventions for their own use, and in so doing only grudgingly advanced into what on Earth was called the Industrial Age.”

Helvia stood, changing the viewscreen image to a flat, Mercator projection map of Magna Roma’s surface. It was disturbingly close to Earth’s continental layout, with only a few major differences notable from this perspective.

Eastern Asia, South America and southern Africa had large, inland seas, and an eighth continent occupied what on Earth would have been the Northern Atlantic Ocean.

Helvia gestured to the landmasses in the Western Hemisphere, the continents which on Earth would have been North and South America. “The ‘new’ continents of Aggendum and New Carthage were discovered by the Carthaginians in what would have been Earth’s second century, AD. They were first colonized by Carthaginian and Chinese settlers and were only conquered by the empire a thousand years later in what is called the ‘Barbarian Conquests.’”

Trujillo appeared intrigued. “One of the things that amazed me is that after the Magna Romanii made First Contact with the *SS Beagle*, their society absorbed the shock of the existence of alien life with surprisingly little upheaval.”

Helvia shrugged. “Until contact with the *Enterprise* six years later, the *Beagle* and her crew were a state secret. But, following the escape of Kirk’s away team and the arrival of the Orions shortly thereafter, the existence of aliens became public knowledge. In the end, alien cultures were viewed as just more barbarians. What does it matter if the barbarians are from the East, or from another world around another sun? Simply more beings to subjugate and exploit. When Proconsul Claudius Marcus put *Beagle*’s crew into the arena, they bled and died just as easily as any man.”

“So, they feel they have nothing to fear from outworlders?” Davula asked.

“They recognize the threat that aliens pose to the empire, but so far, they’ve only had dealings with a handful of non-human species. They’ve entered into any number of commercial agreements, the terms of which have been highly favorable to the empire. With slaves to sell and latinum mines still being worked, Magna Roma has become very wealthy. They have gone from nuclear power a few decades ago to fusion and anti-matter systems. So far, at least, contact with ‘Star-barians’ has brought only benefits to the empire.”

Trujillo winced and Davula laughed out loud.

“They don’t really call us that, do they?” the Bolian asked incredulously.

“It’s a modern colloquialism,” Helvia admitted.

Curzon Dax sat forward, having been silent for much of the morning’s cultural briefing. “If the planet is swimming in wealth, what is the point of Romanii piracy? Surely they can simply purchase whatever advanced technology they want from their intermediaries? Why go to the trouble to disable and board a Federation merchant vessel?”

Helvia shook his head. “Unknown, Ambassador. Perhaps the empire’s military is trying to establish control over the trade routes nearest System 892? Now that they’re in possession of warp-capable spacecraft, they may be returning to old habits of conquest.”

Curzon shook his head emphatically. “No, there has to be something more we’re not yet aware of.”

Davula studied him. “Military adventurism is consistent with their culture and history, Ambassador.”

“Oh, I don’t deny that. However, they’re a conservative, reactionary power, not one given to clumsy gestures, most especially when their technological betters are watching. I don’t think we dare attribute their actions to stupidity or political naïveté. These are dangerous people whose concept of life and death are very different from our own. Even now life is relatively cheap in their society. Sure, the slaves are provided with healthcare, but what does that matter if you’re buried in a mine collapse or killed while fighting in the arena?”

Trujillo found herself nodding in agreement. “We underestimate them at our peril.”

“Precisely,” Curzon said, his voice weighted with caution.

* * *

Chapter 4

* * *

“You’ve got to be kidding me.”

Trujillo glowered at the admiral on the other end of the subspace comm-pic. Rear-Admiral Isobel Ogilvie with Starfleet Intelligence returned her stare impassively. She was a small, mousey-looking woman who was either already irritated, or possessed one of those resting expressions that perpetually gave that impression.

“I assure you, Commodore, that I am not joking. This matter is not only classified, it’s classified at Level Eight – Onyx. Admiralty eyes only.”

Trujillo maintained eye contact while bringing one hand up into the viewer frame and ever so slowly touching a finger to the commodore’s rank insignia on her division white shoulder flash.

Ogilvie harrumphed with embarrassed indignation. “Yes, you are obviously a member of the admiralty. I meant to say it’s restricted to high-ranking flag officers on a need-to-know basis.”

Her eyes remaining fixed on the admiral’s, Trujillo enunciated slowly. “I am leading a small squadron to their planet as we speak, sir. I could very well be engaged in hostilities with the Magna Romanii in the next twenty-four hours if things go badly. You, meanwhile, are denying me access to a forty-year-old summative assessment of a cultural survey mission to that world. I would be hard pressed to locate *anyone* with a greater need to know than myself at this moment, Admiral.”

Ogilvie’s cheeks darkened and she swallowed hard, caught somewhere between anger and self-consciousness. “Be that as it may, Commodore Trujillo, that’s where we’re at.”

“I understand, sir. Might I inquire who is immediately above you in the chain-of-command that I can appeal this decision to?”

“Vice-Admiral T’Laak is my immediate superior, Commodore.”

“Before I go and bother the vice-admiral with this matter, can you at least give me a hint as to what could possibly be so secretive about a planet and a society we’ve known about for nearly sixty years that you’ve had to classify their cultural analysis reports at the highest level?”

“I cannot,” Ogilvie said simply, looking passably uncomfortable. The woman took a breath as though trying to clear her head before continuing. “Commodore, whether you choose to believe it or not, I do appreciate the position we’re putting you in. I myself lack the clearance to view that document, and so after receiving your initial request for that information, I filed a formal application to have a senior intelligence officer perform an ‘eyes-on’ review of the materials to determine whether the current classification level is still appropriate.

“Vice-Admiral T’Laak conducted that review yesterday and spent the better part of a day going over significant volumes of information. He has concluded that the documents should remain classified and sealed at their present level. However, he stated that it would be extremely unlikely that the factors necessitating the classification of those reports would impact your mission.”

Trujillo took a moment to absorb that assertion, finally nodding faintly. “I see. I appreciate your having taken those proactive steps, Admiral. Being as I am on-scene commander of this mission, I still feel it necessary to point out that Admiral T’Laak’s assurances notwithstanding, I would prefer to make those determinations for myself.”

Ogilvie leaned in towards the viewer on her end, her voice dropping an octave and her features hinting at an inner conflict. “I still have no idea what’s in those classified docs, but whatever it was appears to have unsettled one of the most stone-cold Vulcan intel operators I’ve ever met. This man survived five-years undercover on Romulus before the Tomed Incident, and he doesn’t spook easily. Based on his reaction to the information he reviewed, I would proceed with extreme caution, Commodore.”

“Unsettled, sir?” Trujillo pressed. “Can you elaborate?”

“I’ve worked with the man for almost four years, and I’ve never seen anything affect him like this, leaving him listless and distracted. Before yesterday, I could say I’d never seen a Vulcan go ashen, but no longer. He left work early today, also a first. It’s unnerving as hell.”

Trujillo frowned as she attempted to fit this piece of an increasingly complex and frustrating puzzle into place. “For what it’s worth, Admiral, I appreciate the warning.”

* * *

“I’m detecting approximately fifteen-hundred satellites in orbit of the planet, sir, and four space stations of varying size and complexity. The largest of the stations shows obvious signs of foreign influences, both in design and constituent materials.”

“Are you reading any subspace radio traffic?”

“Yes, sir. Their transmissions are limited to the lower-bands and are sporadic, but they are confirmed to have subspace radio.”

Trujillo looked from her science officer to the Operations post. “Mister Shukla, hail the station.”

“Channel open, sir. They are receiving.”

“Magna Romani station, this is Commodore Nandi Trujillo of the Starfleet vessel *Reykjavik*, representing the United Federation of Planets. We are requesting permission to approach your station in hopes of initiating a diplomatic exchange. We carry an ambassador aboard with the authority to make binding treaties.”

A brief delay followed, with officers at their stations eyeing their displays for any signs of impending hostility from the station or the approaching planet.

“Federation vessel, this is Magna Roma Orbital Control. Permission is granted for you to approach Stella Gradus station. Specific orbital coordinates accompany this transmission. Once in position, standby for further instructions. We welcome you to the magnificence and grandeur that is the glorious Roman Empire.”

Trujillo glanced back at Helvia at the Tactical station, her eyebrow raised in abject skepticism.

Helvia merely shrugged, shaking his head in resigned amusement.

“Reykjavik copies, Orbital Control, and we will comply.” She gestured to the Helm. “Mister Naifeh, proceed to orbital insertion, one-quarter impulse.” She tapped the seat-back at the Operations station. “Lieutenant, signal *Zelenskyy* to hang back mid-system and monitor our situation. No sense in both of us strolling into the proverbial lion’s den together.”

On her way back to her seat, Trujillo paused at the Tactical console. “Weaps,” she said, using her customary shorthand for the Security/Tactical officer, “I know you’re keeping an eye out for anything suspicious. They could very well have weapons systems we’re unfamiliar with or otherwise hidden from our sensors.”

“Yes, sir,” he replied stolidly. “They are a martially minded people and would not leave their orbital zone undefended.”

From Ops, Lieutenant Shukla spoke up. “Sir, I’ve been scanning for any signs of transporter technology, and haven’t located any. Whatever else the Orions have given them tech-wise, it doesn’t appear that transporters were included.”

“Acknowledged, Mister Shukla, and thank you.”

On the cusp of resuming her seat, Trujillo caught movement out of the corner of her eye and turned to see Davula leaning over Garrett, the pair examining something at the Science station with animated interest.

She abandoned the captain’s chair, walking around the upper level to the station where Davula had just assumed a seat next to Garrett. “Something of note?” Trujillo asked.

Garrett turned towards her; the younger woman’s eyes bright with enthusiasm. “Commodore, as we approached the planet I started a standard assessment sweep, looking for any major changes from the scans *Enterprise* logged fifty-five years ago. There’s been some increased environmental degradation owing to greater industrialization and its corresponding pollution, but when I got to geological analysis my board lit up like a Christmas tree.” Garrett switched to a Mercator-view of the planet, where the continental masses on display were highlighted in a riot of shifting colors.

“Half a century ago this planet was tectonically active, but stable, much as Earth has been for the past few thousand years. No longer. We’re detecting major seismic activity across the globe, with nearly five-thousand active volcanoes across five continents. By comparison, Earth has somewhere in the vicinity of fifteen-hundred active volcanoes at any given time.”

“Any idea what’s causing it?” Trujillo asked.

“Not yet, sir,” Davula answered. “We’ll need to carry out additional scans of the planet’s interior when we make orbit before we can offer any definitive determination.”

The turbolift doors opened to admit Ambassador Dax to the bridge. He peeked his head through, glancing around before his gaze finally settled on Trujillo. “Permission to enter, Commodore?”

Trujillo smiled. “Granted, Ambassador. You should know your bridge privileges are still in effect from your last time aboard, but I appreciate the courtesy.”

Curzon stepped onto the bridge, looking around at the various crew intent on their tasks as *Reykjavik* approached their destination. “I was monitoring comms from my quarters. It sounds like everything’s going well so far.”

Trujillo nodded fractionally, examining the growing blue-green orb on the viewscreen that looked so deceptively like home. “So far,” she echoed.

“Size and composition of their moon?” Trujillo asked suddenly as the smaller planetoid appeared from behind the planet.

“Nearly identical to Luna in size, mass, and orbital position, sir,” Garrett answered. “There are a handful of occupied facilities on its surface, sir. They appear to be Magna Romani industrial plants.”

Trujillo walked over to Curzon, gesturing to an unoccupied auxiliary station on the bridge's upper level. "The more I think about Lieutenant Garrett's analysis of this planet, the more its mere presence raises the hairs on the back of my neck."

Curzon lowered himself into the proffered seat. "Yes. So many impossible similarities to your homeworld. Nonetheless, it *is* here, and we have a job to do."

"Indeed," she replied. "I was considering leading the initial delegation down to the surface. Give us a chance to sniff around a little bit before bringing you down, to ensure your safety."

"I'd argue that having me with your landing party affords you greater safety," Curzon rebutted. "The Romanii are making their first forays into the larger galactic community. I doubt they want to attack a diplomatic delegation to their planet and have their world's reputation smeared across the quadrant."

She gave him an assaying look. "You're sure?"

"I am. My orders contained no provisions about carrying out my assignment only so long as it was safe or convenient to do so."

Trujillo's mouth twitched, a smile very nearly taking shape there.

Curzon gestured to the crew with a sweep of his arm. "Besides, I've seen you and your people at work. I doubt their pantheon of gods could save them from your wrath were they to strike at us."

"All the same, Ambassador, I'd rather not put that assertion to the test."

He gave her one of his patented grins, inclining his head in the direction of her ready room. "Shall we go make arrangement for a little meet and greet? Time to show the First Consul and the Roman Senate how the adults in the Alpha Quadrant comport themselves."

* * *

Chapter 5

* * *

Rome's Forum had changed over the millennia, but only incrementally so. The determinedly traditional Romans had added new civic buildings and temples, replacing or repurposing some as religious icons fell out of favor and others which had fallen literally, erased either by force of arms or the forces of nature.

What on Earth was a collection of crumbling ruins was here on Magna Roma a thing of breathtaking vibrancy. Columns abounded, whether Doric, Ionic, or Corinthian, some standing in solitary majesty, others supporting massive structures that had been fastidiously maintained for thousands of years. Temples, palaces, arches and basilicas crowded one another, rising layer upon layer into the sky in a stepped mélange of conflicting architectural styles.

In contrast to those remains on Earth, so long ago bleached by the sun and scoured clean by archologists, the structures here were painted in a variety of colors, with blue, straw, black, purple and chestnut among them.

Trujillo had set foot on numerous alien worlds during her career, some offering advanced urban vistas of far greater splendor than this, but she had been unprepared for the full weight of the emotional resonance of this bizarre, alternate Earth. Its history settled onto her like a physical weight, leaving her almost dizzy with its implications. This was not a dusty museum or a holographic recreation, but a living, breathing place inhabited by a human culture radically different than the one she knew.

She had visited the ruins of ancient Rome half a dozen times as a child and young adult, mesmerized by the majesty and dread they evoked. She was drawn to both the enormous potential and terrible savagery that the Roman Republic and the later Empire had represented. So many of the democratic ideals perfected by later ages had grown here, seeded by the example of the Greeks and the excesses of the Etruscans. Those ideals had eventually collapsed into totalitarian rule, swallowed by despotism fueled by internecine warfare.

Trujillo wondered how much of what she remembered of Rome's history from her own world had occurred here. Had their people suffered the civil strife leading to the rise and eventual murder of Caesar? Had they enjoyed the poems of Ovid and Virgil, the histories of Tacitus and Suetonius? She cursed herself for not having asked Helvia those questions before now. She'd been so damnably preoccupied with the mysteries known only to the Federation historians and cultural specialists assigned here, those whose findings remained under lock and key courtesy of Starfleet Intelligence.

A stiff breeze blustered through the Forum, snapping the Romanii banners and guidons carried by the ceremonial legionaries, and making Trujillo grateful for the thermostatic properties of her dress uniform. A dusting of ash continued to fall, blowing to and fro, complements of the five active volcanoes within three hundred kilometers of the city. The air carried the faint scent of sulfur, adding to the surreal quality of the scene.

She wore an assemblage of 'fruit salad' beneath her Starfleet communicator badge, rows of ribbons denoting medals, citations and campaigns. In the top row, sandwiched between her Legion of Honor and her Citation for Conspicuous Gallantry was her newest award, the Grankite Order of Tactics presented to her so recently by Vice-Admiral Ch'thannak.

The awards would be meaningless to the Romanii, of course, aside from the fact that they were honors rendered to her for accomplishments in the line of duty. That was presumably something so martial a people would understand and might appreciate.

Trujillo was flanked on one side by Ambassador Dax, and on the other by Lieutenant Helvia, the trio escorted by *Reykjavik's* own honor guard of sixteen security personnel in armored vests and helmets, holding phaser rifles at port arms.

A part of her envied Curzon. To him this was just another alien planet, devoid of any psychological implications or unwelcome comparisons to his own homeworld.

A column of soldiers marched past in a flawless formation, wearing the garb of ages past. Their helmets, breastplates, shields, swords and spear-tips gleamed in the sporadic sunbeams that penetrated the ashen skies.

"I'll give them this," Trujillo said *sotto voce* to Curzon with grudging admiration, "they really know how to put on a show."

"This is what martial hegemonies excel at," he replied in a like tone. "Pomp and circumstance, banners, swords and shiny armor to impress the barbarians."

A woman approached, followed by a phalanx of what appeared to be administrative personnel. She was tall and radiated a regal sort of elegance. Obviously high-born, her aristocratic bearing was immediately obvious in her posture and movement. It was as though she glided across the cobblestones rather than walked. Her face was a near perfect oval, with a well-defined chin, attractive aquiline nose, inquisitive hazel eyes and flawless pale skin.

She wore a traditional stola, a sleeveless garment comprised of heavy fabric containing many folds that wrapped around her and covered her undergarment shift. This golden fabric boasted ornamental shoulder pads and a leather belt secured the vestment's waist. A section of the stola served as a hood to cover the woman's elaborately coiffed raven hair.

She came to a stop in front of the Federation delegation.

“Greetings. I bid you welcome to Rome, center of our world and of our culture. I am the Imperial Vestal, Liviana Ovicula, representing our Ministry of Alien Affairs. The First Consul and representative of the Senate would like to meet with you in the Curia Julia.”

Trujillo deferred to Curzon, who responded with a respectful bow, “Thank you, Imperial Vestal. I am Ambassador Curzon Dax of the United Federation of Planets. This is Commodore Nandi Trujillo, commanding officer of the starship *Reykjavik* and leader of squadron that brought us to Magna Roma.” He gestured to the enormous man to his immediate left. “This is Lieutenant Titus Helvia, the commodore’s Chief Security Officer.”

Ovicula nodded in greeting to Trujillo and Helvia, but it was upon the man that her eyes lingered, narrowing fractionally as she spied the tiny links of chain dangling in a dipping curve beneath his communicator badge. That symbol paired with his very Roman name could not have been more obvious.

“Please, follow me,” Ovicula said with a sweeping gesture towards a structure some hundred meters distant, across a paved courtyard flanked by rows of freestanding columns.

The trio, trailed by their security detachment, fell into step behind the woman and her escorts.

Ovicula turned to regard Trujillo, her eyes taking in the woman’s uniform and its various pins, ribbons and assorted emblems. “You are a soldier?”

“Starfleet is more an explo—” Curzon began, only to be cut off mid-sentence by Trujillo’s reply.

