

## Tempus Fugit

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## Tempus Fugit

by [CeJay](#)

### Summary

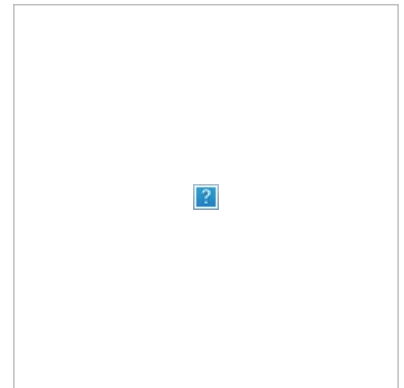
The year is 2366 and Lieutenant Commander Michael Owens, the newly minted executive officer of the USS *Columbia* has been tasked to supervise a groundbreaking scientific experiment that could alter the galactic landscape forever.

Six years later, as now Captain Owens and his crew celebrate their first year serving aboard the USS *Eagle*, Owens has no idea that the consequences of his previous assignment will come catching up with him in a way he could have never thought possible.

Over the course of an unlikely adventure, Owens will have to face his painful past, come face-to-face with old enemies and perhaps his greatest challenge, will have to deal with the one man he never wanted to see again. His own father.

In the meantime, the crew of the *Starship Eagle* has their own mystery to unravel, one which will see the half-Romulan tactical officer, So'Dan Leva, fall for the wrong woman while helmsman Culsten and Doctor Wenera get more than they bargained for when they get sucked in deep into a deadly mystery.

The debut novel of *The Star Eagle Adventures*, first published in 2006.



### Notes

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Also available as an ebook at [StarEagleAdventures.com](http://StarEagleAdventures.com)

# Chapter One: Mistakes

### Six Years Ago

It was serendipitous happenstance that the shuttle that departed the hangar bay of the USS *Columbia* with its three occupants, had been named after the very man who had invented the transporter.

Almost two hundred fifty years earlier, Emory Erickson had revolutionized how people traveled from point A to point B and thereby changed mankind's history forever.

It was therefore only fitting that it was a shuttlecraft named *Erickson* that would take Michael Owens to the site where a new generation of inventors and scientists hoped to make history yet again by once more changing the manner in which people would journey the stars.

For the newly minted first officer of *Columbia*, this occasion was more than just being a witness to history. This mission, his first significant assignment in his new role, had a very personal element to it as well. After all, it was none other than his older brother who had made this new technology his life's work, and that was now due to culminate in a unique experiment like none that had ever come before.

It wasn't an easy task to process not only the anxiety he felt over his very first, major assignment as a command-level officer, he was also very much aware that his brother's entire life's work might depend on the outcome of the coming experiment.

He tried to ban those distracting thoughts to the back of his mind as he watched the *Erickson* approach that large, green planet through the shuttle's forward viewport.

A gunmetal gray circular device sat in the planet's lower orbit. Its peculiar form distinguished it from more traditional satellites. Shaped like a wine glass, a steady blue energy beam emitted from its long stem that was focused on a particular point on the surface of the planet. The pulsating beam, functioning like an anchor, kept the satellite firmly in geosynchronous orbit while the dish-shaped end of the device pointed into outer space.

The *Erickson* quickly began its descent toward the planet's surface, and the source of the energy beam, thousands of meters below. The surface was not directly visible from space. The energy disappeared beneath a massive buildup of green and gray clouds.

Circular lightning patterns shot through the coverage. Every so often super-charged yellow particles would flash up in the skies. The storm was impressive and yet it hadn't reached its full strength.

A few kilometers west from where the beam disappeared, even stronger and more erratic storm patterns were building up and moving eastwards. From space, the distance looked like inches but it would take at least another hour for the storm to hit.

Lieutenant Commander Michael Timothy Owens watched the spectacle below with great curiosity, standing just behind the sitting pilot, outwardly calm and unconcerned, his dark blue eyes fixated on the storm below.

Michael had made first officer at the ripe young age of thirty-two, which as far as Starfleet was concerned, was quite an accomplishment. But then again, he had always seen himself as a career officer. Not because he had an overwhelming desire to climb the ranks but because he was an explorer at heart and for him, the only true way to be an explorer was to someday sit in that center chair on the bridge of his very own starship.

He had made plenty of sacrifices in his life to achieve that dream. Some of his desires had taken a backseat for him to dedicate himself to that one goal.

There had been occasions when he had come to regret the choices he had made. There were plenty of things he had never gotten around to doing and many people he wished he had gotten to know a lot better along the way. But it had all been worth it, he told himself. Sacrifices were a necessity for people with great ambitions.

And he couldn't exactly complain about the way his life had worked out so far. He'd had a chance to see some truly marvelous things as a Starfleet officer and encountered alien species he couldn't have possibly even imagined. He enjoyed his work on *Columbia*, even if he'd only arrived very recently, and so far, he got along with most of the people he worked with including Captain Mendez.

And most importantly his recent promotion ensured that he was once again right on track to someday command his own starship.

The shuttle was quickly drawing closer to the surface and quite suddenly the storm below looked much more threatening than it had from a higher orbit.

"You're sure we can make it through that?"

The pilot turned his head to look at Michael. A bald-headed, blue-skinned Bolian, youthful but showing no signs of inexperience. Michael knew he was one of the best pilots *Columbia* had to offer.

He graced him with a wide smile. "We should be all right," he said, "Our shields will deflect most of the discharges. It won't be a smooth ride. I suggest that you brace yourself, sir."

Michael gave him a curt nod. A soft hand touched his shoulder and he looked around to see an angel standing behind him.

He knew perfectly well that DeMara Deen was as real as he was. And yet he couldn't blame anybody for making that mistake. She was beautiful beyond measure. It wasn't just her sculpted figure in her form-fitting black and blue science uniform, her shimmering golden hair, or those radiant purple eyes. It went beyond the physical; Deen possessed what could only be referred to as a mystical aura that seemed to defy explanation. It had an inexplicably calming, almost spellbinding effect on those around her.

Michael noticed the Bolian officer losing his focus for a mere second before turning back to his instruments.

Michael Owens was more resistant. Not because she found her any less enchanting but because he had been fortunate enough to be one of the first to be allowed to visit her home world and had spent significant time with the Tenarian people.

In fact, he had been among the Starfleet crew to make first contact with the Tenarians just five years earlier. It had been as his assignment as Starfleet ambassador on Tenaria that he had come to truly know DeMara.

She had been fascinated with humans and he had been more than happy to teach her everything she wanted to know. She had been only eleven years old then but no longer a child. Tenarians matured much faster than most other humanoid species he knew.

She was sixteen now but to all outward appearances looked like a woman in her early twenties. Not many people realized that behind that young and gorgeous face was an incredibly sharp mind.

She smiled at him and Michael couldn't resist returning it in kind. He might have been able to keep his focus but to resist that smile he had not yet learned.

"You better take a seat," she said softly. Her voice was perfectly suited to her character. Even though comforting, it carried with it a self-confidence that hinted toward her high intelligence.

Michael nodded and followed her to the back of the small craft. There they both sat down on opposite benches lining the bulkheads.

"You'll do fine," she said as if reading his thoughts.

Michael looked up to make eye contact. "I'm nothing more than a glorified observer here. It'll be up to you science folks to pull this off."

She shook her head slowly. "Only reason I'm here is because Doctor Frobisher and your brother found me the least objectionable science officer on board," she said.

Michael smirked at that. The two scientists had fought tooth and nail to keep Starfleet away from their project. When Captain Mendez had insisted on at least a pair of observers, Michael Owens and Deen had been an easy choice. However, he was sure that the Tenarian didn't appreciate being chosen for a mission because of her charms.

She let that pass. "They want as few outside people around this experiment as possible. It'll be all up to them to make this work. I've spent the last week studying the science and the math behind this and I still only understand a fraction of it. What I do know is that this is a landmark event for molecular science and possibly the first step in revolutionizing space travel. We might be witnesses to the beginning of a new era."

Her excitement was hardly a surprise. She had been looking forward to this opportunity for weeks now, ever since *Columbia* had been assigned to the project. Michael was not as well versed in the exact science and it wasn't for a lack of trying.

Her admission that even she didn't fully understand it made him feel a bit better about his own ignorance.

He knew the basics, of course. He understood that it was the first attempt by Federation scientists to transport matter from one star system to another; many light-years apart. He knew that it utilized a new revolutionary technology and he was also aware that if it was a success, it wouldn't be long until starships might become obsolete. A sad thought for him and yet DeMara's exhilaration was contagious. Who didn't want to be part of history in the making?

He turned to look at the storm again. The shuttle was now just moments away from diving into the dark clouds.

She followed his glance. "This planet is the perfect testing ground. I heard it took Frobisher and your brother years to find it."

He nodded. "They predicted this storm would hit the surface six years ago," he said and didn't even attempt to understand how this unique electromagnetic storm was a required requisite for this experiment to work. It had something to do with the electron density in the lightning charges that would properly stimulate the dark anti-matter on which the experiment relied and make the matter transport possible.

What puzzled him the most was the fact that this sort of anomaly had never been witnessed on any other planet in the known galaxy and as far as he knew it would not happen again on Periphocles V for another hundred years or so. This was the only chance for this experiment to take place.

DeMara had tried to explain that Frobisher and Matthew were trying to learn from the experiment how to reproduce similar conditions artificially, which at the moment completely eluded Federation science.

"Brace yourselves," the Bolian said.

Michael held on tightly to his seat as the shuttle dove into the clouds. He soon found out that the pilot had clearly understated the storm's intensity.

The shuttle pilot proved his worth and steered the *Erickson* safely through the thickening storm and landed it near a provisional encampment mostly made out of tents and simple prefab buildings.

Doctor Owens and Doctor Frobisher had made this place their home for the last two years, working feverishly on their experiment. It usually also housed the forty-something assistants and workers that had been part of this undertaking from an early stage. However, the lead scientists had decided to have them all evacuated to *Columbia* for the time being. It had been considered safer to have only a handful of people around when the delicate experiment began.

The safety concerns were at the forefront of his mind as Michael stepped out of the shuttle, closely followed by DeMara who appeared much more excited than anxious.

As soon as they had both cleared the small vessel, the *Erickson* took off again and shot back into the sky. Michael watched the departing shuttle until it had disappeared in the dense green clouds above.

Cobalt blue and saffron-colored lightning shot silently through the thick sky. As he looked south, he noticed what was still to come. A front of pulsating green mass was moving toward them. It looked angry as though nature herself was out to unleash all its fury at once.

A deafening roar emanated from the approaching inferno and Michael was momentarily stunned. He looked over to where DeMara stood. She seemed fascinated by the spectacle, not in the slightest intimidated by the sudden noise.

Michael turned his attention to his surroundings. Periphocles V was a rough and uninhabited world mostly covered by tundra and wasteland. It bordered on a miracle that it contained a breathable atmosphere. There was not much to look at here besides wide-open land with a few mountain ranges in the distance. The entire surface appeared to be drowned in an eerie pastel green.