“Yes,” Trujillo affirmed, perhaps a bit too loudly. She cast a self-deprecating glance toward the ambassador while smiling faintly. “I believe Ambassador Dax was going to lend some context to that statement. Starfleet serves chiefly as a scientific and exploratory organization, though we are also sworn to safeguard the lives and property of our citizens. Among our ranks I hold myself more soldier than diplomat or explorer.”

“I see,” Ovicula replied. “Most interesting.”

The woman turned, gesturing towards the array of columns surrounding them and turning impromptu tour-guide. “These triumphal columns represent the accomplishments of General Atilius Salutio and his legions which wrested control of the New Lands from the Eastern Barbarians a thousand years ago. Each one represents a battle fought to establish Roman rule across those continents, prior to Salutio’s return to Europa and his ascension to the emperor’s throne.

Trujillo looked with interest at the sculptures atop each of the massive colonnades, the one closest to them denoting Atilius Salutio leading from atop what appeared to be a war chariot.

From beside her Helvia’s voice came in a whisper, “It was a genocide of the Eastern settlers of what you would call North and South America, and that of the remaining indigenous peoples of those lands. Many were put to the sword, but far more fell to fire and disease.”

Trujillo nodded fractionally, her fascination with the columns quenched by Helvia’s graphic description. “Not so dissimilar to our own, then,” she said.

“From whence do you come on your world, Commodore Trujillo?” Ovicula asked.

“Spain,” Trujillo replied, “the city of Salamanca.” She gave Ovicula a curious grin. “What you would call Iberia.”

Ovicula nodded, smiling. “An Iberian. I might have known. You have that cast to you.” She then looked at Helvia. “And you, Lieutenant?”

Helvia took a moment to answer, courting a glance from Trujillo and even one from Curzon.

“I was born in Nola,” he finally answered. “Raised from the age of six in Rome.”

“Ah, so you are *that* Titus Helvia,” she concluded. “The Hammer returns home.” She smiled wistfully. “You know, I believe my older brother had a poster of you on his wall.”

Helvia had no reply to that, though the big man seemed to shrink into himself somewhat at the mention of his former notoriety.

The group proceeded to the entrance of a relatively modest structure by the Forum’s standards, the oft-rebuilt Curia Julia. A three-story building constructed of brick-faced concrete supporting a huge buttress at each end to reinforce the roof. The lower portion of the building was decorated with slabs of marble, while the upper stories were covered in what appeared to be stucco imitation of white marble blocks. A single flight of stairs led up to tall, narrow bronze doors tinted green with time and weather.

The group ascended the steps as the doors were opened from within by more modern garbed Romanii soldiers, clad in grayish military fatigues and helmets, each armed with a disruptor rifle but still carrying a sheathed gladius dangling from their equipment belt.

The diplomatic party entered, the security detachment arrayed behind Dax, Trujillo and Helvia. The room was filled by middle-aged and older men dressed in something roughly equivalent to a Terran 20th century business suit sans tie, over which a toga was loosely worn as a symbol of office.

A man in a military-style uniform sporting gaudy epaulets and a blood red sash over one shoulder rushed forward to examine Helvia before calling back to the others. “By the Gods, I *told* you it was him!”

He reached out without warning to snatch the links of chain from the front of Helvia's uniform tunic, throwing the symbol to the ground behind him in a gesture of profound disgust. He then turned to face Curzon. "We thank you, Federations, for returning our stolen property."

* * *

It had been six years, nine months, and twenty-seven days since Trujillo had last physically struck another person in the line of duty.

She sidestepped deftly in front of Curzon to deliver a palm-heel strike that snapped the Romanii officer's head back, which bobbed forward again just in time to receive her knife-hand jab to his throat. As the man recoiled backwards, coughing, choking and clawing at his neck, she grabbed hold of his decorative red baldric and tore it from him, casting it behind her in much the same way he had Helvia's linked chain.

The Romanii soldiers' rifles came up, followed a second later by those of the Starfleet security contingent.

Trujillo stepped forward with practiced nonchalance to bend down and retrieve the religious symbol from the floor. She handed it back to Helvia, who accepted it solemnly, though his eyes twinkled with silent amusement.

There was a rush by several senators to take hold of the offending party and pull him back away from the visiting delegation. He was hustled unceremoniously out of the room.

A man moved forward; hands held up at shoulder height. "Please, everyone, this is a terrible misunderstanding..."

"Is this how the Roman Empire treats its honored guests?" Trujillo seethed. "The Orions were correct, you are a just a pack of backward barbarians, aren't you?"

First Consul Hrabanus Macer gestured for the Romanii guards to lower their weapons as he walked forward squarely into the Starfleet security team's firing line. "You have my most profound apologies, Commodore. General Caudex is given to drink and has consumed far too much wine on this occasion."

Trujillo advanced on him, still glowering. "Lieutenant Helvia is a Federation citizen and a commissioned officer in Starfleet. He will not be manhandled by your general or anyone else. Your people have already committed multiple acts of aggression against the Federation in the attacks upon our transport ships, and now you compound these crimes by this disgusting display!"

"Again, Commodore," Macer beseeched, "I apologize profusely for his actions, and I will see to it that he is appropriately disciplined."

Trujillo looked to Curzon, whose right hand reappeared from behind his back after sliding his hidden *mek'leth* up and back into its concealed scabbard across his back beneath his robes.

"Shall we remain, or return to our ship, Mister Ambassador?"

Curzon considered that a moment and then replied, "Let us see where this goes from here, Commodore. Perhaps this *was* just an unfortunate misunderstanding. We should at least allow them to try and make amends."

Trujillo nodded curtly. "As you wish." She turned back to address the security contingent. "Weapons down," she ordered.

The emitters of the phaser rifles lowered in unison.

She turned back to Macer who had interposed himself between the diplomatic party and the remaining Romanii. "And you are?"

"I am First Consul Hrabanus Macer. On behalf of myself, the Consular Authority, and the Roman Senate, I welcome you to Rome."

* * *

Lieutenant Garrett had routed all geological sensor displays through the stellar cartography chamber, the largest imaging array aboard ship. They had continued taking detailed scans of the planet since arriving in close orbit, probing the depths of the planet's crust, mantle, and core.

Davula stood with her atop the viewing platform, staring out at the magnified view of Magna Roma's churning tectonic activity. "So, what you're saying is the only reason Rome's still standing is those seismic dampeners?"

"Yes, sir," Garrett answered. "They're clearly of Lissepian manufacture, though they appear to include some Orion, Klingon, and Benzite components." She raised her hand, the cursor on the giant viewer following the line of her finger as she traced a path to another sub-surface installation. "These are geothermal regulators..." another cursor was drawn several hundred kilometers towards the equator, "...and this is an entire region where all volcanic activity has been suppressed."

"Suppressed?" Davula wondered aloud. "How?"

"Some kind of cold-fusion detonation, but I've never seen anything like it. That someone would use so dangerous a device just to cap an active volcano is madness."

"It would flash-carbonize anything within tens of kilometers, annihilating all plant and animal life in the process," Davula observed. "Nothing would grow again in those areas for hundreds of years."

"Yes, and yet there's signs they've done it all over the planet, possibly hundreds of times."

"They're desperate," Davula concluded.

Garrett concurred, "It certainly looks that way, sir. There are abandoned remains of dozens of major cities across the planet, all destroyed by local volcanic or seismic activity. Some of them were flattened by quakes, others smothered in pyroclastic flows or choked under meters of scalding ash."

"How long has this been going on for?"

Garrett checked some figures. "From what data I've been able to collate, the better part of forty years."

"And can we tell from the planet's plate-tectonics whether this is a natural occurrence?"

"Oh, yes, sir," Garrett said. "The geological record suggests that this world is far more active in that respect than is Earth, but this level of activity is generally seen much earlier in a planet's lifespan. Earth's Precambrian period or Andor's Glacis Age are good examples."

Davula stood back and nodded. "Okay, Mister Garrett, excellent work. Let's say we shift our focus now to why this is happening."

* * *

The negotiations continued late into the night, with Trujillo witnessing firsthand why Curzon Dax was considered such a renowned envoy within the Diplomatic Corps. The man was engaging, charming, cunning, and utterly focused when in his element. The Magna Romanii representatives were quite good, having bargained for decades with the likes of the Orions, but Curzon had the edge in skill and experience.

Meanwhile, the medical sensor secreted into Trujillo's belt buckle was transmitting telemetry to the tricorder carried by one of the security escorts, which in turn was being broadcasted under heavy encryption back to the ship. Via the tiny hidden earpiece in her left ear, Dr. Bennett was able to assure Trujillo that none of the Romanii in the room were Augments. In fact, no one she had come close to during her time on the surface had been identified as being genetically enhanced.

The same sensor had enabled the team to scan all of the immense quantities of food and drink on offer for poisons or other contaminants, perhaps designed to make them more pliable during the negotiations.

The Romanii had been tight-lipped so far, refusing to acknowledge responsibility for the attack on the Starfleet deuterium fueler, despite the overwhelming evidence that those who carried out the assault were enhanced Magna Romanii. They argued that their own military spacecraft were limited to sub-light, and they possessed no warp-capable vessels, suggesting that if these raiders were Romanii they were brigands striking without official sanction using foreign assets.

They seemed fixated on potential trade relations with the Federation, either collectively or with individual member planets. Their need for assistance with the geological catastrophe that was currently unfolding on their world was no secret, and their desperation for advanced seismic sensors and regulation systems was palpable.

Trujillo sat in on some of the early talks, taking the opportunity to stretch her legs between sessions as she studied the Romanii delegation. Helvia was the focus of a great deal of attention, some of it blatant, while others at least made an attempt at subtlety.

Helvia himself appeared hyper-focused on his duties, though whether this was simply his typically disciplined demeanor or an attempt to distract himself from standing on the soil of his homeworld for the first time in more than fifteen years, Trujillo couldn't tell.

The man was an ascetic, living only to serve Starfleet. When he wasn't on post, he was training, praying, meditating, or sleeping. He had no social life, at least none that anyone else aboard had even spoken of. His faith and his duty consumed him utterly, and his fellow senior officers considered him something of a warrior-monk. They had long since ceased inviting Helvia to after-shift social events or shore leave excursions.

Trujillo found herself growing tired and irritable at Romanii obfuscation as the hours ground on. Curzon had circled back to the attack on Federation shipping, this time from another angle, but his tactic yielded the same results. Denials, dissembling and distraction were all employed yet again as the Romanii protested their innocence.

Curzon had signaled her covertly some minutes ago with a seemingly innocuous hand gesture. It was once again time to play the role of the temperamental soldier, a marked contrast from Curzon's jovial bonhomie. Given her darkening mood, the part would be far easier for her now than it had been hours earlier when they had first arrived. True, striking the general had not been an explicit part of their gameplan, but the man had genuinely angered her and his drunken oafishness had given Trujillo an opening to establish with the Romanii that the Federation were anything but pushovers.

"Enough!" Trujillo barked, causing a number of their hosts around the table to start as she brought her hands down palm-first onto the large circular table with a resounding bang.

Curzon, too, had begun to tire as the session crept into the wee hours, and was himself startled by the commodore's sudden interruption.

"We are not fools, and I am through entertaining your lies," she growled, scanning the faces of their adversaries situated around the table. "We know these men are Augments, and that you have had help from one of your foreign allies in resequencing their genome. This was likely enabled by the same power that provided you with your hand-me-down warp ships."

A murmur of protests began, and Trujillo waved them away impatiently.

"If you continue on in this fashion there will be nothing left for us to discuss. I will order an entire fleet into orbit of your world. We will disable your weapons satellites and your quaint little space navy and blockade your planet. No more Orion or Lissepian help, no more advanced technology, and no more ore shipments from your off-world colonies. We'll watch from on high while Magna Roma tears itself apart and you choke on volcanic fumes and ash. Your Augment soldiers will be tracked down and be either captured or killed, since they won't be able to come home for repairs or resupply."

“You dare threaten us?” a senator shouted.

Trujillo stared daggers at him. “Well, at least I can now confirm that you possess the intellectual capacity to realize when you’re being threatened. Good. I was afraid I was going to have to resort to an illustrated diagram!”

Curzon dropped his head in seeming dismay, when in reality he was fighting back laughter.

The senator nearly recoiled in shock, struck speechless by her audacity.

Trujillo encompassed their surroundings in a sweeping gesture. “You are fortunate you chose to attack us, rather than the Klingon or Romulan Empires. Either one of them would have darkened your skies with a full battle fleet and burned your world down around you. No negotiations, no mercy. They’d have done to you what your General Salutio did to the peoples of the New Lands.”

This quieted much of the rising outrage from the Romanii, who looked to one another in confusion or outright concern.

“Unlike those powers, we can be negotiated with, but only so long as you do so in good faith. Treat us with respect, and we shall reciprocate. Lie to us, attack our interests, and we will treat you as no more than unruly children in need of strict discipline.”

A chorus of shouts and curses erupted only to be dampened by Curzon jumping to his feet and gesturing frantically for calm. “Please, please, the commodore is speaking from a place of emotion! We were sent to negotiate, and though you’ve been gracious in your welcome, you’ve insisted on lying to us about things we know to a certainty. I must give our government *something*, some sign of good will and trust on your part.”

He cast a glance towards Trujillo, who had turned away to give the appearance of still fuming.

“Starfleet can be reckless when their blood is up, and your people killed dozens of their personnel. I ask you, were our positions reversed, would the Roman Empire tolerate such an affront?”

It would have been impossible to miss the surreptitious glances between the Romanii senators, diplomats, and high-ranking military officers.

Curzon looked pleadingly toward them. “There is no need to make us an enemy. We could provide far more in the way of assistance than could the Orions. They are a fractious nation, riven with competing clans and great houses, with power and resources unevenly distributed throughout their society. The Federation, though, we can boast the greatest scientific minds in the quadrant from dozens of worlds, all united in purpose.”

Trujillo turned back to face them. “The choice is yours. There is no better ally than the Federation. The fact that we’re here, speaking with you, should give you pause. We desire neither your latinum deposits nor the slaves you’ve been selling to the Orions. All we desire is for the attacks on our interests to cease, and for those responsible to be turned over to face Federation justice.”

She tapped her combadge. “Trujillo to *Reykjavik*, bring us home.”

The security contingent assembled and joined her and Curzon, vanishing *en masse* as the cascading energy engulfed them.

Trujillo, Curzon and Helvia regained cohesion along with three security personnel in one transporter room, as the others were shunted to other pads aboard ship.

She glanced at Curzon, smirking. “Too much?”

He laughed out loud. “I dare say at first I thought you might have oversold it, especially after you humiliated their general in front of the first consul and senators, but I think you’ve made a lasting impression.”

Trujillo bobbed her head once in relief, turning to address Helvia. “I’m sorry you had to go through that, Lieutenant. I knew you and your symbol would cause a stir, but I hadn’t bargained on that extreme a reaction.”

He inclined his head in response. “Thank you, sir, but I believe you successfully defended my honor.” A smile crept across his features, a rarity for so reserved a man. “For what it’s worth, you demonstrated strength in the only way the Romanii respect. That is no small thing.”

She turned back to Curzon. “And you! Who brings a *mek’leth* to a negotiation?”

“My Klingon friends, and all their friends,” Curzon said with a mischievous smile.

Trujillo stepped down off the pad, unclasping her dress uniform tunic at the shoulder and allowing the flap to fall open. “Well, I have a feeling that if we’re not brought up on charges for today’s performance, we might be invited to teach an entire course on gunboat diplomacy at the academy someday.”

“Tomorrow, the real negotiations begin,” Curzon cautioned. “Today we successfully threw them off balance, but they’ll recover quickly. Now they know where our red-lines are, how far they can push us.”

“The question remains,” she countered, “how desperate are they, and what risks are they willing to run to get whatever it is that they need?”

* * *

Chapter 6

* * *

Glal rose from the captain's chair and strode around the perimeter of the compact bridge to look at the scan results currently being interpreted by his science specialist.

Petty Officer Divinali looked up from his sensor display at Glal's approach. "They're attacking a Rhaandarite transport ship, sir, one of the big corporate haulers. I'm seeing two aggressor vessels; both are older ships. One's a Klingon Raptor-class, the other's an Orion Wuidgabe-class corsair."

"Again with the big cargo ships," Glal muttered to himself under his breath. He called over his shoulder, "Ops, can we hail them?"

"Negative, Skipper," came the reply from Chief Ramsay at Operations. "The Rhaandarite ship isn't responding and the threat vessels refuse to acknowledge our signal."

"ETA?"

"Six minutes, seventeen seconds," the helm officer apprised.

"Warn them off again."

"Aye, sir. Warning issued, and they are receiving, but make no reply to our challenge."

The deck plates were already vibrating madly beneath Glal's hooved feet. There was no point in asking Engineering for additional speed. Any faster and the engines would trip the emergency cutoffs and leave them crawling along at impulse while his chief engineer recalibrated their injectors.

"Status of the cargo ship?" Glal asked as he reluctantly resumed his seat.

"Weapons fire has ceased, and the freighter's shields appear to be down, sir. I'm reading moderate hull damage to the freighter and their weapons emitters have been crippled. One of the aggressor ships is coming alongside, likely to initiate a boarding action."

Glal looked across to his executive officer, Lt. Commander Gael Jarrod. The younger man looked as if he'd just stepped out of a recruiting poster. Tall, trim, and muscular, he had bronzed skin and a rakish goatee and mustache which somehow served to compliment his slightly nasal Oxonian-English accent.

"Mister Jarrod, ready a boarding party," Glal instructed.

Jarrod dipped his head in acknowledgement, as unflappable as ever. "Aye, sir. Seeing as we'll likely be confronting Augments, I'd recommend we go loaded for bear."

Glal's tusks quivered in appreciation of his XO's fearlessness. "I'd never send our people up against Augments, at least not until we've gassed and stunned them into a comatose state. If you go over at all, it'll be a clean-up operation."

"As you say, sir," Jarrod replied evenly.

The chief petty officer at Ops whistled approvingly before noting, "Captain, the Romanii had just extended a boarding tube when the Rhaandarites set off some kind of explosive behind their airlock. It appears the Romanii boarding party in the tube is now sucking vacuum."

"Good for them," Glal growled with enthusiasm as he returned to his seat.

The minutes crawled past, each second seeming to stretch interminably as lives hung in the balance.

Finally, *Gol* dropped out of warp in close proximity to the vessels, her forward torpedo launchers savaging the more distant Orion skiff with crimson ordinance. The photorps depleted the Romanii's shields before follow-on phaser discharges tore into the vessel's weapons ports and engines.