Not far from the landing platform, on a slightly elevated plateau, stood a large round structure about twelve meters high and eight in diameter and shaped not unlike a delicate old-fashioned flower vase, with a wide, round base and a slim top. It was connected to all sorts of conduits to machinery nearby. Michael had visited the encampment before but he had not seen the finished device until now. It was unimpressive from the outside but he had been told that it housed some of the most sophisticated technology presently available. Or at least that was what its designers had claimed. At the top of the structure sat a large emitter that projected a pulsating blue beam into the sky.

As Michael and DeMara approached the device he noticed a second emitter, this one pointed at a small platform close by. On the platform were several containers and crates, no doubt the test subjects that were to be transported through the device to a planet light-years away.

Another emitter came to life just as they passed the platform, startling him. This one shot out a light red beam that quickly and completely engulfed every single object on the platform.

Michael threw DeMara a concerned glance. The experiment was not scheduled to begin for another hour.

"It's a containment field," she said as they walked up the plateau. "It reinforces the test subject's molecular cohesion and prepares them for the exposure to dark anti-matter."

Michael nodded, pretending that he understood what she had told him. It appeared to be harmless, that's all he needed to know for now.

They reached the device and found just one person working on what looked like final adjustments. It was *Columbia's* chief engineer, Lieutenant Commander Amaya Donners. She was not working directly on the machine itself. Westren Frobisher and Matthew Owens had not allowed any Starfleet engineers to interface with the device itself, instead, Donners was double-checking the power levels from an auxiliary monitoring station placed near the machine.

Michael hesitated. He hadn't been looking forward to this meeting. He had been *Columbia's* first officer for just a few weeks and had managed to avoid the chief engineer for the most part.

DeMara noticed his discomfort immediately. She had arrived on *Columbia* shortly after him and didn't know Donners well at all. But from what she had seen, she had appeared to be an efficient engineer. And yet this hadn't been the first time she had noticed Michael's discomfort around Donners. The few times she had brought it up, the first officer had efficiently deflected her questions.

He had shown an uncustomary disinclination to speak about Amaya Donners, leaving her to realize that if she wanted to find out what exactly was the matter between the two of them, she had to hope for the chief engineer to provide answers.

Donners turned to face her approaching colleagues. She was an attractive woman about Michael's age but easily passed for five years younger. She had creamy brown skin and short straight hair that seemed to be all about business and practicality. She carried herself with distinction, like a person meant for greater things. And while DeMara Deen possessed a more ethereal beauty, Amaya was undoubtedly the more sensual woman.

There could be little doubt that Donners possessed a sharp intellect and great ingenuity. Her dark eyes made contact with Michael for just a few seconds, shooting him an icy glance.

"We are all set here," she said matter-of-factly. "All systems are working within expected tolerances and we should achieve optimal atmospheric conditions in about one hour and twenty-two minutes."

For a few seconds, nobody spoke.

“Where are the doctors?” said Deen finally, not able to bear the silence any longer.

“They’re going through last-minute calculations,” she said. “They should be joining us shortly.”

DeMara nodded and looked at Michael. “Dark anti-matter can be extremely dangerous if there are any discrepancies in the calculations. But if this experiment succeeds it might become a new reliable power source, ten times more powerful than regular anti-matter reactions.”

Michael wasn’t listening. His focus had remained on Donners who had returned to work without paying any attention to him at all.

The first officer stepped closer to the device, faking curiosity in a control panel close to where Donners was working at. “This is quite something,” he said to nobody in particular, still looking at the control panel. “We’re going to be witnesses to history in the making. Exciting, isn’t it?” he said with a smile, turning toward Donners.

“Quite,” she said with little emotion in her voice and avoiding eye contact. DeMara watched both of them with curiosity.

“You think this machine has the potential to make us all obsolete?” he said, glancing up at the accelerator.

“How do you mean?”

He looked at her. “If we can just beam people from one planet to another there won’t be any more need for starships. Certainly not chief engineers.”

Donners frowned and Michael immediately regretted his choice of words.

“Or first officers,” he quickly added.

“I’m sure you’d find another job. Getting ahead in life has never been a problem for you,” Donners said, her frosty tone revealing a hint of spite.

The young Tenarian didn’t miss it. She was suddenly painfully aware that she was eavesdropping on their conversation and quickly turned away to focus her attention on a power conduit nearby. But not without keeping at least one ear honed in.

Michael’s smile had faded. “If I remember correctly, you were as dedicated to your careers as I was. And you’ve done pretty well for yourself, if I may say so.”

“I’m so glad that you approve.” She made no effort to hide the sarcasm now. “And I’m proud of what I have accomplished. On my own, without stepping on anybody’s toes.”

Donners confirmed a suspicion Michael had held for a while now. She had wanted to replace *Columbia*’s outgoing first officer herself and he was now pretty sure that she had lobbied hard with Captain Mendez to get that position. But in the end, for whatever reason, Mendez had decided to give the post to somebody else. He knew it couldn’t have been her age; their birthdays were just ten days apart.

“Not that it matters but I didn’t ask for this position,” Michael said, going on the defensive. There was no reason to do that. He did not have to justify anything to Amaya Donners. But then why did he feel like he had to?

Donners cracked a malicious smile. “I bet it helps to have friends in high places though,” she said and turned away to leave.

That point hit home. She knew Michael had never been happy about having an admiral as a father. He hated to be reminded of it and he had always vehemently denied any notions of nepotism that colleagues liked to entertain. But in the end, how could he even be sure? He was in his father’s realm of influence if he wanted to or not. The obvious link to his father had often caused him to doubt himself and his achievements. It was his Achilles’ heel; he knew that and apparently so did Donners.

He took a deep breath and a decisive step forward. He pushed the doubts about possible favoritism out of his mind as he moved closer to the chief engineer until his face was just inches from the back of her head. The sweet smell of her hair filled his nostrils. For a short moment, it brought back pleasant memories.

“Commander, if you have a problem with me as your commanding officer, I suggest you say so,” he said with a stern voice that he managed to keep not much louder than a whisper. “We will need to have to work together and I don’t want there to be any issues between us that could affect our working relationship.”

Amaya Donners didn’t reply, didn’t even turn around. Instead, she just walked away.

Michael couldn’t quite believe her contempt. “Commander?” he called after her, his voice much louder now.

Donners stopped and turned to face him. “You won’t need to worry about that, *sir*,” she said putting special emphasis on the title. “I’m leaving *Columbia* next week.”

Michael was speechless. “You requested a transfer because of me?”

“Oh please, don’t flatter yourself. I was offered a position as a first officer. I’m merely thinking of my career, Michael. Of all people I’m sure you’d understand,” she said and then quickly excused herself and left for the encampment.

Michael simply stood there, watching her leave.

DeMara joined him. "Good for her," she said.

He nodded. "She always said she'd make captain before me. Who knows, she might be right."

"You two go back, don't you?"

Michael didn't reply.

"What happened?"

The first officer turned to the large machine, inspecting the same control panel he had looked at before.

A roaring thunder made the ground of Periphocles V tremble slightly.

He looked skyward. The pulsating clouds were almost on top of them now.

\* \* \*

A few minutes later a very familiar face approached Michael Owens from the encampment. He was just a little shorter than him but four years older. He had the same brownish hair that he wore slightly longer. His distinct, almost chiseled chin was very similar to his own. Michael had always considered his brother to be the more handsome one. He took much more after his mother while Michael shared his father's more hawkish features.

Michael greeted his brother with an easy smile. He had been reunited with his Matthew only about a week ago after not having seen him for years. His brother had left home as soon as he'd had the chance, no longer willing to live in the same house as his father. He didn't blame him at all. Not only was he better looking, but he had also always been the smarter one. And that he certainly had proven by now.

"Michael," Matthew said, returning his younger brother's smile as he stepped up onto the platform. There was something else in his eyes that Michael noticed immediately. Concern perhaps or maybe something more serious. Probably not surprising considering that the moment he had waited for most of his life was now fast approaching.

"About time you showed up for your own damn show," Michael said and gave his brother a firm hug. He presented his companion. "You remember DeMara."

Matthew's smile widened as he spotted the Tenarian officer. "How could I not? I'm glad you decided to join us."

"Trust me, it's an honor to be here."

The scientist looked at her for a moment and then shook his head. "That you've been hanging around this lame space jockey all this time just baffles me," he said with mock surprise. "You should come and work for me. You just might learn something interesting for once."

She smiled. "I will certainly consider your offer."

Michael pushed his brother away. "Oh no, she won't. You will not steal her away. There're enough people here already whose success has gotten to their heads."

Matthew laughed.

Michael put an arm around his brother's shoulder and they both watched the large device in front of them. "Though you deserve it," Michael said looking at the machine, "I'm damned proud of you."

DeMara watched the two brothers with a smile of her own. She had never had much of a chance to see them together. It seemed almost as though they'd been thrown back into time, two kids playing with their toys and having a blast. She turned to join their appreciation of the slick gray machine. "What are you going to call this?" she said.

Matthew answered. "Well, technically it's a D.M.A.Q.M.A. A dark matter/anti-matter quantum matrix accelerator."

"I don't know," said Michael, "it doesn't have a ring to it."

"I'm considering calling her Big Betty but I don't think Wes likes it."

Michael smirked. He remembered that his brother's first girlfriend had been named Betty. She had been a rather tall girl for her age, which had earned her the nickname.

Matthew's facial expressions became more somber as he turned back to his younger brother. "Mike, I need to talk to you before we get started."

The Starfleet officer nodded and Matthew led him a few paces away from the machine.

"What is it? You're not getting cold feet on me now, are you?"

Matthew didn't reply right away. Instead, his gaze was fixed on the encampment. He let out a small sigh.

Michael could feel that something serious was troubling his brother. Something he'd rather not speak about but felt obligated to communicate nevertheless. He put a hand on his shoulder. "Talk to me, Matt."

Matthew looked at Michael, cracking a small smile. "This has been quite a ride for me. For Wes and me. We've dreamed of this moment since we first started together back at Cambridge. It feels like a lifetime ago now. And it's hard to believe it's all about to come true."

"I understand. I can imagine the pressure you must feel."

Matthew nodded. "I'm worried, Michael."

"I'm sure that's perfectly normal. This is a chance of a lifetime, am I right?"

"Yes, but I'm worried about Wes."

"Doctor Frobisher?" Michael didn't know Doctor Westren Jarett Frobisher well. He knew that Matthew had met him at Cambridge and that they had become close friends. They had shared the same dream and decided to make it their life's ambition to turn it into reality.

He had met Frobisher only a few days earlier and he had gotten the impression that he was a highly intelligent man. Quiet but intelligent. He was a few years older than Matthew and seemingly uncomfortable around people he didn't know. But he was a friend of his brother's and that meant something to him.

"What about him?" said Michael. "Is he having second thoughts about this?"

He shook his head. "No, not at all. He's completely dedicated. Maybe a little bit too much so."

Michael fixed him with a quizzical look. "I'm not sure I understand."

"Did you know that he first came up with the idea of a dark matter/anti-matter accelerator back in high school?"

"I thought you came up with this together."

"We did. But he had laid out the groundwork long before we even met. He had been obsessed with the idea ever since. Over the last few years, it's been getting worse. He lives and breathes for this and I'm just worried that maybe..." Matthew stopped himself.

"Are you saying that he might not be up for this? If you need more time to--"

Matthew cut him off. "That's just it. We don't have more time," he said sternly. "This is the one and only chance we'll ever get at this. If we don't follow through with this experiment now, we will not get the right environmental parameters for another hundred years or so. And there is no way we can reproduce the right environment artificially. If it doesn't happen now, all our work will have been for nothing."

Michael turned away to look at Big Betty waiting for her moment to shine. He let out a sigh. He knew that a large portion of Starfleet's scientific community had their eyes on this.

Everybody wanted this to go through. Captain Mendez had talked to him in private about this experiment just a day earlier. He had stressed how many resources the Federation had already put into supporting this project and how many high-ranking officials in the Council had shown a personal interest in this matter. Michael could sense that Mendez himself had probably been given a similar lecture by his superiors.

He turned to face his brother again. He spotted a look of uncertainty and doubt on his face. "We have to go through with this, you know that."

Matthew nodded his head ever so slightly. "I do."

"All right, worst case scenario?"

"Dark anti-matter is incredibly powerful but also extremely unstable. If we make a mistake, we could end up blowing ourselves to pieces."

Michael nodded. He had anticipated something like that. Risks, of course, were inherent to his job, he fully understood this.

"And there is a small chance that we blow away Sentaka XII," he added more quietly.

Michael's eyes opened wide. That, he had not anticipated. Nobody had even hinted at a possible danger to the site to which Big Betty was supposed to beam the test subjects. A trip that would take a starship eight hours at high warp was to take Big Betty just a few seconds.

"Sentaka XII is populated."

"The chances of that happening are minuscule."

Michael and Matthew had not noticed that Westren Frobisher had made his way to the dark anti-matter device. The slim man with an unruly haircut and sharp facial features had taken up position at the main control console. He looked with dismay at the two brother's conversation.

"Gentlemen," he shouted. "Time flies!"

The Owens turned to look at Frobisher who was impatiently waiting by the accelerator.

Michael took a deep breath. "I guess it's show time."

Matt nodded. "There is one more thing you should know. Something that I observed during early test runs. I may not be important but you should know."

"Doctor, I need you over here now!" Frobisher shouted. "This is not an opportune moment for idle chitchat."

"Tell me later," Michael said. "Go and make me proud."

Matt smiled and hurried over to Big Betty.

"Good luck!"

Frobisher looked up from his instruments. "Luck? Luck has nothing to do with it, Commander. Today you will be witness to destiny unfolding."

Michael could begin to sense why his brother had been concerned. Frobisher sounded nothing like what he had when he had first met the man. Gone were his reservations and inhibitions. He seemed completely alive now. But how could he not be? He and his brother were about to make history. All Michael could hope for was that there was enough room for a footnote making mention of the fearless Starfleet officer that had stood by them at their moment of triumph.

Matt took his place next to Frobisher. "We are forty-five minutes from the event threshold."

"Time to initiate dark matter/anti-matter reaction process," Frobisher said and went to work.

Amaya Donners had by now also returned and together with DeMara they set up at a secondary console that would allow them to monitor each process. Michael stepped behind the two women. From his vantage point, he had a good view of everything that was going on. He looked skyward.

As far as he could see the sky was pulsating in bright green, yellow, and blue lights. There were no sounds but the lightning above could have struck fear into the most courageous heart. It shot through the sky and toward the ground in circular motions, spiraling down at them and leaving behind a whirlwind of light.

And then the thunder began anew. Michael cringed at the ear-splitting noise the sky unleashed. He could hardly hear his own thoughts, not to mention Frobisher and Matt's procedural announcements.

A lightning strike shot down toward their position and Michael jumped when he thought it was going to hit right on top of them. It didn't. Instead, it was deflected to one of the tall poles that had been erected all around the platform.

DeMara offered him a smile when she noticed his discomfort. "The probability of being struck by lightning is smaller than us being hit by a meteor."

That didn't help at all to put Michael at ease. He looked up again, now also keeping an eye out for rocks falling out of the sky.

"The dark anti-matter flow is within predicted parameters," said Donners. "Thirty-five minutes to event threshold."

"The storm will soon reach an exact neutrino density that will be highly sensitive to quantum energy exposure and create a unique singularity. Something akin to a tiny wormhole inside the atmosphere. The dark anti-matter will allow us to transport an energy beam through that singularity and the idea is that it will duplicate it on Sentaka XII," Deen said, shouting to make herself understood over the noise of the thunder above.

Michael had heard this before but it certainly didn't hurt to be reminded of what was about to happen. He had never quite liked the idea of opening a wormhole inside the atmosphere of a planet. A few weeks earlier he surely would have called the attempt ludicrous.

"Containment field at eighty-five percent," shouted Matthew Owens from the main controls.

Michael turned to the transporter dais. The red beam was now gaining intensity, creating a force field around the test subjects. If that was what it took to beam something from one world to another, he could honestly not see how anyone would volunteer for that procedure. As for him, he would have preferred a good old starship anytime.

But then he was certain that people had similar concerns when the regular transporters had been first introduced. And now it was just another essential part of everyday life, as regular and as safe as blasting through space at faster-than-light speeds.

Tensions ran high for the next few minutes. Doctor Frobisher and Matthew announced all kinds of information that didn't make much sense to him. And it wasn't because he didn't understand science. He was convinced that he had a decent enough grasp on the basics of many of the natural sciences. But the things that were going on here just went completely over his head.

Donners and DeMara read out status reports that were slightly more comprehensible to him. All the energy outputs and power concentrations seemed to be within tolerable levels. Everything seemed to be going according to plan. All the while the storm around them gained in intensity, the lightning now striking the poles almost constantly. The wind had built up as well, making it difficult to stand without support. The cobalt beam emanating from the top of Big Betty was pulsating with ever more feverish speed.

And then something happened that Michael had not expected. He became dizzy and his vision began to blur. He looked at the others but they seemed to be fine, completely focused on the task at hand.

Michael took a few steps away from the large accelerator. He closed his eyes for a moment, hoping the sensation would pass.

When he opened them again, he found that the world in front of his eyes had changed. He no longer stood where he had been just moments



before. He stood further away from Big Betty and was certain that it now looked slightly different than it had only a moment ago. The design was still more or less the same, but the machinery and conduits around it had all changed.

Perplexed and still feeling dizzy he looked around. Donners and DeMara remained by the console but they were frozen in place by the containment beam that had targeted them instead of the test subjects.

Frobisher was close to the transporter platform where he was having a heated debate with a tall Vulcan. The man had a weapon trained on the scientist.

Michael couldn't spot his brother until he looked toward his feet. He was laying in the dirt, wounded badly, blood pouring out of his chest and mouth. He was trying to speak.

"Michael," he whispered.

"What happened?" Michael managed to ask, still not over the shock and confusion of the world changing around him

"Michael!"

He felt a hand on his shoulder and he whipped around.

"Michael, are you all right?" said DeMara with concern evident in her purple eyes.

He looked at her for a moment. It took him a second to realize that he was back where he was supposed to be. Everything was exactly the way it had been before.

"You seemed like you were somewhere else for a moment," she said. "Is something wrong?"

Michael shook his head, trying to rid himself of the cobwebs in his brain. "I'm not sure."

"Orbital satellite fully powered and ready to transmit," shouted Frobisher. "We are all systems go!"

Michael forced himself to ignore what had happened and gave DeMara a reassuring smile. "Don't worry about me. We can't afford to miss this."

Reluctantly she let him lead her back to the console.

"T minus five to event threshold," said Donners. There was much more excitement in her voice now. She was anticipating this moment as much as the others.

Michael could not entirely shake the strange sensation he had experienced. But as much as he tried, he could simply not make sense of any of it. He ultimately attributed the entire episode to dark anti-matter radiation playing strange tricks on his mind.

"Brace yourselves!" Frobisher's voice was euphoric.

DeMara however frowned. "I'm detecting a point zero zero five increase in quantum neutrons in the atmosphere," she looked at Michael with concern. "This is not supposed to happen."

Michael directed his glance at the two scientists. They had noticed the anomaly as well.

"This is nothing," Frobisher shouted. "Compensating by increasing dark anti-matter flow to seven point eight percent."

Donners shook her head. "More anti-matter might cause instability within the singularity."

"I can compensate for that," Frobisher shot back angrily.

"Not if the quantum neutrons continue to increase. Point zero zero seven now."

Michael didn't like where this was going. He understood enough to know that if the wormhole became unstable, they might not be around long enough to see the end of the experiment.

"I'm changing the modulation of the energy flow. That will lessen the effects of the quantum neutrons," Frobisher said and went to work zealously. Time was running out fast.

"Four minutes to event threshold," Donners said.

Michael locked eyes with his brother. He could see his concerns resurface. He began to slightly shake his head.

Michael turned to DeMara. "Changing the modulation? Will that work?"

DeMara looked at her read-outs. She seemed uncertain about what Frobisher was up to. "I'm not sure but it might. He certainly could control the increasing neutron levels this way."

"I sense a but."

It was Matthew who answered his question. "Wes, we'll risk instability at the point of reemergence!"

"No, not necessarily," he said without looking up from his instruments.

“Sentaka XII?” Michael said.

“The wormhole at the other end might implode,” DeMara said. “I can’t even imagine the damage that might do.”

“Two minutes to event threshold!” Donners said, now unable to hide the increasing stress in her voice.

Michael had heard enough. He stepped around the observation console and toward the scientists. “We need to shut it down.”

“No!” Frobisher shouted. “No, this can work. I can make this work.”

Matthew put a hand on his friend's shoulder. “Wes, it’s not worth the risk. I’m sorry old friend.”

Westren Frobisher shook off the hand and pushed Matthew away. “I won’t let you shut it down. Don’t you see? We can make this work. I know we can.”

Matthew’s eyes grew larger as if he no longer recognized his friend. This man was completely taken over by his need for success.

“Matt, shut it down!” yelled Michael from across the platform.

Matthew nodded. “There is no other way,” he said and went to work.

“Event threshold: T minus one minute!”

Right above them in the sky a rift was beginning to open, tearing away at the very fabric of space.

“I won’t let anybody stop us now. Not now,” Frobisher spat and stepped away from his colleague.

Matthew looked after him with surprise as he quickly vanished. He didn’t have time to wonder about him. He had to focus on stopping the events that had been set in motion and that if allowed to go ahead could destroy an entire world. “Shutting down the dark anti-matter flow.”

Frobisher reappeared by the main body of the accelerator. “Like hell you are,” he said and entered a command into an override console.

Matthew looked up in shock. He raised one arm toward Frobisher. “Wes, don’t!”

It was too late.

A power feedback surge shot through the console Matthew was standing at and a single energy burst hit him square in the chest. The force of the impact gripped his body and catapulted him away from the console.

“No!” Michael screamed and ran towards his brother.

Matthew hit the ground and when Michael got to him he found the front of his shirt completely burned away. The rest of his clothes were quickly being soaked by the blood streaming out of the large wound on his chest. Michael raised his brother’s head gently off the ground. He was still hanging on. But blood was coming out of his nose and mouth.

“Temporal anomaly,” he said barely audible among the thunderous noise coming from above. “I meant to tell you ... before.”

“Try not to talk,” Michael said. “I’ll get you out of here.”