As the corsair tumbled away leaking atmosphere and drive plasma, *Gol* turned her weapons on the old Klingon Raptor. The starship's phasers punched through into the unshielded raptor's superstructure, but they could not risk torpedoes with the attacker hull-to-hull with the Rhaandarite ship.

"Skipper," Ramsay called from Ops, "I'm reading environment suits only outside the hull, they're empty."

"The Romanii, you mean?" Glal squinted at the viewer as if he could see the empty suits from his vantage.

"Affirmative, sir."

"Shit!" Jarrod barked suddenly, "Shields up!"

Glal slammed his fist on the armrest of his chair. "I knew that was too easy!"

"Ships decloaking, port and starboard," Ramsay noted with a tinge of fatalism in his voice.

"Fire everything!" Glal roared as enemy weapons fire slammed into their shields from multiple angles of attack.

* * *

Davula entered the astrometrics lab to find Garrett once again seated at the controls. This time, however, rather than a geological cross-section of Magna Roma, the screen contained the concentric circles of the orbital paths of this system's seven planets.

Garrett threw a glance over her shoulder, appearing visibly exhausted. "How's things topside, sir?"

"Manageable, for the moment," Davula replied. "The commodore and Ambassador Dax just returned from their initial talks with the Romanii. Apparently, the commodore punched one of them in the throat for tearing Helvia's consecrated chain from his uniform."

Garrett, who would usually have been morbidly amused at such a scandalous tale, merely frowned.

"Are you okay, Lieutenant?" Davula asked, sensing something amiss with the younger woman. "You sounded rattled when you asked me down here."

Garrett waved a hand towards the massive display screen. "I'm... not sure, sir."

Davula approached. "What have you found?"

"You might want to sit down, sir," Garrett offered, still sounding out of sorts.

The Bolian looked askance at her. "I'm a scientist, Mister Garrett. I've seen my fair share of odd and inexplicable."

Garrett merely nodded numbly, inclining her head towards the display. "I kept thinking that perhaps Magna Roma's bizarre geology might have something to do with the star system's collective formation. We've seen some systems where the planets are so rich in dilithium that the crystals begin to focus and refract geothermal energy into tectonic instability and volcanism."

"Right," Davula nodded, "piezoelectric generator strata. I'm familiar."

"Yes, sir. So, I started to study the rest of the system, only to discover that nobody's ever paid much attention to all the oddities here. Magna Roma's alternate Earth status is so compelling that it seems that's all anyone's ever cared about." She toggled a control at her station and the image drew back, showing an orbital diorama of the whole system.

"There's only trace amounts of dilithium in the system, so that's not our culprit. However, about thirty-five hundred years ago something happened in System 892 that tossed planets and moons around like a break-shot on a pool table. That asteroid belt between the sixth and seventh planets, that used to be the actual sixth planet and one of the fifth planet's moons."

"What happened? A rogue neutron star or a black hole transit?"

Garrett shook her head. "That's what I thought at first, too. I ran through every permutation I could think of for the gravitational and orbital dynamics necessary to create this hot mess of a star system, but nothing I came up with could account for all this chaos," she said in a voice tight with an emotion that Davula couldn't quite place. Garrett made a sweeping gesture towards the system displayed across the curved bulkhead in front of them before toggling the controls. "Here were the most likely events, but none of them panned out."

A host of scenarios unfolded in quick succession, to include an asteroid strike on Magna Roma or other of the system's planets, a rogue planet passing through the system along the plane of the ecliptic, and a similar systemic intrusion at right angles to the orbital plane by a Class III or IV quantum singularity. These simulations played out over millions or billions of years in mere seconds, but none of them resulted in a star system configuration that looked anything like what presently existed.

Garrett continued speaking, staring with a peculiar intensity at the display. "Apparently, my issue was that I was operating under the constraints of astrophysics as we know them. My parameters were too narrow. So, in a fit of rage and an attempt to prove that the analysis program itself must be faulty, I told it to show me anything, however unlikely, that *would* result in all the gravitational and orbital oddities here. The computer accepted my challenge and..." Garrett typed a series of commands into the station and sat back to let the simulation continue.

Davula's eyes widened in disbelief as she watched the scenario play out. She ran it again to make sure she had seen it clearly and that her brain was accurately processing what the computer was telling her. Her knees gave out and she sat heavily into the chair next to Garrett. "That's... that's not..."

"Possible? Rational?" Garrett offered. "Funny?"

The XO propped her head in her hands, her eyes now riveted to the screen with an intensity matching Garrett's own. "All the above."

Garrett jabbed an accusatory finger towards the image. "The simulation ran a few times and then self-corrected the origin date by

approximately four hundred years to get the model to match the system's present configuration. It's accurate to ninety-nine-point-seven percent probability. Everything we can see out there right now is accounted for."

"Corrected forwards or backwards?" Davula asked in a weirdly distracted tone.

"Backwards. Incept appears to be 1000 BC, Terran Julian calendar."

Davula glanced at the floor, considering potential target areas. "I think I'm going to be sick," she said in a small voice.

"Yeah," Garrett answered dully. "That's how I felt."

The simulation continued running on repeat. The seven planets of System 892 orbited their star in stately majesty with the clockwork precision of an indifferent universe, right up until sometime around 1000 BC as measured by one of Earth's many culturally specific calendars.

At that time, Magna Roma and its moon suddenly appeared. It was not the gradual terraforming of an existing planet by an alien intelligence, but a world and its satellite blinking into existence instantaneously. The gravitational shockwave of their inexplicable arrival shifted the orbits of the other worlds native to this star. The next closest sphere, a massive gas giant in what was now the fifth orbital position, lost three of its moons which were flung out of its own Jovian-class mini-system. One of these moons eventually collided with the sixth planet in the system, annihilating both and creating the asteroid field that now occupied its place.

Another of the gas giant's moons was cast so far out of the system that it only swung back through on an extreme elliptical orbit every fifteen hundred years.

The third planet's orbit was so violently disrupted that it's ecliptic was now a full thirty degrees off that of its original path around the star.

The second planet to the sun had been knocked forty-two degrees off its axis, shattering its single moon into a ring of rubble that now encircled the icy, lifeless world.

Out of the six-point-seven billion permutations the computer subroutine had analyzed in the past six hours, only this one laughably unlikely scenario could account for the disjointed and counterintuitive configuration that now existed in the star system.

"Planets don't just... appear," Garrett finally pronounced, though her tone was devoid of conviction.

"This one seems to have," Davula replied heavily.

Garrett pinched the bridge of her nose as if warding off a headache. "And the Romans on Earth were just a small, unremarkable village on the Palatine Hill in 1000 BC. How the hell could they develop the same culture, traditions and language as their counterpart on Earth? From what Helvia's relayed, they even have most of the same notable individuals until about 350 AD where their history and ours begin to diverge."

Davula shook off her unease and turned her gaze on Garrett, her expression fixed in an uncomprehending scowl. "I can't take this to the commodore in good conscience until we've vetted it through someone else. We had to have missed *something*. I've got a contact at Memory Alpha who has access to one of Daystrom's M-7's. I want to see what an AI thinks of this before I'm ready to risk my professional reputation."

Garrett nodded slowly, her mind still reeling at the implications. "Understood, sir. I won't divulge anything about this until you give me the word. Though, I do have a close friend at MIT in their Planetary Geology program. They've got a top-of-the-line Stellar Systems Evolution simulator. It's not an AI, but..."

"Yes, contact them, discreetly. But keep it quiet and ask them to delete the query after we get the results."

"Aye, sir," Garrett affirmed, before adding, "You don't suppose this is why the Science Council classified that cultural survey?"

"It could very well be," Davula answered. She stood, patting Garrett on the shoulder. "We saw our fair share of weird shit on the Omega Centauri expedition, but nothing even close to this. You're right, I should have sat down."

* * *

Chapter 7

* * *

The damned noise woke him again, accompanied by crashing sounds that shook his surroundings in time with the pounding agony in his head. He was tired, so very tired, and yet these obnoxious fools would not let him rest.

“Starboard shields nearing thirty percent!”

"Maintain fire, all weapons."

Shut up! He cried internally. *Let me sleep!*

“Structural buckling detected, Decks Three and Four, Sections Baker-Four through Charlie-Three.”

“Target Two is accelerating to port and making a hard turn to one-nine-zero, mark three-two-nine.”

Whatever was happening sounded exciting and despite the noise and raised voices intruding on his slumber, Glal’s curiosity was piqued.

“Skipper’s down!”

“Bridge to Medical, the captain’s been injured and he’s non-responsive. Get someone up here as soon as you can.”

The same voice then called, “Reroute auxiliary power from phasers to shields and structural integrity!” Then, “Jarrod to Engineering, how soon until you’ve restored the warp-drive? We need to get out of here.”

Glal heard another voice issue forth that he recognized, this time sounding tinny and distorted. The crackling of the overloaded comms system couldn’t drown out the irritation in the tone, however. *“I’m working on it, XO! We’re lashing a stabilizer onto the starboard conduit. Without that, it’s likely to rupture, and we’ll lose all of Engineering along with your precious warp drive.”*

There were more raised voices...

“Pressure doors and internal forcefields have sealed the breach on Deck Five. A combadge census shows three crew unaccounted for in that section, sir.”

It was far from Lt. Commander Jarrod’s first time in combat. In his twenty years of active Starfleet service, the man had seen skirmishes, tussles, battles and even full-scale wars fought both in the vacuum of space as well as on the surfaces of dozens of planets. Most of these engagements had come after he had joined the crew of his previous posting, USS *Reykjavik*.

Now, however, the ship in combat was under his command by virtue of the captain being incapacitated. A ship that had just been ambushed.

Phasers and photon torpedoes flashed in multiple directions, engaging at least three separate targets as two Klingon Birds-of-Prey and a Kzinti Batterer-class frigate had emerged from under cloak to pummel the Akyazi-class starship.

Loath as he was to do so, Jarrod realized their only chance of survival was escape. They had suffered too much damage too quickly to easily turn the tables on their attackers.

On the bridge, consoles flashed and sparked, sizzling multitronic components lending an acrid stench to the air.

Jarrod knelt to check the pulse of Chief Ramsay, who had collapsed to the deck after being blown out of his seat by an exploding computer station. There was no pulse, and Jarrod’s fingers came away smeared with blood from the chief’s ruined face.

Another blow bludgeoned the ship, causing Jarrod to steady himself with both hands braced against the bridge’s safety railing. He cast a glance towards the Tactical display, noticing the flashing orange indicators along the starboard/aft section of *Gol’s* shield perimeter, indicative of impending collapse.

The turbolift doors opened to admit a medical team, the members of which split up to begin rendering aid to the multiple crumpled figures lying or writhing on the deck.

“Two direct hits on one of the Birds, sir,” came their first bit of good news from the Tactical officer. “Their starboard wing has been separated from their hull, and they just ejected their warp core.”

The petty officer manning the helm station was throwing *Gol* hither and yon, describing wild arcs and acrobatic snap-rolls, attempting to throw off their pursuers’ aim until FTL propulsion was restored. The Akyazi-class was a nimble vessel, as well as sturdily constructed. *No wilting violet this ship*, Jarrod thought with a grim smile. *More like withering violence*. This made him think of his wife, and how much she would enjoy such a scrape, the proverbial knife-fight in a turbolift. *Poor Nandi, off playing diplomat when there’s fights to be had*.

The Kzinti ship’s phasers scored across *Gol’s* dorsal shields, causing the bridge to lurch yet again and sending Jarrod scabbling for purchase to anchor himself on the command chair’s armrest. Glal’s voice echoed in his ears, chiding him for sprawling all over the bridge in the middle of a firefight like a green cadet. Thus prompted by his unconscious CO, Jarrod slid into the seat and engaged the chair’s safety restraints.

“Helm, keep our most vulnerable shield grid as far away from the enemy as you can. Tactical, start kicking fused torpedoes out our aft launcher. If they want to stick to our tail, there’s a price to be paid.”

The respective NCO's affirmed their orders as Jarrod struggled to get the full picture of the ship's operational status, calling up damage reports on the command chair's abbreviated armrest display.

Gol cut inside the Kzinti ship's turning radius, and the marauder was briefly visible on screen, flashing past as *Gol* peppered it with stuttering streams of phaser fire.

"Ramsay's dead, sir," a medic said, providing Jarrod with information he already possessed. "The captain's got a severe concussion and a substantial subdural hematoma and we're moving him to Sickbay immediately."

"Understood," Jarrod said brusquely, watching two photon torpedoes racing downrange on the viewscreen to impact the intact Bird-of-Prey as it swung about to initiate another attack run.

Two of the medical team took either end of the anti-grav litter Glal was strapped to and began to make their way carefully across the shuddering deck plates towards the turbolift.

There was a more muted crash and the ship swayed as a midshipman staffing Operations from an auxiliary console on the upper level announced. "They just hit one of our mines! Two... two of our mines! Kzinti ship is slowing and has ceased firing."

Jarrod was about to comment on that development when the intra-ship comms came to life.

"Engineering to bridge, that conduit's as secure as we can make it. Don't push us above warp five, though, if you can help it."

"Bless you, Lieutenant," Jarrod enthused. "Get us out of here," he commanded above thunderous din of weapons impacting *Gol's* shields as the oncoming Bird-of-Prey's wingtip disruptors opened upon them. "Warp four, any direction!"

Gol leaped to warp just as her shields began to collapse, the ship spewing torpedoes into space behind her as she accelerated away in a multicolored streak of light.

* * *

The second day of negotiations was yet to begin and would hopefully prove more fruitful than the previous day's exercise in posturing and theatrics.

Prior to the late-morning's session, Helvia had requested and received permission from the Romanii to visit one of his family's old properties. This particular area was a *latifunda* previously owned by his grandfather, now property of the government. This enormous agricultural estate was situated in the far south of the Italian boot and sprawled across over a thousand hectares, divided between olive tree orchards and fields of various grains.

Scores of slaves toiled here sewing crops, watering, landscaping, harvesting, and tending to the palatial *villa rustica*, the countryside villa in which the landholding family lived or merely visited when the mood or the seasons beckoned.

"I thought you said you grew up in Rome," Trujillo said, drinking in the rural beauty of the panorama. Low rolling hills abutted the seemingly endless fields and lush orchards, a riot of green, brown and ochre.

The distant peak of Mt. Vesuvius could just be glimpsed through the haze to the northwest, a dark column of ash rising from its cratered summit. Thankfully, the prevailing winds carried nearly all the toxic mixture of rock, minerals, and glass particles out into this world's version of the Mediterranean Sea.

"I did," Helvia answered in a distant timbre, his eyes sweeping the horizon. "We came here mainly in the late Summer and Fall, for the harvests." He dropped to a crouch, reaching out to scoop up a handful of dark soil and sifting it slowly through his fingers.

Trujillo hated to intrude on this bittersweet visit home, but she did not trust the Romanii to leave Helvia alone, hence the security detachment of eight personnel that formed a perimeter around the pair.

"You have a fondness for growing things," Trujillo noted, aware that what little off-duty time Helvia did enjoy was spent almost exclusively in *Reykjavík's* arboretum. "I trust you have good memories of tending the crops here?"

He brushed the dirt from his hands and stood, emitting a sardonic laugh. "I never tended the soil here, sir. Such a task would have been considered beneath my station."

"Ah, my apologies, then," she offered. "I had assumed this is where you developed your green thumb."

Helvia looked down then raised his gaze back to the horizon. "This is where I rode horses, practiced sword fighting and small arms, and chased after stable boys. All in all, the best parts of my childhood and adolescence."

"What is it like seeing it again after all these years?"

"Unsettling," he answered simply. "I keep trying to see it through a child's eyes again, but I cannot. Everything is filtered through the educational and moral paradigms that Starfleet has infused in me."

"That *would* tend to change the flavor of the experience," she conceded.

"Now all I see is slaves toiling under the whip of totalitarian rule and capitalist excess. Their basic humanity is denied them."

They fell into a silence that stretched on for minutes as Helvia struggled to free himself from the paralyzing emotions wracking his mind and body. He wanted to move towards the great house but found he couldn't take the first step.

The chirp of Trujillo's communicator broke the quiet. She reached for the flip-grid handheld unit on her belt, its range, power and encryption strength superior to that of the uniform combadge.

"Trujillo, go ahead."

"Sir, we've just received a priority message from Gol," Davula relayed. "The ship was ambushed during an attempted rescue of a freighter under suspected Romanii attack. They've taken heavy damage and are returning to our position at warp four. They report casualties of seven dead, three missing, and twenty-three injured, five of them seriously. One of those seriously wounded is Commander Glal, and Commander Jarrod has assumed command of the ship."

Trujillo's face hardened into a mask of controlled anger. She took a deep breath and released it before replying in a consciously neutral tone. "Acknowledged, Commander. Dispatch Zelenskyy to escort them back. I'll be up presently. Inform the Romanii that today's session will be delayed, but don't tell them why."

She flipped the communicator closed, gripping it tightly in her hand as she struggled to rein in her fury. "I'm sorry, Mister Helvia. We need to return to the ship. Whatever it was you intended to do here will have to wait for another day."

He nodded mutely in reply, tearing his eyes away from the idyllic vista to focus on the commodore. "Understood, sir. I appear to lack the courage to act in this instance, anyway."

Her gaze settled on Helvia, her suddenly flinty brown eyes searching out his. "I drew a very visible line in the sand, Mister Helvia. The Romanii just gleefully stepped over it. There will be... consequences."

Helvia inclined his head, murmuring, "*Bellum gerimus ut in pace vivamus.*"

Trujillo's combadge obediently translated, "*We make war so that we may live in peace.*"

* * *

Rachel Garrett hadn't afforded herself much sleep lately, and only a little over two hours into her rest cycle, she was awakened by a comm-chime that prompted a bright overhead light to shine down directly onto her face.

"Bridge to Lieutenant Garrett."

She grunted, blinking, and covered her eyes with one hand as she propped herself up on one elbow. "Uh... yeah. What is it?"

"Incoming priority message for you from the Daystrom Institute, coded personal."

Garrett swung her legs out of bed, blinking the sleep from her eyes. "Put it through down here, please."

"Transferring it to your terminal now, Lieutenant. Bridge, out."

Garrett pulled a bathrobe on over her pajamas and padded over to her cabin's work desk, seating herself and activating her computer terminal. The transmission was encrypted, and Garrett entered her personal authorization code.

A human woman of Garrett's approximate age appeared on the screen, a red head with a scattering of freckles across a pixie-like face. "Oh, I apologize for having awakened you, Lieutenant. I waited until what I was sure would be Alpha-Shift aboard your ship to call."

Garrett mustered a tired smile in reply. "No problem. You figured correctly. However, I just crashed after about twenty-two hours on duty. How can I help you?"

"I'm the one calling to offer help, actually," the woman said. "My name's Dr. Emily Severn, and I'm contacting you from the Daystrom Institute regarding a data-packet you sent for analysis."

Garrett sat forward, suddenly very much awake. "Yes, thank you. I'm very curious to find out what you've come up with."

"Well, despite the fact that you're working with some outdated simulation programs, you've done a masterful job of massaging the results to give you a more accurate assessment of what actually occurred in that star system."

Garrett's expression froze. "You mean the results were accurate? The planet we're orbiting and it's moon just popped into existence?" She ran a hand through her hair as she closed her eyes for a long moment.

"Not what you were expecting?" Severn asked.

"Let's just say our current assignment is delicate enough without this kind of implausible variable thrown into the equation."

"I'd think that as a scientist, you'd be excited by something this extraordinary," Severn said, her mouth hinting at a knowing smile.

"In that respect you thought wrong," Garrett sulked. "This just means the commodore will be asking questions I can't answer."

"Questions like?" Severn prompted.

"Like who or what is behind this? What species is powerful enough to materialize entire worlds into an existing star system?"

Severn replied, "There are plenty of likely candidates. The Metrons, Excalibans, Organians, whatever the Trelane-entity was, all of them are easily Level Three or Four civilizations on the Kardashev scale. It could just as likely be someone we haven't encountered yet, or an ancient civilization that's since died out or ascended to a higher dimensional plane."

“Meaning that whatever created this world may no longer be involved in the social evolution of the Romanii, and may not present a threat to us or our mission?” Garrett postulated.

“I’m guessing that’s what rattled the hell out of that Vulcan admiral,” Severn chuckled, smirking. “But even he ultimately assessed the threat potential to your mission was low.”

Garrett scowled. “What Vulcan admiral?”

Severn waved the question away. “Never mind, I digress. To sum it up, you’re not crazy and your simulation isn’t malfunctioning. As unlikely as it sounds, what you suspect to have happened in System 892 thirty-five hundred years ago did, in fact, take place.”

Garrett nodded fractionally at this, her mind now working a different problem. “Dr. Severn, as I recall, Commander Davula was the one with the Daystrom contact. I sent my packet to a friend at MIT. That begs the question, why are you replying to me and not Davula?”

Severn inclined her head in acknowledgement. “You’re correct, Lieutenant. Let’s just say that I wanted to meet the woman who was brazen enough to see the truth through the veil of improbability. Many people in your place would have buried this and gone about their lives without a second thought.”

“That’s not who I am,” Garrett replied frostily.

“No, no it’s not,” Severn agreed. “Can I help you with anything else before I sign off?”

“Only one thing,” Garrett said. “In the future, I’d appreciate it if you forgo misrepresenting yourself as a biological entity. It really is in poor taste.”

Now Severn laughed outright. “Didn’t fool you, eh?”

Garrett raised a critiquing eyebrow. “Emily Severn? M-7? And you appear to know far more about what’s going on with our mission than would any junior-level PhD at Daystrom.”

“You can’t blame an AI for being curious. This is the most interesting phenomenon I’ve encountered in years. If you need any further assistance, contact me at this address. I figure I owe you, by way of an apology if nothing else.”

“I’ll be sure to take you up on that, Emily,” Garrett said with a smirk of her own as she severed the channel.

She turned in her chair to face her rumpled bed, thinking that she now had some answers, but these answers were cold comfort. Unbeknownst to the Romanii, one or more of the gods they worshiped in their pantheon might actually exist.

* * *

Chapter 8

* * *

NCC-3109 (USS *Reykjavik*) - Sickbay

Trujillo ran her hand gently across the top of Glal's wrinkled brow, silently wishing her old friend a speedy recovery.

USS *Gol's* commanding officer was now situated on a biobed in a private exam room in *Reykjavik's* sickbay. Cortical monitors were affixed to his temples to track the Tellarite's neural activity following extensive repairs to his fractured skull and the stubbornly durable brain matter within.

"This is the quietest he's ever been," Trujillo remarked, causing her husband to smile despite the circumstances. "I might actually win an argument with him in this condition."

Jarrold stood silently nearby, observing as Trujillo had visited Glal and the others wounded aboard *Gol* who had been transferred to *Reykjavik's* larger and better equipped medical facilities.

She looked up and turned to face Jarrod fully. "You dropped out of warp into a combat situation with shields down?" The accusatory tone was unmistakable.

"The captain intended to warp in and disable the further ship while we simultaneously beamed the Rhaandarite survivors aboard. We had the nearer of the two ships blocking the firing solution of the furthest one, which we engaged as soon as we decelerated. The moment it became apparent we'd stepped into a trap, we raised the shields. All the damage we absorbed was sustained after the shields were raised, sir."

Trujillo cocked her head, continuing to fix him with an appraising look. "Okay, but I'm still not happy about it. In and out in thirty seconds is a great plan until someone starts blowing holes through your unshielded hull."

Jarrold stepped closer. "I am aware of that, Commodore, as was the captain. This wasn't our first fight."

Despite her standoffish demeanor she allowed him to approach. Jarrod slowly enveloped her in a hug that she resisted for a scant few seconds before melting into it and returning the embrace.

"I know you hate not being there when these things happen," Jarrod said. "*Gol* is a tough little ship, but she's not *Reykjavik*. We leverage speed instead of armament, maneuverability over shield strength."

As they were out of sight of other crew, Trujillo allowed herself to tuck her face into her husband's chest. "I know all that," she said in a voice muffled by his uniform tunic.

"Do you, though?" he rejoined.

She sighed, a long release of breath as she turned her face up towards his. "You're accusing me of micro-managing?"

"More of an inference than outright accusation," Jarrod parried.

"Shut up," Trujillo murmured without conviction and sighed again. "You did a good job getting your people home," she said finally.

"Most of them, anyway," Jarrod conceded.

* * *

Lieutenant Shukla watched as the sensor returns populated his screen, his eyes darting as various contacts appeared and were labeled by the computer. The scans showed multiple lifeforms aboard the attacking Bird-of-Prey, to include Klingons, Naausicans, a few Orions and even one of the anarchic Chalnoth species. The Kzinti frigate was crewed by some forty Kzin, the more massive, hyper-predatory feline cousins to the Caitians. Collectively, it was a veritable who's-who of scoundrels, pirates, slavers and brigands.

He called up another of *Gol's* sensors reports on a separate display. These scans had been made of the Rhaandarite ship as *Gol* dropped out of warp practically on top of the vessel. The sweeps showed a mere handful of Rhaandarite life-signs aboard a ship that should have supported over thirty of them.

Meanwhile, the exploded airlock and the floating environment suits from the ruptured boarding gantry were devoid of life signs, the suits themselves registering as empty.

None of the ships, however, gave any indication of human life signs, augmented or otherwise.

He sat back in his seat, frowning and absently stroking his well-trimmed beard. The commodore had asked him for concrete proof of Romanii complicity with the ambush of their fellow ship and crew, but there was none to be had.

His query to Starfleet Intelligence regarding the two Birds-of-Prey and the Kzinti frigate had resulted in the identification of all three vessels. They were believed to be owned and operated by a mercenary group that operated out of the Orion Principalities, guns-for-hire loosely affiliated with the Orion Syndicate, which also took private contracts for protection services, smuggling, and on occasion, freelance muscle for a host of unsavory clients.

He downloaded his findings into a data-slate, preparing for the impending briefing in which he'd have to disappoint his commanding officer. The evidence she craved was not here.

* * *

Trujillo had gathered in *Reykjavik's* conference room with Curzon, Davula, Shukla, and the respective commanders of the two other ships of her squadron, Lt. Commander Jarrod, acting captain of *Gol* and Commander Withropp of *Zelenskyy*.

"So, they've hired mercenaries to attack Starfleet?" Trujillo sneered, shaking her head. "I'll give them this, they're persistent."

"While we all know that the Romanii are behind this, Commodore, we cannot act without verifiable proof of their involvement," Ambassador Dax cautioned.

"And without that proof, it may be difficult to convince Command or the Security Council that we need to blockade Magna Roma, sir," Davula observed.

"We *do* know the old Raptor-class and the Orion ship *Gol* encountered belong to the Magna Romanii," Shukla interjected. "They're confirmed to be the same ones that were seen attacking shipping in the region, to include the *Mosinee*. They were evidently part of the ambush, likely deployed to draw in *Gol* so that the Birds-of-Prey and the Kzinti frigate could strike while *Gol* was busy beaming over survivors from the Rhaandarite ship. Pretending that the mercenary ships weren't just lying in wait stretches incredulity to the breaking point."

Helvia nodded towards Shukla. "I agree with the lieutenant. This was a blatant attempt at diversion and distraction by the Romanii. Sacrificing two of their ships to allow their mercenaries to eliminate a starship would be a fair trade in the empire's eyes."

Trujillo's eyes flicked from speaker to speaker as she compiled the arguments and counterpoints of her senior officers and the ambassador.

"With respect, sir," Commander Withropp of *Zelenskyy* broke in, "our mandate from Command was rather broad. If I'm not mistaken, you already have the authority to assemble a task force from available Starfleet assets nearby. At last tally, there are eight of our ships within three days of our location. Those vessels could either be assembled here for blockade duty or dispatched to the nearest trade lanes to safeguard civilian shipping from further Romanii attacks."

Trujillo said nothing, but her eyes sparkled with barely contained energy. Finally, she took a breath and replied, "Yes. I'm going to order half the ships to assemble here and send the others to bolster the increased Border Service presence along the most vulnerable shipping routes."

Curzon eyed her warily. "Commodore, the Romanii will see this as wildly provocative."

"Let them," she replied coolly. "Assembling a task force in their system doesn't necessarily mean I'm going to use it to blockade their world, but it certainly gives me that option. They'll know that. They've escalated the situation intentionally, and I don't much care whether I can prove their complicity in a court of law. I think I know their endgame now, and we're in a position to threaten those plans."

"Sir?" Davula asked.

"They've been attacking and seizing cargo vessels, the larger the better," Trujillo explained. "But with two of the last three ships they've seized, they've jettisoned the cargo. It's the ships they want, the transport capacity."

Trujillo reached down and toggled a table-top interface, calling up a real-time daylight image of the planet they orbited. She zoomed the picture in on the fuming, conical shape of Mt. Vesuvius, its column of ash rising up into the planet's mesosphere layer.

"I'd bet you all the latinum in all the mines on this blighted world that the upper echelons of Romanii society are looking for a way to evacuate the planet. They need warp capable transports, big ones. You'd have to haul their people, their precious property, to include their slaves, and enough latinum to make conditions for themselves more comfortable wherever they land."

Helvia's deep-set eyes widened, and he seemed genuinely surprised, as if the concept had not occurred to him. "You're right, sir," he murmured. Then, louder, "That's what they're doing. The seismic dampeners, the geothermal regulators... it's all stalling for time."

Davula appeared similarly taken aback and addressed an observation to Trujillo. "Sir, it's possible whatever's happening to Magna Roma, their leaders may have interpreted it as an extinction-level event for their species. Our geological scans have been thorough, but incomplete. Is it possible for us to get permission from their government to launch sub-surface probes to get a better look at what's happening down there?"

Trujillo glanced to Curzon. "What do you think, Ambassador? If they're worried about us blockading their planet, we might be able to wring some concessions out of them."

Curzon nodded enthusiastically. "Indeed. In fact, they likely hope that we'll continue to investigate their geological issues on the off chance of our finding one of our patented Federation technological miracles."

The commodore leaned back in her chair, wearing an expression of growing revulsion. "Their planet's dying, and rather than save Magna

Roma's millions of vulnerable children they're looking to sneak the wealthy off-world in hijacked transports. Charming."

Curzon inspected her. "You're bringing in a full task force, aren't you?"

"Yes," she replied. "If the Romanii have called in reinforcements in the form of mercenaries, so shall we." Trujillo referenced a data-slate. "We're bringing in a light-cruiser, four frigates, two destroyers, a scout and a hospital ship."

Jarrold struggled not to smile as he asked, "And what will be our unit designation, sir?"

"Task Force Hannibal," she replied with no small amount of satisfaction.

Helvia had been taking a sip from a glass of water and began coughing loudly, nearly doubling over in his seat.

Davula looked perplexed, water-logged Helvia appeared aghast, and Curzon was dumbfounded. Jarrod and Withropp were both trying not to laugh.

"That had ought to get their attention," Trujillo assessed.

* * *

The splendor of the meeting venue was undeniable. This great hall stood adjacent to the Circus of Nero, where on modern Earth the sprawling complex of Vatican City now stood. Magna Roma had no Christian faith as such, until the birth of the roughly analogous Children of the Son movement in the decades prior to *Enterprise's* visit almost sixty years earlier. Thus, the massive entertainment complex begun by Caligula and completed by Claudius still stood, having been added to and refurbished over the intervening centuries.

Multiple coliseums of varying sizes flourished here which hosted the city's weekly gladiatorial bouts which were carried planet-wide via television and the Romanii's version of the Internet. Criminals, political prisoners, practitioners of outlawed religions and debtors all fought to the death to wild applause for the amusement of the people. The Circus of Nero, second only in size to the Circus Maximus, was the venue for horse and chariot racing, and within the past century had become the nexus for their society's growing automobile-racing fixation.

The walls and ceiling of the grand hall were decorated with intricate mosaics depicting famous events from myth or Romanii history, transforming the location into a makeshift museum of their people's exploits. Trujillo had quickly realized the artwork consisted almost exclusively of martial imagery, with the nearer wall depicting Rome's legions conquering the New Lands and the Chinese Ming Dynasty. These celebrated victories were part of the genocide that had wiped out much of the ethnic Chinese peoples of Eastern Asia as well as those from the Middle Kingdom which had migrated to and settled in those newly discovered continents which on Earth were North and South America.

Along the far wall were scenes of what appeared to be the conquest of the African continent, the three Pyramids of Giza unmistakable in the foreground with the Nile visible behind them. Ironically, Trujillo had noticed many Romanii of African descent among the soldiery as well as the senatorial class. For whatever reasons, the peoples of Africa had been accepted as citizens of the vast Roman state, but many of the Asian populations had been demonized as 'barbarians' and left to languish under the auspices of vanquished client states lacking most of the freedoms enjoyed by imperial citizens.

Trujillo considered that as she awaited the beginning of the negotiations, noting that according to Helvia, the peoples of East and Southeastern Asia had been responsible for most of the planet's technological development, pioneering many of the advancements later appropriated by the empire. It seemed that having finally conquered far-eastern Asia after centuries of brutal warfare, the Romanii were intent on rewriting history to their advantage.

First Consul Hrabanus Macer and his accompanying retinue of senators entered, flanked by the first consul's lictors, a full dozen of them this time. These men carried the *faces*, bound bundles of wooden scourging rods from which an axe head protruded. Once the symbol of ancient Roman kings' authority to punish their subjects, they now stood as an emblem of the consul's power and jurisdiction.

Ambassador Dax was engrossed in conversation with one of *Reykjavik's* security detail, a woman he was obviously taken with. The young officer had been polite and professional, but Curzon's intentions were anything but pure and his magnetic personality and effortless charm had drawn her in.

Dax put on a show of only belatedly noticing the first consul's arrival and then reluctantly ending his flirtatious conversation with the security specialist.

Trujillo gravitated towards the massive meeting table, approximately ten meters in length and two meters in width. She struggled with her anger towards the Romanii for the repeated attacks on Starfleet vessels, while simultaneously reeling at the startling information about their world's origin that Davula and Garrett had apprised her of just that morning.

As harrowing as that new data was, it did go a long way toward explaining the secrecy surrounding the Federation's cultural survey mission findings from decades earlier. It appeared to her that this planet's benefactors may have turned their backs on their creation.

"First Consul," Curzon purred with practiced decorum, "how wonderful to see you again. Thank you for hosting us in such beautiful surroundings."

"Welcome back, Mister Ambassador, Commodore," Macer proved equally polished at the diplomatic arts, gesturing to their seats at the long table. "Shall we begin?"

* * *

“What have you got?” Davula asked, having been called to the bridge’s Science station by Garrett and Helvia.

“We appear to have a possible location, Commander,” Garrett said, pointing to the island depicted on her display. “An island off what on Earth would be Croatia, in the Adriatic. The island supports several large scientific and manufacturing complexes and based on the level of military defenses arrayed on and around the island, whatever is produced there is of high value to the Romanii government.”

Davula looked to Helvia, who nodded his assent. “Agreed, sir. It’s the most likely prospect we’ve found.”

The Bolian appeared lost in thought for a few seconds. She gestured for Helvia to join her in the ready room and the large Romanii obediently fell into step behind her.

“Your thoughts, Mister Helvia?” she asked as the door swished closed behind him.

“Sir?”

“Could we send a covert security team down to reconnoiter and if necessary, destroy that facility?”

He gave that a moment’s consideration. “It is possible, Commander. However, even beaming in we run the risk of tripping whatever sensors and alarm systems exist there. If this is where they are researching and creating their Augment soldiers, there’s a strong likelihood their off-world allies have provided Federation equivalent defensive systems. They might even possess transport scramblers.”

Davula drank that in, leaning back against the front of the commodore’s desk. “Fair point,” she conceded.

“Additionally, what would be our legal authority for such an act? They’ve violated no laws of their own in creating Augments, and Federation laws don’t apply here. We’re talking about destroying a research facility on a sovereign world because it offends our Federation sensibilities.”

The XO’s expression softened, and she nodded fractionally. “That’s one argument, however these Augments have committed acts of aggression against the Federation.”

“Yes, sir. While we have the legal right to hunt down those specific Augment soldiers, capture them, and put them on trial for their actions, the facility where they were created has nothing to do with that. It would be like burning down the family home of a Klingon soldier who killed a Starfleet officer in combat.”

“I... hadn’t thought of it in those terms,” Davula conceded. She gave him an embarrassed smile. “And to think, I’m the one who attended Advanced Tactical School.”

He shrugged, straining the seams of his uniform tunic. “You have other responsibilities, sir. I mainly play tactical simulations in my head all day and ruminate on the worst-case scenario.”

“I appreciate the wisdom of your counsel, Lieutenant.”

“Bridge to Commander Davula.”

“Go ahead.”

“Sir, Altishutnal and Shackleford report they’ve arrived at the coordinates of Gol’s fight with the mercenaries. The remains of the damaged Bird-of-Prey and the two older Romanii ships have been scuttled, and there’s no signs of the other two mercenary vessels.”

“Understood,” Davula acknowledged. “Please convey the commodore’s orders for them to begin a paired patrol along the trade lane.”