Matthew shook his head feebly, already fully aware that all help would come too late. He coughed up more blood, trying to find the strength for a few more words. They never came. The life had left his body, only an empty and broken shell remained.

Michael’s hands trembled when he checked for his pulse. He could not find it. His brother’s eyes were empty, his heart had stopped beating.

It took just a few seconds for his emotions to make a dramatic shift from despair to blinding rage. He stood and spotted Frobisher working on an auxiliary console.

Filled with just one thought he did not hear either DeMara or Donners shouting at him. Instead, he charged the murdering scientist who turned around just in time to see Michael jump him.

They both collapsed to the ground and Michael began to mercilessly pound his face until his nose cracked and blood was covering his fist. It was only then that he heard the voices.

“Event threshold imminent!”

“Shut down the accelerator!”

Michael stumbled to his feet. DeMara and Donners were racing across the platform but judging from their expressions they would not reach the controls in time.

Michael on the other hand was just a couple of arm’s lengths away from the machine that was about to unleash all sorts of doom and despair on a planet light-years away.

Overhead the emitter was loudly swirling to life, the blue beam steadily getting stronger.

Michael stepped to the computer console Frobisher had been working on but he knew he didn’t have the time to find the right controls. Out of the corner of his eye, he spotted several power conduits connecting Big Betty with additional generators and equipment.

He didn't waste any time.

He stepped up to the machine and began ripping out one conduit after another.

He screamed as pain shot up his hands but he didn't stop. By the time he had removed the last conduit, he couldn't even feel his arms any longer.

Exhausted, he slumped to the ground with his back against the accelerator.

He looked up.

Above him, the cobalt beam had disappeared and the dark rift was beginning to close again. By the vibrations, he could feel the machine behind him powering down.

When DeMara and Donners finally reached him they were out of breath. They found him with his eyes firmly fixed on Frobisher's beaten and bleeding body. The scientist's chest was rising and falling as he desperately fought for each breath.

Michael's glance wandered to where his brother lay completely motionless in the dirt.

The storm had quickly vanished and bright rays of emerald-colored sunlight were making their way through the dissipating clouds.

Michael closed his eyes as he felt tears running down his cheeks.

# Chapter Two: Merits

More than one hundred men and women stood quietly on the dim deck, their glances fixed at a bright display on the far wall.

They were spread out over two levels and all of them were impatiently watching the same thing, each and every one of them wearing their best dresses and suits for the occasion.

Behind them, through the large windows, a beautiful azure and crimson nebula lingered in space. And yet all their backs were turned to the magnificent spatial phenomenon. For the moment at least their interest was completely focused on the display that showed just one number.

49669.9.

On the upper level, one man stood slightly apart from all the others. Standing by the railing gave him a good view of the floor below and the many expecting faces. He wore a smile on his face, knowing well what was about to happen. He shot a glance at the champagne flute he held in his right hand. It was full.

There was palpable tension in the large lounge now as everyone held their breath for just one more second.

And then it happened.

The display changed slightly, the digits shifting to display 49670.0, the numbers flashing in a red glow.

The lights went up and colorful confetti was released from the ceiling and rained down on the crowd below. But all that was nothing to the loud cheers and shouts coming from the excited masses.

Michael Owens took a small step forward so that he stood right by the railing. He rose his glass to his crew. “To *Eagle*’s first year and too many more to come!”

Everybody turned to him and cheered. They rose their glasses toward their captain and to each other. For just a moment the noise level dropped to nearly zero as everybody took a sip from their drink.

Michael watched as his crew began to mingle among each other, heading for the bar below, to the seating arrangements by the windows, and just generally enjoying the moment.

He knew they deserved it. They had performed admirably over the last year. Most of the crewmembers who had joined him in *Eagle*’s main lounge—commonly referred to as The Nest—had been with him and the ship since day one. He recognized nearly all of them, something he had promised himself he would do. Get to know your crew. He felt he had succeeded.

The *Eagle* was a heavy cruiser, an explorer, with a crew of six-hundred thirty Starfleet officers, noncoms and ratings, and another one-hundred fifty civilians. He might have known their faces but it was near impossible to know all their names.

The Nest, with its two levels, was a large space but not nearly big enough to hold the entire crew.

Instead, celebrations were held at numerous different spots around the ship at the same time. This way everybody could celebrate their accomplishments together.

This little anniversary celebration was by no means a standard Starfleet procedure. Michael had only encountered it on one other vessel. His late mentor and commanding officer had introduced the annual event on the *Columbia* and Michael had noticed how well the crew had responded to it. The decision to bring this tradition to *Eagle*, to his new ship, had been an easy one.

“Congratulations, Michael.”

He turned to see Lieutenant DeMara Deen approaching. She looked even more stunning than usual in her long and sleeveless green dress made out of numerous individual ribbons, tightly wrapped around her slender figure. She showed plenty of her flawless copper skin and her golden hair seemed even more vibrant today. Only her combadge, attached to the dress, identified her as a crewmember.

She rose her glass and he quickly reciprocated the gesture.

“I’ve lost quite a sizeable bet thanks to you,” she said with a wide smile on her face.

He gave her a quizzical look.

“I was sure you’d quit after two months.”

He smiled. “Proving you wrong is what kept me going all this time.”

She responded with a radiant smile of her own, dispelling any notion that she had been serious, and then joined him by the railing and looked over the assembled crew. “For the record, I think you did an amazing job. I’m not sure if you realize it yet but I’m convinced that you are what they call a natural leader.”

Michael wasn't entirely sure how to respond to this. DeMara probably knew him better than anyone else on *Eagle* and he was certain that she was well aware of the moments of insecurity that had plagued him from time to time over the last year.

More than that, she knew firsthand that he had been rather reluctant to even accept command of *Eagle* after *Columbia's* disastrous last mission he had overseen as her acting captain.

And while he had long since overcome those doubts, a voice in the back of his head still made him question if he really deserved to be here.

As he looked at the crowd below, he spotted a few admiring glances coming his way. Even though he couldn't be completely sure if they weren't meant for the stunningly attractive woman at his side.

"They love you. I don't think a captain could ask for anything more," she said.

"I know I don't."

\* \* \*

Lieutenant Commander So'Dan Leva had never been entirely comfortable in large crowds and this time was no exception. He fully understood the rationale of acknowledging *Eagle's* first year in service, why it had to be celebrated this lavishly he wasn't sure.

He wiped away some of the confetti that had landed on top of his short black hair and his fingers brushed the tip of his pointed ear.

He caught himself before anybody noticed and quickly withdrew his hand. He had never liked his ears. They were a gift from his mother's side and a constant reminder that half the blood in his veins was Romulan.

Leva's anxieties about being in a crowd were nothing compared to his feelings of being the only one of his kind serving in the fleet. No, that wasn't really the problem. The problem was that he was a hybrid of two races that had never gotten along. How was he ever supposed to get along with himself?

At the other side of the Nest, another man with similarly shaped ears towered over the people around him. But he was a Vulcan. Pure and in all manners of the word. So'Dan turned to look away, deciding to observe the distant nebula instead.

Vulcans did not make him feel any better about himself. If anything, they only made matters worse.

A strong clap against his back almost made him spill his drink.

"One year and counting. Hard to believe, isn't it?"

So'Dan turned to see a Bajoran woman who had crept up on him from behind. She wore a fairly conservative pants outfit and had a wide smile on her face.

Nora Laas was an attractive woman with strawberry blonde hair that she kept relatively short with a few bangs hanging down her forehead, framing her hazel-colored eyes.

Although he was well aware that, the thirty-year-old woman had never put much emphasis on her physical appearance and he could understand why.

She was a fighter and she had been since early childhood when she had battled the Cardassian who had occupied her home world. For a very long time, all she had known had been war, and war certainly didn't care how you looked.

So'Dan had met Laas a few years earlier when they had both been assigned to Deep Space Two. The two of them had quickly bonded, quietly sharing their mutual pain born from their complicated backgrounds. So'Dan had long since noticed that she did not sport the traditional earring that many Bajorans wore for spiritual reasons. Nora Laas had left her religion behind a long time ago.

Her hazel eyes sparkled. "If this isn't a reason to celebrate."

The half-Romulan shrugged. "I've had other postings that lasted longer than a year. I don't understand what all the fuss is about."

Her mood was not dampened, however. She sat down on one of the comfortable seats and liberally put up her legs. "You never celebrated it before though, did you? I admit, at first, I thought it was an overly sentimental notion, but now," she looked around the room. "I think I really like it," she said as her glance found him again.

He sat next to her. "I assume it has certain benefits for ship morale."

She laughed out loud. "Now you sound like Xylion."

He frowned. He didn't much care for being compared to the Vulcan science officer.

The Bajoran's expression sobered up. She could sense something was bothering him. It wasn't all that difficult considering how joyful everybody around him seemed to be. She leaned in toward him. "All right, let's have it. What's eating you?"

So'Dan pretended to look puzzled. "What do you mean?"

She rolled her eyes. "Come on. I know you're not a big fan of parties but you're practically pouting."

"I'm not pouting," he said sharply.

"Then what?"

She gave him some time when he didn't answer right away. His eyes found the large observation windows in front of them.

"Nothing more than the usual. The main phaser array needs to be recalibrated, there are new rules of engagement that have to be implemented, and we have a new tactical officer I'll need to train who of all races had to be Vulcan, of course."

"Hmm," said Laas as her only reply.

"And I received a letter from my mother this morning telling me that she might leave the embassy on Earth to return to Romulus."

"Ah," she said. "You're worried about your mother."

"Worried? Who said I was worried? If she wants to go back to Romulus that's her choice. No matter that she had an illegitimate child. With a human. Or that he now serves in Starfleet. No, I'm sure they'll be more than happy to welcome her back in the fold with wide open arms."

She went quiet. So'Dn had achieved what she had hoped he wouldn't. He was beginning to project his mood onto her.

He noticed. "But that's quite all right," he said quickly. "She's a grown woman and I'm sure she knows what she's doing."

Laas nodded thoughtfully.

"Lieutenant Commander Leva?"

So'Dan looked up to spot somebody he had wished to avoid. The tall Vulcan science officer had stepped next to his seat and was now looking down at him. He also held a glass of champagne in his hand and the confetti all over his black suit and hair gave him the comical appearance of a sad circus clown.

Laas cracked a smile but the humor was lost on Leva at that moment.

"I was hoping to confer with you concerning the plans to design the new long-range probe I mentioned to you earlier," he said with a straight face and his usually carefully modulated, neutral-sounding voice. He had without doubt taken notice of Nora Laas' amusement but apparently decided to ignore it.

At seventy-eight, Xylion was still a relatively young Vulcan man. But he continued to have difficulties understanding more emotional species. In fact, he had been so irritated by them that after graduating from the Academy he had quickly accepted a posting on his home world and had spent most of his professional life dedicated to science while living amongst his own kin.

Sometimes he found himself regretting the choices he had made. It would have made things much easier for him if had shown greater patience with emotional beings when he had been younger. But then he had completed some exceptional work that had given him much satisfaction over the years.