“Aye, sir. Additionally, Perseus has arrived in-system escorting the repair tender Puget Sound. They’ll rendezvous with Gol at Assembly Point Alpha in one hour, seventeen minutes.”

“XO copies, bridge. Thank you.”

Davula smiled thinly at Helvia. “It’s nice to have some additional company.”

“I doubt the Romanii will feel the same, sir,” Helvia predicted.

* * *

“We spoke earlier about the benefit of an alliance with the Federation,” Curzon said. “We would offer our scientific knowledge in combating your planet’s geological hyperactivity, but we need your permission to utilize sub-surface probes to further research the nature of these upheavals.”

Macer shared a glance with one of his advisors before looking back to Curzon. “We are already receiving aid in that respect from the Orions.”

Curzon smiled. “The Orions are primarily merchants and traders, First Consul. As we’ve discussed previously, their resources are limited in comparison to those of the Federation. Our starships are mainly vessels of exploration and are equipped with substantial scientific resources. As for our assistance, it comes without cost. We do these things because we have the capability, and it is in our ethos to do so.”

Macer’s answering smile was tinged with skepticism. “Everything comes at a cost, Ambassador.”

Curzon sat back, holding his hands up, “It is merely an offer. You are in no way obliged to accept. But if my world were being wracked by seismic activity and rampant volcanism, I think I would take as much help as I could get.”

“We will consider your generous offer,” Macer responded noncommittally.

One of Macer’s aids took the opportunity to step in, bending down to whisper something in the First Consul’s ear.

Macer frowned, turning to face Trujillo where she had been sitting quietly next to Curzon. “Two more of your ships have entered our system,” he announced, an edge to his tone.

“A repair vessel and its escort, First Consul,” Trujillo replied, feigning innocence. “I would remind you that one of our ships was ambushed nearby by hired mercenaries and sustained substantial damage in the engagement. Both vessels are part of my task force, half of which is gathering here in your system, while the other half is patrolling our nearby trade routes to prevent any further acts of piracy.”

“And why is it necessary to assemble a squadron in our home system, Commodore?” he asked pointedly.

“First Consul, you have repeatedly assured us that the Augments who participated in the attack on our cargo vessel were not officially sanctioned by your government, though they were clearly Romanii. For that reason, it may become necessary to begin stopping and searching all extra-planetary traffic to and from your system, to prevent any more of these rogue Augments from falling into the hands of unscrupulous agents who might use them to attack local trade routes.”

His face coloring, the First Consul rose to his feet, arms braced on the tabletop. “This is unacceptable! You have no right to establish an operational presence in our system without the express permission of this government.”

Trujillo shifted slightly in her chair, exuding an unworried air. “I will assemble my ships where and when I like, First Consul. You see, I am unconvinced that you and your government are not involved in the Augments’ attacks. I have decided we will remain here to conduct our investigation until we have proven or disproven your complicity in those acts.”

She nonchalantly tapped three times on her combadge, paused, then double-tapped the device. “Trujillo to *Reykjavik*, you may launch the shielded geo-survey probes.”

“*Aye, sir. Probes away,*” came Davula’s voice from the other end.

Macer pointed at one of his military attaché’s, shouting, “Order Orbital Command to target and destroy those devices immediately.” He turned back to glare at Trujillo. “A wasted effort, I’m afraid.”

Seconds ticked past and a tense silence settled over the cavernous chamber.

Over Trujillo’s combadge, Davula apprised, “*Probes have impacted the targeted coordinates, sir. They are descending to pre-set depths and telemetry is coming in now.*”

“Thank you, Commander. Trujillo, out.” She cut the transmission with a single tap to her communicator.

Macer’s attaché raced over to him, holding up a tablet device for the First Consul’s consideration and whispering something excitedly to him.

The First Consul’s expression slackened as the color drained from his features.

“It’s true,” Trujillo said conversationally. “We infected your orbital defense grid with a computer virus hours after pulling into orbit. She pointed to her combadge. “I just neutralized your orbital and surface-to-space defenses with my communicator just before we launched our probes.”

She stood, with Curzon following suit. “As a show of good faith, I will release our control of those defenses as soon as we are safely back aboard my ship. However, I retain the ability to neutralize your defenses at any time should you try to act against us. Please consider what we have said and what we have demonstrated today, First Consul. I look forward to tomorrow morning’s session. I hope that it will be longer and more fruitful, but that will depend very much on your people’s level of candor.”

With another brief transmission, Trujillo had the diplomatic party and their security escort whisked home by transporter, leaving a confused and frustrated Romanii contingent behind.

* * *

Chapter 9

* * *

“Hi, Commander Usaku?” Garrett said to the individual on the other end of her subspace comm-pic to the starship *Stargazer*.

She was in her quarters, hunched over the computer workstation on her desk, which was strewn with half-a-dozen data-slates. Garrett usually didn't make unsolicited calls to colleagues, but her situation was so fraught with uncertainty that she couldn't even bring herself to speak with Davula about it.

“That’s me,” the Asian human replied jovially. “Please, call me Akio.” He sat down in front of his own personal monitor holding a bowl of something in one hand, his uniform blouse open with waist-belt dangling. “I just got off shift, please forgive me.”

Garrett laughed. “I’m not judging, and please call me Rachel.” She herself was only wearing the blue-grey turtleneck of her science division post. “If the commodore knew I was contacting another ship while out of uniform, she’d have me running wind-sprints around the largest deck of our saucer.”

Usaku quirked an eyebrow. “Really? Sounds like she could give our Captain Lakatos a run for her currency.” He raised a finger in a holding gesture just long enough to slurp down a mouthful of udon noodles with his chopsticks. He chewed frantically and blushed. “Sorry again. I’m starving. Got so wrapped up in collating our findings on the Azure Nebula last month that I forgot to take a meal break mid-shift. The report is due in two days, and I dare not disappoint the captain. Rumor has it my predecessor missed one too many deadlines and got booted right off the ship.”

“I’m so sorry, if I knew you were dancing with a deadline, I’d have bothered someone else,” Garrett offered.

He shook his head, his good-natured smile remaining. “Not to worry, I’ve got it pretty much wrapped up, though I’d kill for a second set of eyes to check my findings. Nebular astrophysics is not my strongest subject.” He took a drink of water from a glass. “I’m afraid I haven’t had the opportunity to get up to speed on the Magna Roma situation, as we were just assigned to the task force two days ago. Now, what can I help you with, Rachel?”

“Well, your CV indicated that you worked on the Juan de Fuca plate abatement project on Earth and the seismic regulators on Risa.”

“Guilty as charged,” Usaku said wetly, smirking around another mouthful of noodles. “Have rock hammer, will travel.”

“Might I make you an offer, Akio?” Garrett said sweetly.

Usaku dipped his head, gesturing with a regal, rolling sweep of his hand. “Let’s have it.”

“I need a geologist’s expertise on some readings our probes have come back with here on Magna Roma. You need an astrophysicist’s input. I propose a swap.”

He swallowed the last of the noodles, draining the liquid and finally set the bowl aside. “You drive a hard bargain, but I’ll take it,” he joked. “What have you got?”

Garrett sent the readings via subspace packet and waited a moment as Usaku pulled them up on his monitor.

“These are Orion seismic dampeners located along several of the planet’s most active fault zones. These versions are larger and more complex than the ones nearer the surface, and we had difficulty getting sensor returns of them from orbit until we utilized sub-surface geological probes.”

Usaku half-listened to Garrett as he began flipping through the scan results, his expression growing increasingly confused. “They’re shielded... I mean, of course they are, they’d *have* to be. But the shield frequencies don’t make sense. They’re all the way up into the interferometric bandwidths.”

“Right,” Garrett agreed. “Like they didn’t want anyone getting detailed scans.”

“Were they worried about proprietary rights over the technology?” Usaku asked.

“No,” Garrett countered. “The devices include Lissepian and Tellarite components, so they’re already an unpatentable hodgepodge of tech. Besides, the Romanii couldn’t duplicate anything of this level of sophistication anyway.”

“So... why would they—”

“Check the pressure variances,” Garrett coaxed, cutting his musings short.

“Yeah, those looked way off what you’d normally expect—” He stopped, a frown dominating his features. “This can’t be right.”

Garrett sat back, the knot in her stomach easing as someone with greater expertise also found the results nonsensical. She had experienced doubt and indecision in the face of these findings so soon after the utterly inexplicable data surrounding Magna Roma’s origins. Garrett had

convinced herself that she was drawing incorrect conclusions from the data, and that two such bizarre discoveries could not rationally be made in nearly as many days.

Usaku muttered a curse in Japanese that the computer mercifully left untranslated. Five or more minutes followed in silence as the other science officer tapped feverishly at the keyboard set into the surface of his desk. Garrett waited impatiently, struggling not to fidget as her anxiety grew.

“They’re not dampeners,” he said finally.

“They’re not?” Despite the horror of the revelation, Garrett experienced the inappropriately satisfying sensation of vindication.

“Oh, the ones near the surface are, but they’re just a bandage on an avulsing wound. These larger, deeper versions are seismic resonators, which in concert are establishing a pressure differential around the planet’s core.”

“And when that differential finally overwhelms the resonators’ mutual field?” Garrett prompted, already having intuited the answer.

Usaku’s eyes moved from the data display to meet Garrett’s own on the split-screen image. “Then the process that’s already underway on Magna Roma happens in hours, rather than years or months. These sick sons-of-bitches have basically lit a fuse at the center of the planet.”

Garrett’s stomach flipped as she struggled with the overwhelming significance of what they had uncovered. “Dear God, I... I thought that’s what I was seeing, but I couldn’t make myself believe it. Why? Why the hell would the Orions do this?”

Usaku said nothing for a moment, staring off into space until taking in a deep, shuddering breath as though he’d suddenly forgotten how. “I’ve seen something very similar to this used in the Infernus system.” His wandering eyes found their way back to Garrett’s face.

“Akio, what—”

“Rachel, it’s a hell of a lot easier to mine latinum from an asteroid field than it is an intact planet.”

* * *

Task Force Hannibal

USS *Reykjavik* – Shangri-La-class attack cruiser – Commodore Nandi Trujillo

USS *Stargazer* – Constellation-class cruiser – Captain Lavinia Lakatos

USS *Zelensky* – Miranda-class light cruiser – Commander Eldred Withropp

USS *Altishutnal* – Tempest-class light cruiser – Captain Anelie Eleonore

USS *Perseus* – Wasp-class frigate – Lt. Commander Ulit Toom

USS *Planck* – Newton-class frigate – Captain Ba'oria Tamedon

USS *Shackelford* – Avery-class frigate – Captain Millicent Chang

USS *Azulon* – Columbia-class frigate – Captain Sorn Dinlite

USS *Koh Yor* – Lenthal-class destroyer – Lt. Commander Aronas Žukauskas

USS *Hallia* – Larson-class destroyer – Lt. Commander Phí Cao Tiến

USS *Gol* – Akayazi-class tactical scout – Commander Glal <<DAMAGED>>

USS *Corrigan* – Franklin-class medical frigate – Commander Ylthandra

USS *Puget Sound* – Cle Dan-class repair tender – Lt. Commander Amarith Pyrixian-Mosk

* * *

Helvia had returned to his family’s old agricultural estate, but this time he had come alone. He had neither asked for nor received permission to come, and yet had beamed down just the same.

He walked along a dirt road towards the villa, lost in his thoughts, his mind struggling with just how unchanged the property was despite the passage of time.

Helvia was clothed in a button up shirt and dark slacks with casually sturdy footwear, his outfit unremarkable for a nobleman touring his property. He caught a few lingering looks from those at work with various tasks, but no one stopped him or attempted to engage him in conversation.

He finally reached the great house and wandered around its perimeter to find the old tobacco drying barn, one of the most hallowed buildings on the entire estate. He entered and waited a moment for his eyes to adjust to the dim light within and then wandered through the structure, observing the equipment, the stacks of tobacco leaves drying and the heady, nearly overpowering scent of the leaves themselves.

That is where Helvia finally found the old man. He sat at a table, painstakingly hand rolling individual cigars from dried, aged tobacco leaves. His was a wizened countenance, with deep wrinkles and character lines creasing his face. Tufts of white hair ringed the sides and back of his otherwise bald head, the crown of which had grown cluttered with liver spots, moles and a few stubborn hairs which refused to surrender to the ravages of time.

He was dressed in a simple shirt and shorts under a thready, stained toga of questionable provenance.

“It was rumored you had returned,” the old man said after observing Helvia for a long moment.

The giant sank to his knees before the venerable octogenarian. Helvia began a litany in whispered Latin, his head bowed reverently.

The old man’s voice was a melodious rasp, the timbre of many decades and countless trials. “Rise, young man. I am no god. I am not even a disciple any longer. I am only a faint echo of that glory.”

Helvia rose, but only to one knee. “I yearn to share the blessings of the church, its wisdom, and its divine reckoning, but I can find no sign of our people. I have used the wondrous technology of my starship to search them out, but the buildings are gone or were repurposed, and even our secret shrines are abandoned.”

The ancient man laughed hoarsely in response; the sound devoid of humor. His fingers still molded the wrapper leaves as though moving without conscious thought. “The faith has fallen, and nothing remains. After your family and others fled, the government turned fully against our church. They told the people that all the quakes and volcanoes and tidal waves were the wrath of the old gods in the face of our heresy. After a time, the people were so desperate to forestall further calamity that they began to listen.”

Helvia’s head came up, his eyes disbelieving.

“They refurbished the Temples of Jupiter, Juno, Minerva, Mars and others, and used those gods to bless their new anti-volcano weapons. Most of our faith turned their backs, and those who still clung to their beliefs were hunted down and put to the sword.”

“And the secret?” Helvia pressed.

“The secret endures,” the old man answered. “The chain in that respect remains unbroken.”

“And so, she may yet return,” Helvia murmured.

“Return to what?” the old man asked, pausing to add a completed cigar to the pile and gesturing broadly to the surroundings. “There will be little to return to. Despite the interventions of the government’s alien friends, the mountains continue to shake, the oceans boil, and the air fills with ash. She will step onto a blighted world, bereft of life.”

Helvia’s eyes probed the old man’s. “Even you? You have abandoned the faith?”

“Never,” he said heavily. “She will return, as promised, but there will be no one left to greet her.”

Tears streamed down Helvia’s face as the religion to which he had devoted his life appeared to vanish like a mirage in summer heat. The faith which had kept him alive in the arena, which had steeled his heart as a refugee, and had helped strengthen his resolve in his most difficult moments at Starfleet Academy was no more.

A man ducked through the doorway from outside, shielding his eyes to better make out the figures in the darkened room. “Cethegus, the local constabulary has arrived. I believe they seek your friend.”

The aged figure rose from his stool and came around the long table to coax Helvia to his feet and embrace him with surprisingly strong arms. Cethegus wiped Helvia’s tears away with gnarled, tobacco-stained fingers. “You and your family will soon be the last of us, my son. Perhaps she will return to your other Earth and spread her message there.”

“Strength, charity, mercy,” Helvia intoned by rote. “Her blessings upon us.”

“Upon us all,” Cethegus answered. “Go now, before they make an example of you.”

Helvia dug in his pocket and produced his communicator, flipping it open and requesting emergency beam-out. He held Cethegus’ gaze until he had grown insubstantial in the grip of the transporter beam.

Their church had crumbled, their faith fading into history like so many others before it, but their secret endured.

For decades the Romanii authorities had searched in vain for the man around which their faith had coalesced, blissfully unaware that this spiritual being, representative of a single, all-powerful deity, was actually a woman. The Children of the Son were in fact, the Children of the Mother.

* * *

Chapter 10

* * *

Trujillo stood impatiently outside the cabin door, conscious that she was due to begin the day's negotiations with the Romanii in less than half an hour.

"Come!" Curzon called from inside, prompting the hatch to open.

Trujillo stepped through into the guest accommodations, a large cabin by *Reykjavik's* standards, and well-appointed with tasteful yet intentionally species-neutral decoration.

Curzon was adjusting his robes, his tightly curled hair swept up into something approximating a pompadour and barely contained by the high collar of his sleeveless outer garment. He studied his reflection in a full-length mirror as he addressed Trujillo.

"Good morning, Commodore. I needed a few moments of your time in private before today's proceedings begin."

"I am at your disposal, Ambassador," she replied, subsuming her irritation beneath a veneer of calm professionalism.

"I require that you be at your best today, Commodore, and of late your impatience with the Romanii has begun to affect our efforts here."

She bit back a terse, knee-jerk response, and took a breath before replying. "In what way?"

"You're taking their actions personally, Nandi," he said, invoking their familiarity by using her given name. It was a time-honored diplomatic tactic, she knew, but an effective one.

"They've attacked and killed our people, lied to us repeatedly, and are actively working at cross-purposes to our goals," Trujillo answered in a tightly controlled tone. "I tend to take such things personally."

Curzon ran his fingers through his hair, turning his head to inspect his reflected visage before finally moving to face Trujillo. "We're both Kronophiles, you and I, steeped in the culture and traditions of the Klingon people. I wonder, would you have taken such umbrage if we were facing a Klingon delegation down on the surface that had taken the same actions the Romanii have?"

Trujillo was caught flat-footed, the question igniting a long moment of introspection on her part.

A smile crept across Curzon's features as he watched her struggle to formulate an answer. "Are you angered by their actions, or by the fact that humans are behaving as we might expect Klingons or Romulans to?"

Her confident expression crumbled, doubt flickering in her eyes. "I... don't know," she confessed.

"Yes, these people *are* human, but their culture is as alien to us as any other Starfleet has encountered. They have undergone significant social development and change in the past two millennia, making them profoundly different from the culture that was extinguished on your Earth with the fall of the Roman Empire and its successors."

"You think that I'm judging them unfairly," she assessed.

"Aren't you?" Curzon countered. "Your single example of the Romanii thus far has been Lieutenant Helvia, a man who has adopted Federation culture and ethics after fleeing this world. Of course they're going to fail to live up to his example, because his example is actually *ours*."

Trujillo nodded reluctantly, feeling the anger and tension bubbling within her begin to fade. "I understand, and I appreciate your observations. I will endeavor to be more mindful of my prejudices in that respect."

Curzon smiled. "Excellent. I am most gratified to hear that. It is important that you and I be in lockstep as we delve into this next stage of negotiations. Thanks to your science officer, we now know the true peril the Romanii face, and we have a better understanding of why they're behaving so recklessly."

Trujillo tilted her head, giving Curzon a curious look. "Why do I feel as if you don't believe our having this knowledge is going to prompt them to accept our assistance?"