So'Dan's attention returned to the nebula. He desperately didn't want to converse with Xylion at the moment. Wasn't it enough that he had to train a new Vulcan tactical officer? It wasn't necessarily that he disliked all Vulcans.

He'd had some bad experiences with Vulcans in the past. During his Academy years, many students and faculty members had simply assumed that he himself was Vulcan and it had frustrated him to no end.

"Not now," he finally said without looking back up at Xylion.

The science officer gave him a curt nod and then disappeared again into the crowd.

Laas frowned at her friend. "You could have handled that better."

He turned to look at the leaving Vulcan and then at Laas. "He doesn't care. He has no emotions, remember?"

Laas stood, appalled by his statement. "He's not a machine. So. Since when has treating somebody with respect become dependent on their race?"

She spotted somebody in the crowd who immediately lifted her spirits once more. *Eagle's* first officer, Commander Eugene Edison had stepped into her line of sight. He stood by the bar at the other side of the room, conversing with a few crewmembers. When he noticed her eyes on him, he turned to face her and smiled.

Laas didn't realize nor would she have been able to explain it if she had known but she blushed slightly. Nobody had to tell her that Edison was a handsome man. His facial features were soft and yet radiated strength and confidence. He had a tall, athletic body that looked even better in the civilian clothes he now wore.

His wavy blond hair looked like satin and his smile had the unique quality of letting everybody around him know that he deeply cared.

"I will not stay here and get dragged down by your bad attitude. Excuse me," she said and crossed the room to approach the first officer.

She was right, thought Leva, and wondered if it was too late to find Xylion and talk to him about that probe. In the end, he couldn't bring

himself to face him again and left the Nest instead.

\* \* \*

His full name was Liftu-Tensu-Lestu Culsten. On Krellon, where he was from, he would have never actually used his family name however, it was simply not a custom. But since joining Starfleet the young man had decided to make some changes. He was known amongst his friends and colleagues as Lif Culsten. And he had plenty of friends on *Eagle*.

There weren't many other Krellonians in Starfleet. The Krellian Star Alliance was not even a member of the United Federation of Planets. But that didn't stop Lif from making friends easily wherever he went.

The helmsman was sitting by a table on the upper level of the Nest surrounded by some of his friends. But his concentration was focused on the cup of vanilla-flavored ice cream in front of him as he carefully picked up the small pieces of colorful confetti that had sprinkled all over it.

A female ensign, sitting to his right, had laughingly assured him that they were not toxic at all and he could easily consume them with the ice cream. But that had not deterred Lif. He was determined that those little unwanted dots of color would only spoil this great new food that he had discovered only very recently.

His friends decided to leave for one of the holodecks to try out a brand-new recreational program but Lif had made up his mind to finish the frozen dessert first.

Shortly after they had left Ashley Jane Wenera joined his table. The raven-haired ship's physician offered the younger man a warm smile.

"You know you can eat those, right?"

Lif frowned. "I've been told."

Wenera nodded and continued to watch his efforts with amusement. Ashley Wenera liked the young helmsman. He had a cheerful personality and the natural talent to make people laugh. As the ship's chief medical officer, she understood well the curative benefits of good humor and sometimes wished she could prescribe it.

She also had an interest in Culsten from a professional standpoint. She had never encountered a Krellonian before serving on *Eagle* and meeting new species was the reason why she had wanted to be a starship physician in the first place.

She always marveled at his earless head and his skin's ability to pick up sound waves, making them unnecessary.

She wondered what else the membranes of his epidermis were capable of and she made a mental note to find out eventually.

His skin had a dark bronze color but what really fascinated her were his silver-colored eyes which were a perfect match to his long platinum hair that was put into a small ponytail at the back of his head.

"I don't think I've congratulated you yet on your recent promotion," the doctor said, remembering that the junior lieutenant had been made primary flight controller just a few days earlier, essentially making him *Eagle's* chief pilot.

Culsten finally fished the last piece of confetti out of his dessert. He looked at it for a moment with utter satisfaction and then raised his head to see her smirking. "Thank you, doc," he said, took the spoon, and began to dig into the ice cream. The delayed pleasure had been well worth it, he quickly decided.

"I'm working on an experiment involving very fragile Denobulan turtle eggs and I would really appreciate it if you could steer the ship clear of any ion storms or other disruptive regions of space for a while."

"You don't like the shaking and heaving, do you?" he said with a smile.

"It makes me queasy."

"You're the doctor, you should have something to take care of that," he said and guided another spoon of ice cream to his mouth.

"Funny. Are you anticipating any of that in the near future?"

When he looked up again his facial expression had turned more serious. His silver eyes had lost some of their spark. "I'm afraid not," he said with a sigh.

The doctor narrowed her eyes. She liked his answer but not his demeanor. "You actually want *Eagle* to get into trouble?"

He quickly shook his head, feeling guilty all of a sudden. "No, of course not. It's just that things have been fairly routine as of late. Very little excitement."

"And that is bad?"

"Look at it this way. How am I ever going to make captain if I cannot show off my skills? Don't get me wrong, I'm not ungrateful but I don't want to be stuck as a helmsman for the rest of my life."

Ashley had heard of his abilities and clearly, he was not shy about them. Apparently, Krellonians had superior reflexes thanks to a more

elaborate central nervous system. She added that to her list of future study topics.

“Lif, I have absolutely no doubt that you’ll make a fine captain someday,” she said with a smile. “As for the excitement, I’ll let you know when my turtles hatch. Watching those little critters feast is a sight you won’t soon forget.”

Lif looked at her smile, trying to figure out if she was being serious.

The doctor gave him a wink and left the table.

\* \* \*

After the festivities, Captain Eduardo Mendez would normally reconvene with his senior officers for a more intimate dinner.

It was another tradition Michael had decided to bring to *Eagle*. It was the least he could do to keep his mentor’s legacy alive. He had been lost too soon when he had been tragically killed on the bridge of the *Columbia* two years earlier.

Michael himself had been on an away mission at the time and even though he sometimes considered what could have happened differently if he had been on the bridge, his friends liked to remind him that it was only due to his efforts that *Columbia* and several other ships had not been completely destroyed at the time. Starfleet had awarded him with a medal and given him temporary command of the *Columbia*. But he would’ve gladly given it all back for a chance to save Mendez.

He was sitting in *Eagle*’s observation lounge and briefing room on deck two. The long conference table was set for an extensive dinner.

The occasion had called for the use of the ship’s best china. The elegant white and gold plates were decorated with the Federation emblem and the cutlery was made out of pure silver.

The glasses were shiny and spotless and several bottles of the finest wines from all over the galaxy were ready for *Eagle*’s senior officers to enjoy. Contrary to standard practice all the beverages were the real thing, containing actual alcohol. Michael trusted his officers to show due restraint when consuming it.

His entire senior staff was present and patiently waiting for the food to arrive. They were casually talking to each other and carefully probing the different choices of beverages. To Michael’s immediate left sat DeMara Deen, his close friend and operations manager. She had become a fine officer since he had begun her training on Tenaria many years ago. He couldn’t help but feel pride in what she had accomplished and liked to think that he had just a little to do with it.

Opposite her and to his right sat his first officer, Commander Eugene Edison. The bright British man had turned out to be quite the find. Not only had he shown great command awareness, but he had also become a close friend and confidant over the year they had served together. Michael felt blessed to have had him at his side. They shared a few common interests; both of them for example had been captains of the swim team back at the Academy.

Xylion occupied the seat next to Edison. Michael had chosen the veteran Vulcan officer to head the ship’s science department after Starfleet had denied his initial request to have DeMara fill that position. But things had worked out pretty well nevertheless.

Lieutenant Commander Xylion was one of the most competent people Michael had ever met. He was also more Vulcan than many others of his species he had known over the years and that had made things a little bit more complicated at times. But Michael did not doubt that he would learn to fit in eventually. His dedication to his work could not be questioned and he had already shown a strong willingness to work with the rest of the crew. He wanted to be here and that was important to him.

Chief tactical officer Lieutenant Commander Leva sat in the chair next to DeMara. Recruiting the half-Romulan had been an easy decision. His tactical accomplishments spoke for themselves. Michael liked Leva but he was also aware that he had a few personal issues he was still working through. He had shown some difficulties working with Xylion for example but all in all, Leva had turned out to be a more than competent and reliable officer.

Leva sat next to his best friend Lieutenant Nora Laas, chief of security. Most ships in the fleet had a single officer to manage both tactical situations and provide ship security. Michael had taken yet another page out of Mendez’s approach however and assigned two different individuals for the two jobs.

This way he could be sure that he had an experienced tactical officer on the bridge even when the security officer would accompany an away team. So far, the arrangement had worked splendidly.

Chief engineer Louise Hopkins, sitting across from Nora, had been the only member of his senior staff over whom he’d had some reservations at first. She and Nora had been at the Academy together and it had been the Bajoran’s passionate testimonies of her skills that had finally won him over.

The sandy-blond engineer was young, shy, and at first glance, not the person somebody would entrust with the most sensitive parts of a starship. When she had come aboard, she had been twenty-seven years old and had become one of the youngest chief engineers on a ship of the line in Starfleet history. But Michael had seen her work in her element.

She was nothing short of a genius when she was around the warp core. Her uneasiness simply slipped off her shoulders like an unwanted coat and she became a different person. Michael no longer had any doubts that she was the best person for the job.



The last two seats on either side of the table were occupied by the ship's doctor, Ashley Wenera and for the first time since he had come aboard, helmsman Lieutenant Junior Grade Lif Culsten had been invited to join the senior officers in the observation lounge as the chief flight controller.

Wenera was a talented physician there was little doubt about that. She had never served on a starship before coming on *Eagle* but she had made the transition look easy. She had a genuine curiosity about everything alien and a tendency to question anything. An inclination that had turned out to be either extremely helpful or just plain annoying.

As for Culsten, he was a person full of surprises and full of energy. Michael sometimes thought of him as DeMara's male counterpart. He was well-liked by everybody but differently from his friend he still had to learn the virtue of closing his mouth and opening his ears on occasion.

Michael considered his officers and smiled at each one of them. Except for the Vulcan, his crew was exceptionally young. He had worried about that fact when he had assembled it a year earlier. But he had been pleasantly surprised. What they lacked in experience they made up in their passion and dedication as well as loyalty.

Michael rose his glass. "Before we begin, I just want to say how lucky, no, how honored I consider myself to be to have served with you all for the last year. I think I can safely say that I consider you to be the best crew I ever had the pleasure to work with."

Edison took his own glass. "Sir, I think I speak for all of us if I say that it has been our pleasure to serve you," he said.

Michael nodded with appreciation. Eugene Edison was not only one of the most honest people he had ever encountered, he also had the confidence and buoyancy to make people feel his sincerity.

"Hear, hear," seconded DeMara and rose her glass. The rest of the officers followed suit, showing their admiration for their commanding officer.

After everyone sipped their chosen beverage Michael spoke again. "To show my appreciation for all of you I have asked some very talented cooks that I wasn't even aware we had on board, to prepare us a real meal. I hope you will find it to your satisfaction," Michael said with a smile and pressed a panel embedded in the table.

The doors on each side of the observation lounge opened up and crewmembers dressed in shiny white uniforms wheeled in four covered food carts.

The officers turned their attention toward the procession with great anticipation. The waiters dramatically lifted the covers and the smell of freshly cooked food quickly filled the room. On the trays were steaks, a roasted turkey, a few lobsters as well as more exotic and alien-looking foods from many other worlds.

Michael noticed a few faces lighten up. This was no ordinary treat. Food served on Starfleet vessels was usually replicated and he'd had to call in on quite a few favors to be able to surprise his officers with this meal.

"Everything you see here is real food that has been prepared and cooked manually," said Michael while the waiters moved the dishes onto the conference table.

Doctor Wenera looked skeptically at the turkey. "You're saying this is real meat? Those were real animals once?"

Michael nodded. "I'm afraid some sacrifices had to be made," he said and smirked. "But don't worry, all of this was humanely sourced. Plus we have plenty of vegetarian and non-animal product dishes here also. None replicated." He looked at Xylion and DeMara whom he knew would not want to consume real meat.

They nodded approvingly.

"There should also be some *hasperat* soufflé for you, Laas. And anybody else who would like to try it. As well as some Vulcan mollusks—I hear they are delicious—and also plain *plomeek* soup."

"That is very considerate of you, Captain," said Xylion as he began to search the table for the mollusks.

Nora was also excited. "I haven't had proper *hasperat* in I don't know how long," she said with a wide smile on her face.

Michael leaned back and enjoyed the view of his officers greedily digging into the fresh food. He had done alright by them and he was happy to be able to pay them back for all the hard work they had put in over the last year, keeping his ship going.

Like any good host, he turned to eat only after he had made sure that everybody was satisfied.

The first officer happily munched on a piece of turkey and quickly picked up another piece with his fork. "This is absolutely fabulous," he said and then spotted DeMara shaking her head. "You should really try this."

The young woman looked at the meat on his fork with disgust. "That used to be alive."

Edison smiled. "It died for a noble cause," he said and put it into his mouth.

DeMara shrugged and to everybody's surprise, she cut herself a little piece of turkey. She had some difficulty at first using the knife to cut through the meat, probably repulsed at the idea initially.

Michael looked on with wide eyes when she placed the small piece of meat on her plate. Tenarians had been vegetarians for millennia. He had never witnessed a Tenarian eat any kind of meat over the three years he had lived amongst them.

DeMara froze as she spotted the many eyes resting upon her. "A little piece won't kill me," she said with a smile. "I hope."

Edison turned to Wenera. "Doctor, you better get your medkit ready."

DeMara gave him a smug smile and then took a bite. Everybody seemed to have stopped what they were doing while watching her slowly chew her food. She swallowed and looked at the others. "It doesn't taste half bad."

Michael and Edison laughed.

*"Ensign Stanmore to Captain Owens."*

"Go ahead, Ensign," he said still smiling.

*"Sir, I'm sorry to interrupt your dinner but we are receiving a priority-one message from Starfleet Command. It is addressed directly to you, sir."*

Michael nodded as if Stanmore could somehow see him. "Understood, Ensign. I take it in my ready room. Owens out."

Edison immediately put down his utensils but Michael motioned for him not to. "No please, everybody continue your meal. I'm sure I'll be back in just a minute," he said, took a napkin to wipe his mouth, and stood.

"You better," said Culsten. "The way Commander Leva is digging in there won't be anything left by the time you get back."

Leva froze suddenly aware that he was slinging down his food much faster and had much more on his plate than anybody else.

Michael smiled and then quickly left the room.

\* \* \*

The day had put Michael into a good mood, which he continued to spread among his crew when he crossed the bridge to get to his ready room. He promised Ensign Lance Stanmore and the other bridge officers that there would be plenty of food left and waiting for them after their shift.

He entered his office, walked past the large water-colored painting of his family's estate in Wisconsin, and sat down in his chair. He turned toward the computer screen and was still smiling when he activated the desktop computer to receive the message.

His smile dropped from his features almost as though he had been slapped in the face.

The man that greeted him there was well in his seventies and wore an admiral's uniform. He also possessed the distinctive chin of an Owens. For the first time in many years, he found himself face-to-face with his father: Admiral Jonathan Taylor Owens. His good mood had evaporated.

*"It's good to see you again, son. How have you been?"* Jonathan Owens said in his rich deep baritone voice. His features were stern and serious at first but a smile cracked his lips before he spoke. *"I hope I haven't interrupted your well-deserved R&R?"*

Michael realized that he was referring to his civilian outfit. He shook his head. "Just an informal dinner," he said. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

*"We haven't spoken in a long while, son. Doesn't a father deserve to check in on his son from time to time to see how he's doing?"* he said.

"Please dad, we both know that's not why you called. What's this about?"

Jonathan Owens' expression hardened. There was no fooling his own son. He had raised him too well for that. At least that was what he liked to believe. *"Very well, let's forgo the usual pleasantries for now. We'll have plenty of time for that later anyhow."*

Michael didn't like where this was going.

*"I have an urgent mission and I need your help. Yours and your ship."*

Michael didn't reply.

*"I'm currently on Vulcan. A diplomatic delegation is waiting here for you to pick up. I will join them and you will take us to the planet Farga in the Sigma Hydra sector where they will enter into negotiations with the Fargan government to discuss supplying them with corradinexyn, a medical vaccine."*

Only a small part of his father's explanation had really registered with him and it continued to linger in his mind. "You're coming aboard?"

The admiral nodded. *"Perhaps we'll be able to catch up then,"* he said, forcing another smile onto his lips.

Eagle's captain stiffened in his chair. His father was coming aboard his ship. The person who was possibly the only reason why it was his ship to begin with. It was a possibility he did not want to face. It didn't matter if it was true or not, all he wanted was to continue his life without ever having to think about it. Now that chance was gone.

If Jonathan Owens was aware of his son's feelings he did well to hide it. But it wasn't difficult to sense the unspoken tension between them. He had expected it, of course, but had hoped that his son would have been glad to welcome his father after the long time they had gone without seeing each other. He knew it would have been a pleasant fiction.

*"I expect you to be here no later than stardate 49673,"* he said when he realized that Michael was not going to say anything.

"Sigma Hydra?" Michael said suddenly once he had considered everything he had heard. "That's pretty close to the Klingon and Romulan borders."

*"Correct."*

It was only now that Michael realized the oddity of his father's request. Not only had he never asked him for anything like this before, but it was also inconsistent with Starfleet protocols. Admiral Owens was without a doubt a very influential and high-ranking figure within Starfleet Command. Michael did not know his remit exactly, but he knew that fleet operations were not part of it. Especially not involving his ship.

"Does this mission have Starfleet sanction?" he said, ignoring the possibility of offending his father. "I'm not just going to hand you over my ship on a silver platter for you to do with as you wish."

*"You won't have to worry about Command. This mission is cleared at the highest level. You can check in with Admiral Throl. As for your ship, all I need is an escort. I wouldn't dream of taking away your command."*

Michael still didn't like it but what else could he do? Sure, he could put in a formal protest with Throl, his direct superior, but he doubted that it would have done much good. His father seemed determined and this mission seemed to be legitimate. But what bothered him was the fact that he most likely could have had any ship he wanted. And he had wanted *Eagle*. His ship.

"I'll be there."

The admiral smiled. *"Good. I'm looking forward to seeing you in person again. Owens out."*

His father's face disappeared from the screen.

Michael remained sitting in his chair, staring at the now blank screen on his desk. What was his father up to? Why had he asked him personally and not gone through official channels but most importantly, was he going to be able to look him in his face after everything he had done?

He wished there was a way to avoid answering all these questions. But he knew that there wasn't. This had to happen, his father had decided. Perhaps there was a chance, a small chance that he had changed and that he was finally ready to accept responsibility for his actions. For the things he had done to him and his family. It seemed unlikely. But in any case, he would find out soon enough.

He took a deep breath and stood from his desk. He realized that his senior officers were expecting him back in the observation lounge. But somehow his appetite was gone. He decided to return to his quarters to be alone with his increasingly unpleasant thoughts.

# Chapter Three: Family

It had all appeared so straightforward.

*Eagle* was to travel to Vulcan to shuttle a delegation to the planet Farga to negotiate the release of an urgently required vaccine for the Fargans.

Andy yet, something didn't feel right about this mission and Ashley Wenera couldn't quite put her finger on it.

She was walking back from a very short briefing the first officer had held for the senior staff. The captain himself had not been present and the doctor wondered why. She hadn't seen him since he had left the dinner the night before.

*Perhaps something didn't agree with him? I should check on him later and make sure he's all right,* she thought.

Ashley entered sickbay and found it mostly empty. The only patient was a Tellarite lieutenant and Nurse Leila Adams was just finishing up with him, giving him a hypo injection for the road. The Tellarite nodded thankfully and made his way for the exit leaving Adams to clean up the equipment.

She approached her head nurse. "Is Lieutenant Goul still having those headaches?"

Adams turned around and nodded. "It's getting better. I told him to take it easy with parrises squares for the time being. Seems he gets them every time he plays," she said and looked at the door through which the lieutenant had passed moments earlier. "I don't think he's going to listen." Adams shrugged her shoulders and turned back to the doctor. "So, are we going to be needed on Farga, you think?"

Ashely shot her a surprised look. "How do you know where we're going? I only returned from the briefing just now."

Leila smiled; proud of the information network she had in place on *Eagle*. "Goul is friends with Ensign O'Houlihan who works down in engineering and is an assistant of deputy chief Fernuc."

"And he was told by Chief Engineer Hopkins?"

She shook her head. "Fernuc went to the Academy with Ensign Stanmore who happens to be close friends with Lif Culsten."

Ashley found herself perplexed at how fast information traveled on the ship. While she had made her way from the briefing room to sickbay, the details of their new mission had already spread like a bushfire throughout the ship. Granted she had walked with no hurry, having plenty on her mind to consider, but the speed at which rumor traveled on *Eagle* was still dazzling.

"I hear there is some sort of unstable vaccine involved. Do we have to make any preparation for transporting it? We should at least have a look at it."

Ashley shook her head. "There was no mention of that in the briefing. But you're right we should get a look at it. Corradinexyn is very unstable and--"

*That's it,* she thought, interrupting any other train of thought in her head. *It is very unstable and it has to be stored at extremely low temperatures to maintain its remedial effects. Why had the first officer not mentioned any of that?*

Edison had not been very detailed at all. He had explained that those were all the facts he had and she had believed him. There hadn't been any reason to question Commander Edison's honesty. But it seemed all very vague now. She was sure that she had not heard of any medical emergencies on the planet Farga in recent months and Ashley had a habit of keeping herself informed in such matters. She had worked at Starfleet Medical's emergency relief agency for a few years and was well aware of the procedures. This mission did not follow any she was familiar with.

Leila looked at her expectantly, wondering why the doctor had stopped herself.

But Ashely was too deep in her thoughts to notice. She turned away without speaking another word and headed straight for her office. She passed a large fish tank, containing several fist-sized red eggs and sat down in her chair behind her desk.

She knew that there was one person who would surely be able to answer her questions. She turned to her computer screen and entered an address code into the console.

She smiled when the face of her good friend and mentor Doctor Elijah Katanga appeared on the screen. He noticeably lightened up as well when realizing that he was facing one of his favorite students.