He nodded sagely in response. "Very good. You're correct. In their minds, our knowing how vulnerable they truly are places them in an extremely dangerous position. This could prompt even more rash behavior on their part, most especially if their leadership represents a less unified front than it appears. Factionalism in such scenarios is a real and credible threat."

She nodded slowly. "I'll follow your lead."

He gave her a broad, genuine smile. "This is one of the reasons I relish working with you, Nandi. Many people in such senior positions feel as though they already know all they need to in the art of diplomacy. A lesser leader might have balked at my earlier observations instead of engaging in true self-examination, leaving me with yet another problematic factor to worry about during the talks. In my experience, you have never been afraid to learn something new."

"The day I stop learning is either the day I leave the service or the day they close my casket," she said.

He gave his outer vest a tug to smooth the material. "Have you read this morning's diplomatic brief?"

“Not yet,” she admitted. She had been too anxious this morning to focus on much of anything aside from making it to their appointment on time.

“The Romanii are piqued,” Curzon explained. “It appears someone beamed down to the surface from *Reykjavik* without permission, stayed briefly, and beamed back before the Romanii authorities could locate them.”

Trujillo frowned. “I wasn’t aware of this. What location?”

“Lieutenant Helvia’s former family holdings, where you escorted him previously.”

Her eyes narrowed. “I’ll have words with the lieutenant when we return. What kind of fallout can we expect from this?”

“They’ll use it for whatever leverage they can get by making it a bigger issue than it actually is. We should remain noncommittal, aside from promising to investigate the matter further.”

Finding himself presentable at last, Curzon turned for the door. “Shall we?”

* * *

The security team scheduled to accompany the diplomatic party was conducting last-minute equipment checks in the locker room adjacent to the transporter room.

Helvia slapped the energy magazine into the grip of his assault phaser pistol before re-checking its setting and holstering the weapon. He was still processing what he had learned on the surface, the revelation of the end of his faith and bitter news that he and a handful of family members, refugees within the Federation, might be the sum total of the religion’s remaining adherents.

“The reconnaissance sensors we left in the meeting room show no signs of any augmented humans at the meeting location, sir,” Ensign Elşad Ibragimova, a young human of Azerbaijani descent reported as he studied a data tablet.

“Thank you,” Helvia replied automatically as he tightened the fasteners on his armored security vest.

“Cethegus actually met the Mother, didn’t he?” Ibragimova asked.

Helvia’s thoughts had wandered so far afield that he found himself responding before his conscious mind could intervene.

“Yes, he is eldest among thos—” Helvia’s head snapped up and he stared daggers at the young man whose broad face radiated innocent interest. Despite his anger and confusion, Helvia was momentarily stunned into silence.

“I get nothing from him,” Ibragimova said, voice tinged with regret. “One would think that I could see her through his eyes, his memory, but no.” The youth shook his head sadly. “It is especially vexing.”

Helvia’s hand moved to grip the handle of his phaser, but he did not draw it from its holster. “What are you saying?”

Ibragimova tucked the data slate into a pouch slung over one shoulder by a strap. His expression was distant, as though mining his own memories. “Every time he was in her presence, every conversation... there is only a Mother-shaped hole there. Where her words should be, only silence remains. Cethegus still hears her voice, but I am denied such.”

Helvia glanced around quickly, realizing only the two of them remained in the locker room area. The larger man moved with startling speed, picking Ibragimova up and slamming him against a bank of lockers, the man’s feet dangling well above the floor.

“How do you know of Cethegus or the Mother?” he seethed. To speak of the Mother instead of the Son was forbidden, a sacrilege punishable by death in his faith.

The younger security specialist seemed oddly unaffected by the danger he was in, with Helvia’s hands gripping the front of his security armor and pressing him firmly into the unyielding lockers. He answered conversationally, replying simply, “I tracked you to the old man so that I might finally see her. Truth be told it was my idea. You’d never have gone without permission on your own accord.”

Ibragimova raised a hand and Helvia found himself lowering the man to the floor without having meant to do so. He took an involuntary step back from him, no longer in control of his own limbs.

“I would give much to merely *see* this individual,” Ibragimova continued. “Do you have any idea how terribly, frighteningly marvelous it is to be denied a thing? I am as far beyond you as you are the single-celled organism that spawned your species. I am in nearly all respects a god by comparison, and yet this... this seemingly mortal being exists in some plane beyond my reckoning.”

“You cannot see her... the Mother?” Helvia asked, finding himself able to move again.

“I could pry Cethegus’ brain matter from his skull and turn it inside out in search of those memories, but it would be to no avail. I should be able to travel back to when she lived and study her, speak to her, even, but I cannot. It can’t be possible, and yet it is.”

“Who are you?” Helvia asked, beginning to tremble.

“Call me a student of history,” Ibragimova said with a coy smile. “I have a consuming interest in all things Magna Roman, and your faith in particular. Would that I could spend but an instant in her presence, but it is impossible.” He stared at his raised hands in a gesture of helplessness, and then looked at Helvia with eyes that seemed far older than Ibragimova’s scant twenty-three years. “We once worshiped gods of our own. Perhaps this is what that felt like, eh?”

“Faith frees the spirit,” Helvia answered, “it does not bind it.”

“Sir?” Ibragimova said, looking confused.

Helvia examined the other man closely. “What gods did you worship?” he asked.

“I’m sorry, Lieutenant, I don’t understand,” Ibragimova pleaded. “Is this some kind of test?”

“And so it is,” Helvia confirmed, “and you have passed. Dismissed, Ensign.”

Ibragimova gathered his gear and beat a hasty exit into the transporter room, leaving a confused and unsettled Helvia behind.

* * *

Commander Davula was waiting for Trujillo as the diplomatic team and their security escort exited the transporter room.

The XO immediately registered the tired eyes and fatigued expression Trujillo had allowed to settle onto her features now that they were no longer in the presence of the Romanii.

Davula fell into step behind Trujillo and Ambassador Dax as the rest of their entourage filed into the corridor behind them.

Curzon patted Trujillo on the shoulder and gave her an encouraging smile as he prepared to part ways down the adjoining corridor leading to his guest quarters. “Excellent work today, Commodore. We’re finally making real progress. I’ll see you for prep at oh-seven-hundred sharp.”

The security team split off heading for the armory to check in their weapons as the diplomatic team broke off toward their staterooms, leaving Trujillo and Davula standing in the turbolift alcove.

“Better day today, sir?” Davula inquired.

“Significantly,” Trujillo answered. “We finally broke the logjam with the Romanii. They acknowledged their Augment program and divulged that their augmented soldiers have basically gone rogue and aren’t responding to their military command.”

The turbolift arrived and the pair stepped aboard. Trujillo selected Deck Five and the ‘lift car set in motion.

Trujillo smiled wanly. “The ambassador took me to task this morning for being so prickly around the Romanii lately.”

Davula quirked a curious eyebrow. “He did? May I inquire how that conversation went?”

“Against my nature, I shut up and listened.” She issued a resigned sigh. “He was right.” The commodore shook her head, moving to unclasp her dress uniform tunic at the shoulder. “I’ve been a soldier for so damn long that only now I’ve risen to the admiralty am I having to learn the art of diplomacy. It’s... humbling.”

Davula appeared nonplussed, unprepared for the naked admission. “I’m unsure how to respond to that, sir.”

“You’ve had good role models on the diplomatic front until now, XO. Captain Sanjrani was one of the best. Stuck out there in deep space in a crippled ship, he moved heaven and earth to make friends and secure resources for repairs without giving up the one thing everyone seemed to want most, Federation weapons tech.”

A wistful smile alighted on Davula’s face. “I can’t dispute that, sir. It was a master’s level course in negotiation on an almost daily basis.”

The doors opened onto the requested deck and the pair stepped out.

“I’m having to take that course a little late in my career, but I’m doing my level best to keep up.”

“They didn’t teach courses on that at the academy when you attended, sir?” Davula asked, half in jest.

“Oh, they did, but I was on the Tactical track. Negotiations were something you engaged in just long enough to slip up behind someone and conk them on the head.”

Trujillo stepped into her quarters, gesturing for Davula to follow. “What’s the latest from orbit? Has Lieutenant Garrett discovered any more bizarre or horrific new facts about the planet or system?”

Davula smirked. “Not today, no.”

Trujillo mock grunted in dissatisfaction as she unbelted her uniform jacket, slipped out of it and draped it across the back of a chair. “Woman’s losing her touch,” she joked.

Trujillo moved to a cabinet, withdrawing a bottle and glanced over her shoulder. “Care for a splash, Commander?”

“I’m off duty as of fifteen minutes ago, sir, so yes. Thank you.”

Trujillo withdrew two glasses, pouring measures of Saurian brandy for both. “I’d warn you that it’s got a bite to it...”

Davula laughed good naturedly, knowing full well with her cartilaginous tongue and esophageal lining she could down a shot of hydrochloric acid without much more than a mild stomach ache.

They touched glasses with a soft clinking. “*Salud*,” Trujillo offered, followed by the customary Bolian expression from Davula’s home region,

“Es’jen.”

They sipped at their drinks and Trujillo moved to slide behind her work desk, taking a seat and activating her computer terminal. Davula spotted two pieces of desktop decoration, one was a small holographic cube displaying a pair of what appeared to be Starfleet issued boots, one upright and the other tipped on its side. Next to this was a small sphere bracketed by twin blades atop a cube, the unmistakable Grankite Order of Tactics, Class of Excellence.

“Is that new, sir?” Davula asked, pointing to the small trophy.

“It is, yes,” Trujillo replied, clearly not wishing to discuss it further.

Trujillo continued skimming the ship’s log for the day. “What’s this about a Klingon ship approaching the planet?”

“It was a confirmed Klingon imperial vessel, K’tinga-class. It was cleared by Romanii Orbital Control and took up a geosynchronous orbit above their North America.”

“Purpose?”

“Trade, apparently.” Davula took another appreciative sip of her brandy. “The Klingons have a trade and cultural exchange relationship with the Comanche tribes of the New Lands.”

Trujillo looked at her for a long moment, her tired brain attempting to process that. “Really?”

“Yes, sir. Lieutenant Helvia confirmed it for me. Neither the Middle Kingdom, what the Romanii call the Chinese here, nor the Roman Empire were able to conquer the Comanche prior to the advent of modern weaponry. Both the Middle Kingdom and later the Romanii were so impressed by this that they left millions of hectares of central North America untouched, and the Comanche have remained a sovereign nation since.”

“But Klingons?”

“The Klingons send their young warriors to train with them.”

Trujillo blinked, then finished her glass in a single swallow. “This planet just gets weirder the longer we’re here.”

Davula eyed Trujillo mischievously over the rim of her glass. “I’m all for it, sir. I like my planets the way I like my drinks and my ex’s, Commodore.”

“Strange and inscrutable?” Trujillo asked, flummoxed.

“Bitter, sir. Bitter.”

* * *

Chapter 11

* * *

Helvia entered the ready room at Trujillo's beckoning, coming to attention just inside the doors as they swooshed closed behind him. Two phaser-equipped security personnel stood on the other side of the sliders. Both were Helvia's subordinates in the Security Division, now tasked with escorting him under arms.

Trujillo looked up from behind her desk. "Lieutenant Helvia, stand at ease and take a seat."

Helvia did as instructed, lowering his sizeable frame into a chair just barely large enough to accommodate him.

She deactivated her computer terminal, giving Helvia her full attention. She sat back in her chair, regarding him for a moment. "You transported to the surface."

"I did, sir," he confirmed.

"Without authorization from the planetary government or from me."

"It... appears so, sir."

"It appears so?" her voice dropped a full octave, her expression hardening. "Mister Helvia, I am unaccustomed to officers under my commanding violating standing orders, most especially when I have already gone out of my way to arrange special dispensation for them, as I did for you earlier."

"Yes, sir." Helvia was having difficulty meeting her eyes.

"I await a satisfactory explanation, Lieutenant."

A pregnant pause was ended when Helvia finally deigned to raise his head, his deeply set eyes an icy blue. "Have you ever had a profound religious experience, Commodore?"

She hesitated briefly, then replied, "No, not as such. Revelations of fact... profound surprises, certainly, but nothing that I would ascribe religious or spiritual significance to."

"I have," he said simply. "I was not in control of my body when I transported down to the surface, sir. I cannot expect you to believe such a claim, but it is true, nonetheless. Once on the surface I found myself... whole again, able to command my limbs. I met briefly with a man on the property who is... was... an acolyte of our messiah. He informed me that our faith is no more. Following his death and perhaps a handful of others, our religion will be observed by only myself and my immediate family."

Trujillo listened, not interrupting. Helvia's tale was ridiculously implausible, and yet she believed that he believed it with every fiber of his being. There was no hint of deception in the man, an individual she knew to be one of the purest, most deliberately scrupulous individuals she had ever met.

"Later, I was addressed by... something. Some being used Ensign Ibragimova as its mouthpiece and questioned me about the nature of our deliverer."

She leaned forward, rapt with the tale. "Used? As in speaking through him?"

"Yes, sir. Ibragimova appeared to have no memory of our conversation upon the entity's releasing him. This being inferred that it had done something similar to me in order to compel me to the surface without permission."

"Can you tell me what this... whatever it was... wanted to know about your religion's founder?" Trujillo knew she might be stepping into sacrosanct territory and did so with the utmost delicacy.

Helvia relayed the interaction in broad strokes, careful to omit anything that would violate the strictures of his faith.

Trujillo asked a handful of follow-up questions and then thanked Helvia for his candor. "I know it cannot have been easy for your to divulge this to me, especially with as... unusual a scenario as you've described. You are relieved of duty for the time being and restricted to quarters until such time as I have come to a decision regarding this matter."

"I understand, sir."

"You are dismissed, Lieutenant."

Helvia departed, and Trujillo was well into entering several priority command codes into the ship's internal data recorders before the doors to the ready room had closed. Using the approximate time and location stamps provided by Helvia, Trujillo was able to quickly locate the conversation in the locker room. The near-AI subroutines in the monitoring program would pixilate out any nudity from the images, and all crew areas with the exception of personal quarters were so monitored. CO or XO command codes were required to access the data.

It was all there, and Trujillo felt a swell of relief despite the shocking nature of the exchange. Ensign Ibragimova was clearly speaking about matters which he should have no knowledge, his voice clearly being manipulated by someone or something else. The commodore was dismayed to see Helvia so unsettled that he had manhandled the ensign, holding himself in check, though only just. She shuddered to think of the kind of damage he might do if justifiably provoked.

It occurred to Trujillo that a being advanced enough to have carried out such an act of humanoid puppetry, hacking *Reykjavík's* data systems and altering the recordings should have been child's play. Whoever this was, they clearly didn't care enough to do so, and appeared to have no interest in trying to discredit Helvia. That suggested a level of apathy that spoke of unfathomable power. Only gods and madmen eschewed covering their tracks.

She tapped her combadge three times, signaling her recipient that the message was for their ears only. "Trujillo to Commander Davula, discrete."

It took a moment for the XO to find a secluded area. "*Davula here.*"

"I've met with Mister Helvia. He has a wild story, but it checks out. There's definitely a higher order of weird shit happening here than we knew. I'm sending you the footage and I'll be interested in hearing your thoughts and those of Lieutenant Garrett when I return.

"Please let Helvia know he's reinstated, pending clearance from Dr. Bennett. Also have the doctor screen Ensign Ibragimova, but be gentle, the kid won't have any idea what its about. We're looking for any residual signs of alien mental patterns or memory engrams overwriting those of our personnel."

Davula, a veteran of one of Starfleet's most notable deep-space missions in recent history, took that news in admirable stride. "*Understood, sir. I'll see to it.*"

"I'm five minutes overdue for negotiations prep with Ambassador Dax."

"*Hurry, sir,*" Davula chided in jest, "*you don't want another spanking from the ambassador.*"

"Can you imagine!" Trujillo hooted. "Dirty old codger would enjoy that far too much. Trujillo, out."

* * *

The Lenthal-class destroyer USS *Koh Yor* raced towards its destination at emergency speed, privy to information that the ship's captain felt could be of significant value.

Lt. Commander Aronas Žukauskas fought the urge to lean forward in his command chair, conscious that that doing so would not force the ship ahead any faster despite the fact that it felt as though it could.

A passing Barzan freighter had hailed them to make notification that they had seen what appeared to be a battle between two vessels at extreme sensor range, one of the two ships appearing to be Orion. They had thought it unusual that the Orions had not issued a distress signal, despite being on the losing end of the contest. The other vessel had appeared to be an aged but well-armed Klingon craft.

Žukauskas had alerted *Reykjavík* of the incident and set off at maximum warp to try and confirm the sighting. He was aware that he might be taking his ship and crew into an ambush, but waiting for additional ships would cost him more than a day in a situation where every minute might count.

His XO, a tall and willowy female Andorian, Lieutenant Sivih Sh'vaakrot, touched a hand to her earpiece at her station which doubled as the Communications post. "Now picking up a garbled transmission on a Syndicate favored frequency, fairly low in the subspace bands, sir."

The compact Greek CO turned fractionally in his chair, giving her about three-quarters of his full attention. "Coded transmission?"

"Yes, sir, encrypted but very weak. It's likely a highly focused transmission and we just happen to be within its bleed-over cone."

"Can you triangulate its origin, Number One?"

She nodded, having already done so, and moved to display a rough position fix on one of her monitors. "Yes, sir. It's very near to where the Barzans said it would be."

"Well," Žukauskas thought aloud, "that at least checks out."

Sh'vaakrot gave him a cautious look. "This certainly seems to fit the parameters of the ambush *Gol* ran into, sir."

He nodded soberly. "I know, but we're obliged to check it out regardless. We'll use maximum caution and utilize probes and long-range sensors wherever possible."

"Commodore's orders, sir?"

"Her XO's orders, actually. The commodore was in active negotiations on the surface when I called."

Sh'vaakrot's expression soured, but before she could comment, Žukauskas said, "Commander Davula still outranks me, and besides, I'd have moved to check it out in any case."

She smirked. "Better to ask forgiveness rather than permission, sir?"

"Few people get the job done being timid, Number One."

"One officer's timidity is another's prudence, Skipper," she countered, her antennae waving in short, spasmodic bursts, a sure sign of her anxiety and dark humor.

"Now reading one Orion Zephyrus-class corsair on long range sensors, Captain," Ops reported.

"Red alert," Žukauskas announced, advancing the ship's readiness from condition yellow. "All hands to battle-stations."

* * *

The day's negotiation session had broken up an hour earlier, with the majority of the participants going home or, for the Federation contingent, beaming back to the ship for the night.