Katanga was a near legend among Starfleet physicians. At seventy-six he was one of the most decorated doctors in Starfleet history with a track record that could easily span two lifetimes.

For the last few years, he had worked at Starfleet Medical headquarters on Earth where he had become Ashley Wenera's mentor as well as a friend. His skin was almost as dark as the night sky and it stood in sharp contrast to his white beard and gray hair. His sharp green eyes mirrored the extensive wisdom he had acquired throughout the years.

"Jane," he said with a wide smile. Katanga had always referred to Wenera by her middle name. "*What a pleasant surprise. How are you?*"

"I cannot complain, Eli. I trust you're doing well."

"*I've been trying to keep things from falling apart since you left,*" he said. "*Most of these young doctors nowadays wouldn't know the difference between the Pederian Plague and a common cold.*"

"I remember one of those young doctors," she said, still wearing her smile. "Hopelessly naïve and green behind the ears but you taught her everything she needed to know and much more."

Katanga nodded. "*Yes, and against all odds she turned out quite alright, didn't she? But I'm getting too old to teach these new kids. All they want nowadays is a quick fix and a shot at glory.*"

"Too old? With your healing skills, you're going to outlive us all."

"*Not if these young fools have anything to say about that,*" he said. "*How can I help you, Jane?*"

Ashley remembered how Katanga always seemed to know when something had been bothering her. He had a sixth sense that came in very useful when treating patients, both physically as well as psychologically.

"I was wondering if you knew something about a medical emergency on a planet called Farga in the Sigma Hydra sector."

Katanga turned away to look at a console off-screen. "*Farga,*" he muttered. "*Sounds familiar.*"

Eagle's chief medical officer waited patiently as Katanga seemed to look into his files.

"*Yes, here it is,*" he said and turned back to face Wenera. "*They reported a class two epidemic about six months ago. We dispatched a few medical advisors and the situation was resolved quickly.*"

"Are you sure it was resolved?"

Katanga nodded. "*Quite. A few hundred patients concentrated on their western continent suffered from a then-unknown condition. It turned out to be a waterborne virus created by an industrial accident. Once that was established, a proper vaccine was quickly formulated and administered.*"

"And there have been no reports about other outbreaks perhaps one that would require large amounts of corradinexyn?"

The older doctor frowned. "*Jane, please tell me I have not completely failed you as a teacher. Corradinexyn is an extremely experimental drug based on ammonia and hydrogen. To use it on carbon-based humanoids to treat a class two epidemic—*"

Ashley cut him off when she realized what he was alluding to. "It could lead to severe tissue damage and induce internal bleeding."

Katanga nodded.

"I don't understand. It doesn't make any sense."

The gray-haired doctor gave her a look of curiosity.

"If I was to say that we are to negotiate with the Fargans for the release of corradinexyn—"

Now it was Katanga's turn to interrupt. "*I would say either somebody made a big mistake or they are dealing with an entirely different kind of medical emergency. One I certainly am not aware of.*"

She nodded in agreement. "Thank you, Eli."

"*Any time. Be careful, Jane. It occurs to me that somebody out there isn't telling you the whole story. Long experience tells me that once people start keeping secrets, they are willing to go to extraordinary lengths to keep them.*"

She smiled. "You know I like a good mystery. I just can't help myself. But maybe you're right about this one."

"*You take care of yourself now. I expect you to come visit me soon.*"

"Most definitely," she said. "Wenera out."

With that, Doctor Katanga disappeared from the screen.

Ashely leaned back in her chair, her thoughts focusing on what Elijah had told her and trying to put it into relation to Eagle's new mission.

He was right, it seemed somebody had done a mistake or was trying to cover something up. If indeed it was just a mistake, she had an obligation to set everybody straight. Lives could depend on it.

But for some reason, she doubted that Starfleet was able of such a crude error. But what was she to do? If this was a cover-up it was probably

so for a good reason.

Ashely was well aware that they all lived in dangerous times. The Federation's enemies were slowly but surely beginning to outnumber its friends. If Starfleet wanted to keep whatever they were up to a secret, perhaps it was best not to ask questions about it. She had always found it exceedingly difficult not to ask questions.

\* \* \*

The shrill melodies of the *Ride of the Valkyries* boomed from the speakers, making Michael Owens' skin crawl. He could feel the vibrations of the sound all around him. His eyes were closed and he was lying on his back on a large couch in his quarters directly beneath the slanted windows into space.

He didn't exactly enjoy the exuberant music. This particular piece had never been one of his favorites. He had always found it to be too pretentious and overbearing but at the moment he felt like it was exactly what he needed.

He had tried reading a book but had grown tired eventually and the thick leather-bound volume now rested on his chest. Above him, the stars streaked by as *Eagle* continued to approach a place he did not wish to go.

For a second he thought he heard a faint foreign sound, not part of the musical piece coming from the speakers. He couldn't be sure, the *Valkyries* were simply too dominant to allow for anything else to be audible.

He didn't much care either, unless the ship had gone to red alert he was certain it could wait. And the computer would have made sure to notify him properly if an emergency had arisen.

He did not open his eyes, not even when he thought he could hear a voice nearby. And then the music suddenly disappeared. His ears screamed out in pain for a few seconds as they had to adjust to the sudden silence in the room.

He had a good idea of what had happened. There was only one person on board who had the audacity to enter his quarters unannounced. "I was listening to that, Dee," he said with his eyes still closed.

"You and half the ship."

Michael sighed and opened his eyes. DeMara Deen was standing in his room not far from the couch, looking down at him, wearing the current black duty uniform over a gray turtleneck with gold shoulders to denote her position in operations.

"You ever heard of knocking? I'm pretty certain it's a serious offense to break into a captain's quarters."

"You didn't answer," she said. "Besides, I didn't break in. The door wasn't locked, I figured you wanted company," she said with a smile. She took a seat in the comfortable chair across from the sofa.

Michael sat up as well, setting the book on the small table in front of him. "I assume the blasting music wasn't a clue."

Her expression became more serious when she noticed the book. She looked up at her friend. "You seem in a rather gloomy mood today."

"Now what gave you that impression?"

"You're listening to Wagner and you're reading Tolstoy."

He uttered a short laugh. "It's a good book, you should read it sometime," he said and stood up to walk over to the replicator.

DeMara leaned back in the chair and shook her head. "*War and Peace*? It's the war part that throws me off. Too depressing."

"Tonic water, cold."

Michael took the glass containing the clear liquid that had materialized in the replicator alcove and returned to the couch. "Life is not all rainbows and sunshine," he said and sat down.

"I choose to believe that that's a matter of perspective," she said with a grin.

"Dee, I'm not really in the mood to have this conversation right now."

"That's too bad," she shot back. "Because we're having it."

He looked up to see the warm smile on her beautiful face. He was once again surprised by how assertive the young Tenarian could be when she wanted to be. Something few would have been able to guess judging by her appearance.

"Unless of course, you would prefer to speak with Counselor Trenira. I'm sure she would arrive at all sorts of interesting conclusions considering your recent behavior. Not coming back for the dinner last night, staying in your quarters all day, reading depressing books, and listening to aggressive music. That be quite an interesting psychological profile, don't you think?"

It was Michael's intention not to entertain her and to maintain an uninviting demeanor to discourage the conversation. He didn't manage.

A small smile cracked his lips. "You must be her new understudy."

"It's that new mission, isn't it? Edison didn't tell us much but I don't understand why it would affect you like this. What could possibly--"

"My father is coming on board," Michael said, interrupting her. Better to get it out early than to have her probe her way to it inch by inch, he thought.

"The Admiral is coming to *Eagle*?"

He had never understood why she insisted on calling him that. Certainly, it was his rank but she had made it his nickname as well. "He is part of the delegation."

Her smile widened. "I haven't seen him since we left space dock last year."

Why his father and DeMara were getting along so well was another mystery. Or perhaps not. After all, he could think of nobody who did not get along well with DeMara.

The Tenarian's smile faded when she noticed his displeasure. "You're still upset with him?"

"Who said I was upset with him?" he said quickly and took a sip from his drink. His efforts to fool her were hopeless however and he knew it.

"He is your father, Michael."

"And what exactly does that mean? That because we are connected by blood he has a right to tell me what to do?"

"No, he has the right to tell you what to do because he earned that when he became an admiral. More importantly though, it means that he is the person who was instrumental in bringing you into the universe and making you into the man you are today."

He stood, picked up the book, and headed for his desk. "Please, spare me Tenarian philosophy."

She looked after him. "I'm sure that respecting your parents is not a concept limited to my world."

He slid the volume back onto the bookshelf behind his desk. He froze for a moment when he spotted a framed picture of him as a child. His late mother and father flanked him on each side. "You know what they say about him and me, don't you?"

She stood. "Who cares what they say?"

Michael turned around. "I do if it turns out to be true."

She took a step toward him. "Over the last year and even before that, I have seen you accomplish things that Starfleet officers twice your age haven't been able to. You have saved countless lives and made a positive impact on so many more. You have two starship crews who can testify firsthand of what you have achieved and would be more than willing to follow you wherever you may lead them. Are you really going to dismiss all that because of a few rumors started by ignorant and jealous officers?"

A forced smile came over his lips. He took a seat at his desk. DeMara was a good speaker as much as she was a good friend. Somehow, he didn't doubt that she would make a great captain someday. Even though she claimed that she had no such aspirations.

He looked up at her. "I guess I can't argue with so many brave people now, can I?" he said and looked back down at his desk. His eyes found another picture. This one was animated and showed his brother Matthew Owens. He wore a long black gown complete with a mortarboard. His clothes as well as the trees in the background gently moved with the wind. The picture had been taken when Matthew had graduated from Cambridge University and it was the only one Michael had of his brother.

DeMara did not know nor did Michael intend for her to find out that he blamed his father for Matthew's death. Not directly of course but it had been his father's ardent views and his insistence that Matthew followed in his footsteps that had driven him away from home and kept him isolated from his family.

In Michael's eyes, it was the reason why he had dedicated his life to something that was everything his father was not. And it had killed him. He didn't know if he could ever forgive him for that.

DeMara stepped up to the desk. He looked at her before she had a chance to realize what was occupying his mind.

"You know I'm right," she said. "It's accepting it that is so difficult for you."

He mirrored her smile. Looking at her face everything seemed to be possible and he felt his mood lightened all by itself. For better or worse it was the effect she had on people. He stood up tall. "I guess there comes a time for every man to face his innermost demons."

She laughed. "So we have moved from philosophy to clichés."

\* \* \*

Ashley Wenera was still sitting in the chair of her office, mulling over her recent conversation with her mentor when she spotted Lif Culsten

entering sickbay. She quickly stood and left her office.

“If you have come to watch the turtles hatch, you’re a few days early,” she said as she approached *Eagle*’s helmsman.

Culsten turned to face her. “Am I really? How unfortunate,” he said with a smug smile on his lips. “But while I’m here, perhaps you could have a quick look at my wrist.”

The doctor noticed the prominent swelling immediately. “Take a seat,” she said and pointed at one of the bio-beds.

Culsten proceeded to do just that.