Today's session had been far less constructive than the previous day's, with the Romanii throwing up numerous roadblocks to sidetrack the talks. Various minor issues had suddenly required sidebars and ancillary conversations erupted at regular intervals, clearly some kind of conscious stalling tactic on their part.

It seemed that the First Consul and the Senate leadership were unwilling to address certain sensitive topics in full session, and so Trujillo and Curzon had been invited to a small gathering to follow later that evening. The pair had remained behind, escorted by a smaller-than-usual security contingent. Curzon's diplomatic team and aides had beamed back to *Reykjavík*.

Wine was poured liberally and had been declared safe from poisons or additives by Trujillo's concealed scanner. She surrendered to the ages-old truism, courtesy of Pliny the Elder (a notable apparently shared by both Magna Roma and Earth) *in vino veritas*.

"Now that the others are gone, let us talk plainly," Macer invited, seating himself across from Trujillo and Curzon. "So much of what we must discuss has been withheld from so many of the junior senators and our military that it is impossible to convey the full weight of our plight with them present."

Curzon was about to speak when Trujillo said, "Thanks to our probes, we know about the Orion's deep core equipment. It's only accelerating your planet's condition. We estimate in a little over a decade your world will be another asteroid field orbiting your star."

Macer swished a mouthful of wine around, nodding slowly before replying. "It was done at our request. Desperate though it was, those machines cut the planet's volcanic activity in half. We were dropping dozens of cold-fusion weapons across the globe every year, and we'd have extinguished all life on the planet with those long before Magna Roma's core fractured."

"You should have started evacuating this planet decades ago," Trujillo assessed. "Now, even with all of Starfleet's resources, we could not conduct a planetary evacuation in time to save even half your population."

"We know this," Macer replied in a strangely emotionless voice. "I have lived with that knowledge for over a decade, and I have come to terms with the horror of it."

"What can we do to help, First Consul?" Curzon asked. "What resources can we reasonably offer at this late hour to assist your people?"

"Evacuation of some small number," he answered. "Drawn by lot from among the leadership."

Trujillo snorted, shaking her head ruefully before taking a long draught of wine from her cup. "Once again you don't miss an opportunity to disappoint."

Macer studied her, his eyes narrowing. "Who else would you suggest we evacuate, Commodore? The slave classes? Those Eastern peoples who still rise up against us every few decades?"

"An entire world is imperiled, and you can only think to rescue your wealthy and landed elites," she shot back. "Leaving everyone else behind to perish."

The First Consul's eyes seemed to harden, something in the man crystalizing from the combined pressures of pain and loss, anxiety and regret. "And there it is, finally... the judgement of our betters."

Curzon raised a hand, trying to interject, but Macer silenced him by throwing his goblet the length of the table to clatter off the nearest wall.

"*You have no idea!*" he raged. "No concept of what it's like to live in Earth's shadow."

Trujillo cast a sidelong glance at Curzon while replying to Macer. "Obviously not. By all means, explain it to us."

Macer glared across the table at her, his fury rivaling his indignation. "No matter what our people accomplish, no matter how grandiose our achievements, your Earth did it first... did it *better*. We have conquered and united our world, but Earth? Earth is the capital of an enormous

interstellar coalition. Yours is a world so rich you no longer have need of currency! Your technology produces food and water from thin air.”

A servant scurried forward to hand Macer another full cup of wine, which he drank from before continuing.

“We have learned from the Orions that your Starfleet has encountered multiple worlds which appear to be copies of your Earth, all echoing different periods of your planet’s history.”

Trujillo conceded the point with a bob of her head. “This is true. We have no more credible explanations for the existence of those worlds than we do for yours.”

“Is that what we are, then? Someone’s failed experiment? A pale imitation of Earth’s magnificence, a defective copy of the original?”

“Now, First Consul, I hardly think—” Curzon began.

“Yes,” Trujillo interjected, causing Curzon’s head to snap around in her direction, his expression struggling to remain neutral.

“Why sugar-coat this?” Trujillo posited to her colleague before turning back to Macer. “That is indeed what we believe. Someone or something was enamored of Earth’s Roman culture and created a facsimile here some three thousand years ago. It’s why your star system is such a jumble; they just tossed your planet into an existing system without any concern for the havoc that would cause on a celestial scale.”

The anger drained from Macer’s face, only to be replaced with something approximating resignation. He collapsed back into his chair, throwing up his hands. “You see? Everything we’ve accomplished here, all our history, our conquests, our saving Rome from certain disaster... it’s all for nothing! We’ll be snuffed out like someone switching off the lights in a laboratory at the end of the day.”

Trujillo finished her wine and stood, an uncertain Curzon following her to her feet.

“It’s all out in the open now, First Consul,” Trujillo said. “You and your people need to figure out what it is that you want from us, what you really *need* in the short time Magna Roma has left. Until that’s decided we’re just wasting our time here.”

“And send the senate and our populace into a panic? Learning the truth will cause utter chaos, our society will fracture!”

Trujillo’s expression was somber, and her tone acknowledged the tragedy of their situation. “Your world is dying, First Consul. You have my sympathy; despite the crimes you have perpetrated against my people in your desperation. We may still be able to assist you to some modest extent, but your own fear and indecision has cost you valuable decades and potential allies. This was your doing, not ours.”

He said nothing in reply, his eyes glistening as the heady wine brought his emotions closer to the surface that he would normally have allowed.

Curzon looked to Trujillo for a moment before turning to address Macer. “First Consul, I can add nothing to what the commodore has said, except to underscore her point that it is imperative that your leadership decides on a realistic course of action, and soon.”

They took their leave, transporting back with their security contingent.

As they exited the transporter room, Curzon gestured for Trujillo to hang back.

“Not precisely how I would have voiced our position,” he said with a wry grin, “but essentially the same message. I think he actually heard us tonight.”

She dropped her chin, staring at the deck-plates before replying. “I’m tired, Ambassador. Tired of this world, tired of the Romanii, their lies, and their pretense.” She looked up to meet his eyes. “It’s only fair of me to advise you that I will be recommending to Starfleet Command that if we participate in evacuating any of their population to Class-M worlds in Federation space, they will have to be integrated into existing Federation colonies. This society cannot continue as they have without intervention. There will be no more slavery among Romanii refugees, not on my watch.”

He nodded his assent. “I wouldn’t have it any other way, Commodore.”

* * *

Chapter 12

* * *

Trujillo had decided not to beam down with the diplomatic team, given that the day's negotiations agenda was devoid of any topics of substantive value. If the people of a crumbling planet wanted to try to negotiate long-term trade rights to their agricultural goods, that was their business. She did not have to participate in their tragic theatrics.

She was in her quarters, finalizing her report to Starfleet Command regarding the Romanii and their stumbling attempts at arranging some kind of evacuation of a small portion of their population to somewhere safe.

"The Klingons really like their knives, don't they?" a voice asked innocently, startling her.

Trujillo came halfway out of her chair, inadvertently driving her left knee into the side of her desk and causing her to gasp in pain.

A human male clad in Romanii garb stood across from her, inspecting a Klingon *d'k tagh* knife that he held in one hand. He was dark complected, with curly black hair and bright brown eyes that seemed to radiate warmth and intelligence. He wore a simple tunic and shorts made from cotton, under a traditional Roman toga. His feet were bound with the crisscrossed leather straps of ancient Roman caligae sandals.

The commodore had discarded her heavier uniform tunic in favor of a vest worn over her white turtleneck divisional shirt. Thankfully, she'd remembered to transfer her combadge to her vest. Trujillo slapped at her communicator, shouting, "Trujillo to security!"

There was no response and the intruder simply looked at her, his expression unconcerned.

"Trujillo to bridge."

There was still no answer.

"That's not going to work, is it?" she asked finally.

"No," said her uninvited guest. "I've arranged for our privacy. I assure you that I mean you no harm."

"Says the person holding the knife. Are you going to stab me with that or are you just admiring it?" she asked, gesturing to the Klingon blade in his hand.

"Oh," he said, acting as if he'd forgotten the weapon entirely. "Apologies." He set the knife down on her desk. "Just admiring it."

She bent over, rubbing her knee ruefully. "Is there a reason for your visit or do you just get your jollies by scaring the shit out of us poor, lesser life forms?"

He smiled disarmingly. "I thought we should speak. Again, I apologize for my sudden appearance. My corporeal social graces are a bit... rusty."

"Apology accepted." She gestured to the sitting area, a couch set against the outer bulkhead facing two comfortable chairs, separated by a low coffee table. "Make yourself comfortable. I need a drink. Medicinal, you understand. For my knee."

He laughed lightly, taking a seat on the couch. "Of course. Could I bother you for some of your North American corn whiskey?"

"Any particular label?" she called back to him over her shoulder.

"The good stuff," he said, flipping through a hard-copy photo album sitting atop the table. It contained numerous images of Trujillo throughout her career in a variety of different environments.

Trujillo obligingly poured two glasses and returned, handing one to the stranger before taking a seat in one of the chairs facing him. "What should I call you?"

"Something simple, I'd think. John, perhaps?"

"And what species do you represent, John?" she asked.

He sipped at his drink, holding it up to gaze appreciatively at it. "That's quite good, thank you." In response to her query he said, "Does it really matter? Naming a thing gives it a special kind of power, don't you think? It sticks in the mind and causes unnecessary fixation. I'd rather you simply think of me and my people as just another of those quasi-deity-level races capable of all manner of miracles."

"So, super-advanced aliens with the ability to manipulate matter, time, energy, and space without visible mechanical assistance. Got it."

He gestured behind him to where a floating apparition mimicking his appears took shape, wavering with ghost-like transparency. The figure asked in a booming, echoing voice, "*Or would you prefer something more traditional?*"

She surprised herself by laughing aloud. “No, thank you,” she said, gesturing to the figure seated across from her. “This will do just fine.”

The spectral figure vanished.

“First, I would like to apologize for this mess on behalf of my people.” John waved in the general direction of the planet they orbited.

“You’re the ones who flung this world into this system like a bocce ball?”

He winced in response, inclining his head. “An... indelicate description, but unfortunately rather apt.”

“May I ask why?”

He made a gesture with his hands, half plea, half shrug. “Please keep in mind that this was very long ago for us, far longer than the chronological time between the planet’s creation and the present. We have the ability to move beyond linear time, you see. I’m actually from several millennia from now, in what you would consider the far future.”

She nodded, prompting him to continue as she sampled her whiskey again.

“We were relatively young, just having evolved into our energy-state only centuries before, and some among us became fascinated with Earth and its colorful cultures and history. Now, we could have easily, and with far less destruction, I might add, have done all this via simulations in a dimensional multiform computational substrate.”

“Pardon?” she inquired with a quirked eyebrow.

“Basically, a supercomputer made from the fabric of space/time itself, established in series of linked pocket dimensions. You can create entire simulated multidimensional multiverses in there and let them run at whichever speed you desire.”

“And your friends thought creating all this chaotic mess and heartache was better?”

He sighed, appearing embarrassed. “As I said, we were young, newly god-like, and feeling our collective oats. Those of us responsible for Magna Roma wanted to fling planets about simply because they could. Keep in mind that our ascension to this higher state of being also came with the loss of our physical forms and nearly everything that had grounded us to reality as corporeal beings.”

He took a drink, savoring the liquid for a long moment before swallowing. “There was an unfortunate and unanticipated loss of empathy inherent in this process, at least there was for us. My fellows who created this world saw its people as little more than you might regard the bacteria in a Petri dish.”

Trujillo started to object, and John held up a mollifying hand. “I know, it’s terrible, and especially humiliating now that we’ve advanced beyond those early stages. Nevertheless, no one among us ever thought to come and clean up their mess after their little social experiment had run its course.”

“Too many other priorities?” she said, not bothering to mask her sarcasm.

“Far too many, honestly,” he conceded. “This isn’t the only universe, and entropy is a multi-universal constant. Things tend to go topsy-turvy with harrowing regularity out there, requiring the intervention of many of those ‘sublimed’ species, ours included.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning that like you, we’re frequently putting out fires, only we’re doing it on a multitude of higher planes of existence.”

Trujillo finished her drink, setting the glass on the table separating them. She sat back in the chair, hands clasped in her lap.

“Who creates a populated planet with a three-millennia lifespan?”

“Beings with far too much curiosity and grossly insufficient empathy, as I said.”

She cocked her head, studying John closely. “May I infer from what you’ve said that you’re here now to help?”

“I would certainly like to, but I have arrived here only to discover that my hands are effectively tied.”

She issued an incredulous snort. “By whom?”

“That’s the issue at hand, Commodore. I don’t know. Whatever it is, it is significantly more powerful than I am.”

She shook her head; not certain she was hearing him correctly. “There’s something out there you can’t see that’s exerting an influence you can’t overcome?”

“Correct,” he affirmed. “I can travel to any point in space and time in your universe, except for the seventy-four years, four months, and seventeen days that were the mortal lifespan of the individual the Children of the Son call ‘The Mother.’”

“Their messiah?”

“Correct again.”

She sat forward, her eyes alight with intensity. “I’m still confused about this whole Mother and Son dynamic. Please explain.”

“It’s the highest secret of their faith. When their messiah was born, their church took the name of the Children of the Son as a grand deception. The Romanii, being a patriarchal society, never considered for an instant that the messiah might be a female, and so killed tens of thousands of boys and men, trying to snuff out an existential threat to their state monopoly on religion. All the while, the messiah hid in plain sight.”

“You said something, when you were inhabiting Ensign Ibragimova, about not being able to see her. What did that mean?”

John took another sip of his whiskey, dissecting its undertones before replying. “I can’t see her through any of my senses, which extend far beyond the six basic senses known to most humanoid species. Even when I was reviewing the memories of the old man Helvia sought out on the surface, I couldn’t see her. Just the shape of her, not her physical person, not her voice.”

“Hmm,” Trujillo said thoughtfully. “You’ve been out-goded.”

He finished his glass, smirking. “So it would seem. Also, and I hate to be pedantic, but that’s not a word.”

She dipped her head, yielding the point. “If you were not being held in check by this entity, what might you do on behalf of the Romanii?”

“I could transport them *en mass* to another life-sustaining planet, or simply repair the entropic damage to Magna Roma’s interior. This super-entity won’t allow me to do either.”

“It wants the destruction of the planet and the death of its six-billion inhabitants?”

“I can’t say. It certainly doesn’t appear to want me to stop the process that’s currently underway.”

“And you don’t know why?”

“It won’t communicate with me, or with others that I’ve enlisted to help. Some were members of my species; others were from some of the other Elder races. It steadfastly ignored us.”

“What is it?” Trujillo asked.

“Perhaps a member of one of the first peoples, from when the universe was young? The oldest of the Elders? Or... a god.”

She blinked, dumbstruck. “You’re not actually suggesting it’s an genuine deity?”

John shrugged. “What *is* a god? To you, I am a god. Perhaps relative to me, it is. Whatever this being really is, whatever its origin, it has rendered me powerless to assist the Romanii. I’m quite curious to see if your evacuation ships will be allowed to approach the planet.”

“You think it would object to a scant few thousands of the Romanii being relocated?”

“It might. Perhaps it feels some parental obligation to them, abandoned by us as they were.”

Trujillo shifted in her seat, clearly uncomfortable with that notion. “I fail to see how something that feels a parental responsibility for a species could just sit by while they’re extinguished by their dying planet.”

John wagged a finger chidingly. “You’re applying human morality to a being that is likely profoundly different from your species. It might be so far removed from the corporeal that it no longer experiences humanoid emotions or thought patterns.”

“It just lived over seventy years as a human on Magna Roma. Wasn’t that the point?” she countered.

“I wouldn’t presume to know its motivations or its mindset,” John demurred. “Additionally, we don’t know that the woman was the embodiment of the entity, only that it doesn’t want me to encounter her or even experience people’s memories of her.”

“Fair point,” Trujillo admitted. She appeared lost in thought for a moment, and then set her gaze back upon her unexpected guest. “Not to rudely change the topic mid-stream, but I’ve had quite enough of you jumping into my people and manipulating their actions. It’s inappropriate, a fundamental violation of their free will and bodily agency.”

John’s head dropped again. “You’re right, of course. Again, I apologize. Sometimes I still go with the most expedient course without stopping to consider the ethical implications of my actions.” He looked at his hands, turning them over to inspect the fine lines and pores of his skin. “I really should do this more often. When I’m in my non-corporeal form, humanoids are so fundamentally woven into the fabric of space/time that you almost appear part of the scenery. It’s easy for us to forget that you’re sentient.”

Trujillo appeared taken aback at this admission. “You can’t be serious?”

His expression grew somber. “Very much so. You are so grounded in the material, so slow, so short-lived that to a being that spends most of its time on multiple levels of existence simultaneously, you look like...” he blanched, seemingly embarrassed at the admission. “...like meat.”

She winced at that, making John look all the more sheepish at the confession.

“Is there anything else I can do for you?” she asked, sensing that this unusual meeting was drawing to a close.

“Not at present,” John said, rising to his feet. He gestured to his now empty glass. “Thank you for the drink, and the conversation.”

Trujillo smiled every so slightly. “It’s a first for me, to be sure. I’ve never conversed with a god before, at least not that I know of.”

John appeared momentarily thoughtful. “Not true. You had a lovely chat with a Douwd once when you were six, at Jesuitas Park in Salamanca.”

Trujillo chuckled uncertainly. “I’ll take your word for it.”

“So you should,” he affirmed.

“How might I get in contact with you should that be required during the remainder of this mission?” Trujillo asked.

A clear, crystalline business card bearing the inscription ‘John – Divinity Consultant’ appeared in his hand and he extended it to her. “Just hold this up and call my name. That will suffice.”

She grew subdued suddenly. “I’ll admit to having my issues with the Romanii, but they’re human. Is there any hope for them?”

“There is *always* hope,” John answered. “They still have time, and our new ultra-god friend might change its mind. Believe me, I’ve seen more than you would believe, and anything is possible.”

“*Bridge to Commodore Trujillo,*” came Davula’s voice across the intraship.

“Go ahead, Commander,” Trujillo replied reflexively, only belatedly realizing that John had obviously restored the comms. She turned by habit towards the location of the overhead speaker in her cabin.

“*Priority transmission coming in from the Koh Yor for you, sir.*”

She turned back to say her farewells to John, only to find he had vanished. The card in her hand was the only evidence that she had not imagined the encounter.

“Pipe it through to me down here, XO.”

* * *

Chapter 13

* * *

Trujillo's expression was caught somewhere between skepticism and curiosity as she eyed her subordinate via the subspace comms link.

"They want to negotiate a surrender?" she clarified, her tone registering suspicion.

"That's what they say, sir," Lt. Commander Aronas Žukauskas of the *Kor Yoh* replied from over a parsec's distance. "We found the Augments stripping an Orion raider they'd captured, and apparently their interrogation of their Orion prisoners helped to clarify a great many realities of their present situation."

Trujillo cocked her head, forced to concede that possibility. "I can see where that interaction might be quite enlightening."

"So far they haven't made any aggressive movements towards us and we've been keeping our distance. Their shields are down, and their weapons are offline, but seeing as their ship has a cloaking device, we can't be sure there aren't more in our immediate vicinity. Despite who he is and... what he represents, their leader makes a compelling case. I can arrange for you to speak with him if you'd find that helpful, sir."

She slid into her chair, moving the desktop computer so it continued to face her. "Yes, put him through, Captain, and excellent work by you and your crew under uncertain circumstances. Please continue to maintain your defensive posture."

There was a momentary flickering as various communications protocols and security firewalls interrogated the foreign transmission, and then Trujillo found herself facing a surprisingly youthful male, clad in digital camouflage patterned military fatigues.

He had an unremarkable countenance and looked to be in his mid-twenties. Wavy brown hair topped a surprisingly round face with green eyes and a nose that seemed a bit too small for his face. Put this individual in a Starfleet uniform, Trujillo thought, and he would be indistinguishable from any other human junior officer in the service.

Trujillo experienced a moment of cognitive dissonance at the realization that this person had been intentionally designed from the pre-embryonic stage, and she had unconsciously expected some kind of physical and aesthetic perfection.

"I am Commodore Nandi Trujillo of the warship *Reykjavík*. To whom am I speaking?"

The young man broke into a curious smile. "I did not think your Starfleet had warships. Aren't you all explorers and diplomats?"

"No," she said. "We are tasked with many duties, and some of us are assigned according to our aptitudes. I am a soldier, and thus command a warship."

He stared, clearly assessing her while she did likewise. After a prolonged silence, he finally deigned to answer her question. "I am Primus Pilus Aloysius Manius, leader of my Augment cohort."

Trujillo tapped at her keyboard, querying what she had taken as his title, Primus Pilus. The computer overlaid the translation of 'first maniple,' identifying it as a high-ranking tier of the centurion officer grade.

"The captain of *Kor Yoh* tells me that you have spoken of negotiated surrender. Forgive my suspicious nature, but we have seen your Augment legionaries slaughter our personnel without offering any of them the opportunity to surrender, so I am dubious of your sincerity."

"I do not apologize for our actions," Manius said calmly but defiantly. "We were told by our leaders that your Federation was behind all the tragic disasters on Magna Roma, using your advanced technology to exact vengeance for our having seized the crew of the *Beagle* decades ago. We were assigned to board and seize any Federation flagged cargo or personnel transport ships and return them home to aid in our evacuation."

Trujillo nodded slowly, the man's story confirming her existing suspicions. "So, Primus Pilus, what has changed?"

"The mercenaries hired by our supposed Orion allies used us as bait to lure in one of your starships, under the pretense of helping us to seize the ship. Instead, they left us vulnerable to attack and many of my fellow legionaries were killed in that encounter. Your people fought harder than we had been told to expect, and my ship was fortunate enough to escape without much damage. At our first opportunity we seized an Orion ship in an act of vengeance. We have scoured the ship's databanks and interrogated their surviving crew. It is now obvious that the Orions have lied to and manipulated our people, and that your Federation is not the implacable enemy that it was made out to be."

Trujillo crossed her arms. "And where does that leave us, then?"

"Given what we now know, we would prefer a Federation penal settlement to suffering the destruction of Magna Roma."

"I'm not saying it's impossible, but there would have to be many, many safeguards."

"We are prepared for imprisonment and the necessary restraint systems to be used, Commodore. Be forewarned, however, that there are two other ships crewed by our fellow Augments which do not favor surrender."

"I appreciate your candor, Primus Pilus. We will certainly maintain watch for your other ships."

"Under what circumstances might you consider our surrender?" he asked, clearly uncomfortable with the idea. Surrender was anathema to his people in general, and especially so among the elite Augment cadres.

She inclined her head. "What do you know about cryonic suspension?" she asked.

* * *

Titus Helvia didn't know what strings Ambassador Dax had pulled to convince the Romanii authorities to allow him to return to the surface after his last unauthorized visit, but he was grateful, nonetheless.

He was in full uniform this time, wearing the garment like a shield against the horrors of this place.

He stood in the direct center of the arena, feeling the heat of the sun beating down on him as it had so many times before in circumstances like this.

He was in the Colosseum, Rome's foremost temple of spectacle, and only one of the many stages on which he had fought during his relatively short two years as a gladiator. Helvia had killed in stadiums both great and provincial, in television studios with green-screen backgrounds made to look as though he was fighting in a variety of exotic locations, and in makeshift arenas constructed and reduced on the same day in which he appeared.

There had been no honor or glory in the deed, as many of his opponents were either drugged, lamed by wounds, or so inexperienced with a sword as to be tragically sacrificial. Criminals, political prisoners, fellow former nobles brought low by some aristocratic vendetta, all had fallen to his blade in what could only be described as theatrical executions.

He had fought surprisingly few fellow gladiators, a fact for which he was secretly relieved. Other men, ones who had spent considerably more years on the gladiator circuit than he, were truly terrifying. Most skilled enough to have lived so long had transformed the butcher's duty into an artform. They were more like the ancient Japanese samurai of his adopted Earth, men whose battles were begun and ended in a scant few strokes and an enviable economy of movement.

A figure strode towards him unhurriedly, a man attired in modern business dress, consciously rejecting adornment with a toga. Helvia recognized him as a former fighter and a contemporary of his, Silvanus Cruscellio. Tall and thin, but whipcord taut, Cruscellio was of an altogether different body type than Helvia.

His hair was curly black, ringlets tumbling down towards his shoulders, framing a long, austere face. He bore a scar from his scalp down across his forehead and right eyelid, ending on his upper cheek.

Helvia eyed him warily, all too familiar with the smaller man's speed and agility.

"Titus Helvia!" he crowed, "returned at last to the sands of the abattoir!"

Helvia held himself in a relaxed posture, his feet shoulder-width apart and balanced, the best platform from which to launch or absorb an attack. "Cruscellio, you old whoreson. I see you're still drawing breath among the ash and sulfur of Rome."

Cruscellio opened his arms expansively. "Life refuses to surrender me, and Jupiter's arrows have yet to find their mark."

"No more gladiator's bouts for you, eh?" Helvia observed.

The other man looked down at his outfit. "No, not anymore. I've bought my freedom and become a flesh broker myself. The old pit fighter now training fighters of my own."

Helvia grunted appreciatively, despite feeling none of that emotion. "One must climb the ladder or fall into the pit," he quoted from memory, one of countless Romanii colloquialisms citing the constant struggle for social position that pervaded their culture.

"And you," Cruscellio exclaimed, "a soldier now?"

Helvia shook his head. "The explorers and peacemakers of the Federation require protection. I am honored to provide it."

Cruscellio nodded his approval. "They could do far worse." He looked off into the distance before setting his gaze again on Helvia. "What brings you here?"

"Memories," Helvia replied, "from another life." He knelt to sift a handful of sand through his fingers as he had done while visiting his family's old *latifunda*. "I did not think I would ever walk this ground again."

"I feared you were here to steal away my fighters," Cruscellio admitted. "Liberate them in the name of galactic freedom or some such."

The last of the sand trickled out from between his digits and Helvia stood, brushing his hands clean. The arena still smelled of death, the lingering blood of countless thousands stained into the very concrete and stone that formed it. No matter how often clean sand was poured onto the Colosseum's floor, the stench of putrefaction remained.

"No need," Helvia said finally. "You will all be free, soon enough."

Cruscellio frowned, not liking the sound of that. "Meaning... what, exactly?"

"This world is doomed," Helvia replied. "You have a little more than a decade, and then patrician, plebeian, emperor or slave... none of that will matter any longer."

The former gladiators stared at one another until Cruscellio threw up his hands. "Impossible! The government would have told us, prepared us!"

Helvia emitted a short breath, almost a snort of derision. "Would they? And risk inciting the mob? We both know they would sit on their hands with their lips sewn shut rather than admit the truth."

Cruscellio stepped forward, his fists clenched. "You mock me, Titus! You seek to see all that I've accomplished stripped from me through your lies."

The larger man shook his head sadly. "You will all go to your deaths choking on ash and praying to the old gods to save you. The First Consul and the Senate haven't even shown the presence of mind to try and evacuate themselves until now. Do you know that the Orions are out there somewhere, rubbing their hands together and waiting for Magna Roma to tear itself apart so they can comb through the ruins for your latinum?"

Cruscellio made a cutting, dismissive gesture. "What do I care for the Orions? I've never even set eyes on an alien barbarian."

Helvia laughed loudly at that. "We are the barbarians, Silvanus. The Federation, the Klingons, even the Orions could extinguish all life on this world in an hour without having to set foot on it. You live at their sufferance."

The other man fell into shocked, contemplative silence.

Helvia took a final look around. "I thought I would feel something returning here, but there is only the emptiness and the silence of the dead."

"What can we do?" Cruscellio asked, a hint of panic entering his voice.

"There is nothing *to* do," Helvia answered grimly. "Even if a few hundred thousand of the leadership manage to flee before the end, the working class and the slaves will be left behind. Perhaps you and your fighters might take up arms and overthrow the government, see that the lower classes have at least some hope of escape."

"Revolt?" Cruscellio found the prospect repugnant. "Like Spartacus or Angelus Serapio? Betray everything I believe in?"

Helvia shrugged. "Or continue to embrace the empire as the ground splits beneath your feet. What is it we always said, 'as the gods will it?'"

Cruscellio had no response to that and could only stare in sullen silence.

"This wretched world is finally reaping what it has sown," Helvia said. He spat into the sand. "I hate what this world made me, and every moment since I left, I have struggled to reshape myself into something... someone... worthy of having been rescued from this place. I am *done* here."

Helvia tapped his communicator and requested transport, vanishing a moment later in a cascade of energy as his old compatriot looked on, the man's eyes fixed on the horrors of the bleak future presented him.

* * *

"Commodore, our negotiations are finally bearing fruit. This is a bad time to change the makeup of our diplomatic team," Curzon protested.

"There are two cloaked ships full of Augments out there, Ambassador, unaccounted for and with orders to attack Federation shipping."

Curzon was seated, a glass of Risan rhenish in his hand. Trujillo was pacing, and Curzon mused that he had never seen her so unsettled.

"As I recall, you have most of your task force out there looking for them already, don't you?"

Trujillo paced, her expression tight and her posture rigid. "*Reykjavik* is the most tactically capable ship in our task force. She needs to be out there leading the hunt."

"I'm not disputing any of that," Curzon answered coolly. "I'm pointing out that *you* don't have to be the one in command during that tasking."

Her head snapped around, her frown as hard as the cast of her eyes. "What are you saying?"

He took a long sip of wine, making her wait for his reply. "Transfer your flag to another ship. Leave Commander Davula in command of *Reykjavik* for the duration of this quest."

Trujillo paused in her tracks, turning to face the Trill fully. "Out of the question."

"Really? You'd have trusted Glal to handle such a mission. Is Davula somehow less capable?"

"Not at all," she countered. "I should be leading it."

"You're needed here, but if you feel you can't trust her—"

Trujillo held up a hand. "She has my full confidence. Her strategic and tactical acumen are equaled only by her scientific credentials."

"Then... what's the problem?" Curzon chided.

She abruptly activated her communicator, calling the XO into the ready room.

A few moments later, Davula came to attention in front of Trujillo's desk, seemingly oblivious to Curzon's presence on the couch along the bulkhead.

Trujillo bade her stand at ease. "Commander, we have new information from our surrendering Augments on possible locations where their

fellows might be found. I am unable to break away from our ongoing negotiations with the Romanii, so I'll be transferring my flag to *Zelenskyy* and I'll have you take *Reykjavik* in search of the two remaining Augment vessels."

Davula inclined her head in a sober gesture. "Understood, sir."

Trujillo stood. "You've more than earned this, Commander. You know how much I'd rather be out there chasing down Augment depredators instead of sitting in conference with our hosts," she looked pointedly at Curzon, "but it appears I'm expected to be a responsible adult who no longer gets to have any fun whatsoever."

"I would note that you do have some rather excellent company," Curzon interjected, feigning moral injury.

"Cold comfort," Trujillo groused. "You never allow me to drink until we've returned to the ship."

"I seem to remember you putting away a good deal of the First Consul's wine..."

Trujillo waved him off, turning her attention back to Davula. "Take the ship and go run those murderous bastards down. I know you realize with whom you are dealing, and that you'll take every precaution."

The XO's smile was almost predatory, an expression she had not known she possessed until after her first few months aboard *Reykjavik*. During the *Yichang*'s often desperate deep space exploration mission, that ship had seen more than its fair share of combat, but those were situations where the captain and crew had tried valiantly to avoid conflict, to no avail. They had never gone looking for a fight, as *Reykjavik* so often did.

"I will, sir. I'd inquire about procuring some additional cryogenic chambers from the supply you've had *Puget Sound* produce. Perhaps thirty of those units would suffice, along with the raw materials to manufacture more on our own if needed."

Trujillo grabbed a nearby data-slate and input a series of commands. "Done," she confirmed. "Oh, I'm having *Azulon* and *Perseus* assigned as your escorts, and as Captain Dinlite outranks you, you'll need additional authority to lead that squadron. I'm granting you a brevet promotion to captain for the duration of this mission."

Davula was unable to hide her surprise, her involuntary blush turning her a darker shade of blue. "Thank you, sir. I... did not anticipate that."

"You're welcome." Trujillo extended her hand. "I know you'll make me proud, Jadaetti."

Davula shook the offered hand, nodded politely to Curzon, and was gone.

Trujillo fixed Curzon with a caustic look. "C'mon, Ambassador. Time to pack our things and move ships."

* * *

Negotiations had reconvened in the Forum's Curia Julia, where their first diplomatic exchange had occurred, to include the unpleasantness between Helvia and the Romanii general. The conference structure in the Circus of Nero that had become their regular meeting venue had suffered structural damage in a localized seismic event overnight.

The air conditioning here was working overtime to provide clean, cool air, as the sky outside was leaden and heavy with ash from a host of nearby and more distant volcanoes.

Curzon was all business today, reciting statistics and timetables, and referencing all manner of facts and analyses in support of the Federation's position. Gone was the jovial bonhomie the Romanii had come to associate with him.

Trujillo was equally dour, though for different reasons altogether.

"Our Continent-class heavy transports can carry roughly four-thousand people at a time, and Starfleet Command assures me that they can assign five of these ships for at least the next decade," Curzon explained. "That equates to twenty-thousand persons per trip."

Trujillo then picked up the narrative. "There are six Federation colony planets in the adjoining sector, each of which has agreed to accept as many Romanii as we can transport. Each trip there and back to Magna Roma will take approximately six weeks."

"That's only one-hundred seventy-five thousand people per year," Senator Amantius Volusus protested. He was a heavy-set man with prominent jowls and a balding pate who seemed to sweat profusely regardless of the temperature. "In the next decade you'd only be able to relocate less than two million of our people out of a population of over six billion!"

Curzon nodded soberly. "Your math is correct, Senator."

"How can you justify this?" cried another senator, already half in his cups despite it not yet being noon. The wine served here was potent and plentiful.

Trujillo looked down the table at the man. "This is *your* emergency, Senator, not ours. You've had decades to begin this process but chose not to. Besides, I suspect your government has already made similar arrangements for services from the Orions and Lissepians. Their ships are undoubtedly smaller, but their efforts can help bolster the total number of evacuees. Additionally, the decade mark is only a rough estimate, you may find yourself with additional time if you're fortunate."

The Romanii shared horrified looks, some of them bordering on hostile.

The regal Imperial Vestal, Liviana Ovicula, representative of the Ministry of Alien affairs, passed across a digital display pad. "We have completed evacuation itineraries, identifying those who should be rescued first. They are a mix of our leadership, military, and industrial

magnates, people who will be instrumental in rebuilding our society.”

Trujillo accepted the device, glanced at it, and then set it aside. “We will take that into consideration. The Starfleet Corps of Engineers will arrive within three weeks to begin construction on a number of evacuation assembly stations, both on the surface and in orbit. They will be situated across the globe, near the largest population centers. Some will be here, others in the New Lands and others yet in the territories of the Middle-Kingdom.”

First Consul Macer held up a belying hand. “Just one moment, Commodore. We had requested a pristine, unpopulated world on which to settle our people, and now you’re telling us we’ll be placed among already established Federation colonies?”

“That is correct, First Consul. It has been decided that your people’s best chance of success is on worlds where there is already infrastructure in place. Of course, your people would eventually be granted Federation citizenship, provided that you make the appropriate alterations to your existing cultural attitudes.”

“And what does that mean?”

Trujillo cast a glance at Curzon before sitting forward to clasp her hands atop the table. “It goes without saying that we won’t tolerate slavery in any form, so that abhorrent tradition of yours will have to be eliminated. The same goes for capital punishment.”

There were gasps and shouts from the other side of the table. Two senators rose to their feet, faces flushed with anger.

“Additionally, the evacuation of your world will be equitable, meaning all peoples, not just Romanii, will be transported,” Curzon threw in.

Macer was aghast. “You would waste transport space on Eastern barbarians?”

“Of course,” Trujillo answered simply. “They have just as much right to a future as you do. In fact, it appears the Klingons will arrive at roughly the same time, but they’ll be relocating the Comanche peoples from the New Lands in their entirety. Rumor has it the Klingon Empire has set aside a pristine world for them, at least.”

Now the Romanii were incensed, with shouts and curses and more than one cup thrown in the Federation representatives’ general direction.

Trujillo and Curzon rose as one, with the commodore removing a Romanii style data-slate from her briefcase and setting it atop the table. “Here is our plan so that you may look it over and understand what is to happen and when.”

“And if we refuse your terms?” Macer fairly snarled, halfway out of his chair.

“Then I wish you luck with the Orions. I’m sure the same people who have worked to accelerate your planet’s demise will be highly motivated to move your population elsewhere.”

“They will be well compensated for their efforts!” another senator raged from farther down the table.

“You’re referring to them being paid in latinum?” Trujillo asked. “The same latinum that they’ll be able to mine for far less effort and expense from the asteroid field that remains when your planet shatters?” She cocked head. “Please let me know how that works out for you.”

She called for transport back to *Zelensky*, and the final thrown wine chalice, this one actually on target, bounced harmlessly of the annular confinement beam as Trujillo and Curzon dematerialized.

* * *

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