She grabbed a tricorder and began to investigate the damaged ligament. “And how exactly did this happen?” she said and gave him a stern look. “Did you enter course corrections too quickly again?”

The young officer uttered a short laugh. “Very funny, doc. No, actually I made the mistake of joining DeMara on the holodeck. Trying to climb a mountain range called Everest.”

Ashely looked up. “Not very successfully, I take it.”

“Do you have any idea how big it is?” he said with wounded pride. “I slipped and fell and if it hadn’t been for the safety protocols, I would’ve come away with much worse than a swollen wrist.”

The doctor reached for a medical instrument, activated it, and slowly directed its healing beams at Culsten’s ligament. “Thank heavens for safety protocols.” She had treated more holodeck-related injuries in her time as a starship physician than injuries derived from any other activity. They were usually as minor as the young lieutenant’s wrist but every so often somebody felt like taking the ultimate risk by disabling the safety protocols. She could never understand why some people could be so careless with their own health and safety.

The instrument showed results instantly and the swelling slowly subsided. “So let me get this straight,” she said. “You’ve already become so stultified with your new position that you have decided to go and climb Earth’s highest mountain?”

Culsten shrugged. “This new mission doesn’t promise to require any of my skills. I need to keep myself challenged, doc. Keep the mind sharp, you know?”

The swelling was now almost gone. His copper skin around his wrist was still discolored but that would heal by itself in the next few days. She could have easily removed the redness as well but she preferred to keep her patients with reminders of what she thought had been obtuse decisions. Even if those were merely temporary.

She sighed as she put the medical device back into its place. “A challenge would be to find out what this mission is truly about.”

Culsten sprang to his feet. “What do you know?”

She turned around and quickly regretted her last statement when she noticed the eager gleam in the young man’s silvery eyes. She looked at him for a second, considering if she should divulge the information that she had learned. She decided against it and turned to return to her office. “It’s nothing, forget I said anything. Take it easy with that wrist now.”

But Culsten was not going to give up that easily. He followed her. “You know something about this mission, don’t you? What is it?”

She continued into her office. “Don’t worry about it.”

“Doctor, I’m the primary flight control officer of this vessel. I’m responsible for the safety of nearly nine-hundred lives. Don’t you think I should know everything there is to know about this mission? For everyone’s sake?”

She turned to face Culsten, giving him a suspicious look.

He knew right away that this approach was not going to get him anywhere. “Fine, don’t tell me,” he said and made for the exit. “However, I will be coming in every hour or so to check up on my wrist. Just to make sure it’s healing alright,” he said and then faced Wenera again. “I’m very worried about it,” he added, stroking his previously swollen joint.

She sighed and leaned against her desk. “You won’t leave this alone until I tell you, will you?”

Culsten nodded eagerly and took a few steps closer. “What’s going on?” he said in a conspiratorial whisper.

“You promise you won’t tell anyone?”

He put his hand on his lower chest where she knew his heart was. “Sacred Krellonian promise.”

“I made some calls and I think this whole mission is nothing more than a smoke screen,” she said, actually feeling relieved to be able to share the information with somebody else. “The vaccine that the Fargans want to negotiate for would be completely useless to them.”

The young officer nodded slowly. “Of course. And Farga is pretty close to both the Romulan and the Klingon border.”

She had not even considered that before. “What do you make of it?”

Culsten was caught up in his thoughts for a moment. “With the way things are with the Klingons and the Dominion, who knows? Perhaps the Fargans have some sort of secret that could help the Federation. A new weapon or something to that effect.”

Ashley found the young helmsman’s imagination slightly too vivid for his own good.



“Doctor,” he said suddenly, “we should investigate the matter.”

She quickly shook her head. “No, absolutely not. Nobody can know this. What if this whole thing is some important secret and we undermine seriously important efforts by blowing the lid on the whole thing?”

“I mean discreetly, doc. We’ll reach Vulcan tomorrow and take on the delegation. We’ll just keep our eyes and ears open and perhaps ask a few harmless questions here and there. Just to see what they have to say.”

Ashely didn’t like Culsten’s enthusiasm at all. And she didn’t like the idea of snooping around without the knowledge or the consent of the captain. But she could not deny the thrill and excitement that would come with being involved in an undercover investigation.

She finally nodded. “Fine but remember to be discreet. And if we find out anything of consequence, we’ll contact the captain immediately.”

“Of course,” he said quickly. He headed for the exit. “I have to go and make preparations for our assignment. We should have code names. I think I’m going to be seven-seven-oh and you can be whatever you like,” he continued to mumble something else but was already out of the doctor’s earshot.

Ashely looked after him with a concerned expression, wondering if she had made a grave mistake.

\* \* \*

Over the year he had served as captain of *Eagle* and the time he had spent commanding *Columbia* before its destruction, Michael Owens had become quite accustomed to receiving dignitaries and VIPs.

This time things were different and even Gene Edison could tell that he was unusually tense as he stood next to him in the transporter room, waiting for their guests to arrive.

He kept pulling at the collar of the long-shirted dress uniform he wore instead of the utilitarian red-trimmed jumpsuit.

It was obvious there was nothing inherently wrong with the uniform itself, the captain was simply uncomfortable in his own skin and clearly wished he could be anywhere else at that moment.

Gene wasn’t entirely sure why that was. The captain had been surprisingly curt and tight-lipped since receiving their most recent orders. Something told him that he was about to learn the reason for Owens’ apprehension.

Chief Petty Officer Yang Sen Chow, *Eagle*’s most senior transporter controller, a short and slightly rotund man of Chinese descent who had the uncanny ability to have an upbeat disposition and a smile on his face no matter the occasion, cleared his throat. “Sir, the delegation is signaling that they are ready to beam onboard.”

Owens didn’t reply. Instead, he simply nodded, not to the chief in particular but Chow understood nevertheless and began to operate his controls.

Gene found the captain’s snub response rude and uncharacteristic but if Chow, a Starfleet veteran of thirty-five years, had taken any offense by it he certainly didn’t show it.

Seconds later the transporter platform came to life. Six columns of sparkling blue light emerged and began to reveal six figures. They materialized into solid forms within moments.

The first officer quickly realized that all of them except for one were Vulcans. This wasn’t much of a surprise considering that they were in orbit around the Vulcan home world but Federation negotiating teams were usually more diverse.

The non-Vulcan was a human male, wearing an admiral’s uniform. A man of advanced years, close to eighty most likely. His hair was snow white and he wore a neatly trimmed beard of the same color. He seemed tall for his age, seemingly robust, and in good health with energetic eyes. He looked familiar to Gene but he couldn’t quite place him.

The admiral stood front and center on the platform. The next person who caught Gene’s eye was a woman, standing next to the human. She was with no doubt Vulcan but the blond highlights in her jet-black hair and her subtle yet obvious make-up were rather untraditional.

She didn’t look a day older than thirty but Gene was certain that looks were deceiving in this case and that she was more than likely much older than that. She was attractive and it wasn’t just because of her make-up and hair.

The other Vulcans looked much more conventional except for the man who stood at the admiral’s right, a younger Vulcan wearing a green robe instead of the black and gold ones most of the older Vulcans seemed to prefer.

The admiral stepped off the platform and the others followed.

“Welcome aboard, *Eagle*,” said Owens, keeping the tone of his voice carefully neutral. “We are honored to be able to serve this delegation.”

The Vulcans responded with slight nods.

The admiral however stood firm, watching the captain intently.

Owens didn't speak.

Then to Gene's complete surprise, a large smile formed on the admiral's face and he took two quick steps forward to embrace the captain. "It's been too long. You look good."

Owens reciprocated the embrace only hesitantly.

"You don't look so bad yourself," he said once he had let go. The smile on his face was remarkably smaller.

"Let me introduce my first officer, Commander Eugene Edison," he said and pointed to the executive officer standing next to him.

"Of course," said the admiral and took Gene's hand, shaking it firmly. "I've heard much about you, Commander. The man who single-handedly avoided a major political crisis on Elderon IV. Let me tell you, there are several people in the Federation Council eternally grateful to you."

"Thank you, sir. However, the stories of my exploits on Elderon IV are greatly exaggerated." Gene had never met this man before but it became quickly apparent who he was. The eyes, the distinct chin, and even the manner of his speech all reminded him of his captain. "It is a pleasure having you on board, Admiral Owens."

The admiral nodded. "I appreciate a humble man, Commander. I hope you'll keep my son equally level-headed."

"I'm certainly planning on it, sir."

Admiral Owens turned to the Vulcans. "I don't think there is going to be much time for exchanging pleasantries on this trip but I'd like you to meet a very exceptional person nevertheless," he said and gently motioned for the female Vulcan to step forward.

She did and Gene could have sworn that her lips cracked for a faint smile.

"Please meet K'tera, one of the masterminds of this undertaking. K'tera, this is Captain Michael Owens. My son," he said, his voice easily betraying his own pride.

"You bestow me with far too much credit, Admiral," she said softly and then turned to the other two Starfleet officers. "I am very thankful for you to provide your services to our endeavor," she said and then gestured at another member of the delegation. "But I cannot with good conscience accept the admiral's praise without introducing Mister Nakaar, without whom this mission would not have been possible."

The slender Vulcan man in the green robe stepped next to the woman. "Captain, Commander," he said, gracing both with a quick nod each. "I look forward to traveling on your fine ship. I have somewhat of a curiosity for Starfleet vessels."

Gene found both Vulcans very refreshing. They were not at all what he had expected. He noticed something else. For a moment he was sure he could spot a flash of recognition in Owens' eyes when he focused in on Nakaar. The Vulcan man himself didn't show any such signs. The look vanished as quickly as it had appeared.

Owens nodded. "We will attempt to make your stay on *Eagle* as comfortable as possible. If you like, my first officer will now show you to your quarters."

"That would be appropriate," K'tera said.

Owens exchanged a quick glance with him, one that didn't tell him much at all. However, he was beginning to understand why he had been so agitated. His theory became substantiated when he realized that Admiral Owens was not going to be led away but instead remained in the transporter room with the captain. It didn't take a counselor to understand that Michael Owens' relationship with his admiral father was not one to be envied.

Not wishing to intrude into family affairs, or expose them to the delegates, he quickly led the Vulcans out of the transporter room.

\* \* \*

"I might not have much time," Admiral Owens said once Edison and the Vulcans had left the room. "But I do expect a tour of your ship at some point."

"Certainly. I'll have the commander arrange it. Would you like me to show you to your quarters?"

The admiral nodded and followed Michael out of the transporter room.

"I would have come by sooner to see you and your new ship but I've been busy, I'm sure you understand," he said as they walked down the corridor side by side.

"Of course."

The two Owens' entered the turbolift.

"Deck eight."

The lift car sped away instantly.

“How long will it take to reach Farga?” said the admiral.

“Six days at high warp,” Michael said, keeping his eyes focused on the doors ahead. “We can make it in five if you feel it necessary,” he said, shooting the admiral a quick, sidelong glance.

Jonathan Owens shook his head. “Six days is fine. That will give the delegation ample time for necessary preparations.”

The lift stopped and the doors sighed open. Michael allowed the admiral to step out first and then quickly led the way again. His father stayed at his side.

They reached one of *Eagle*'s largest guest quarters shortly after. Neither one of them spoke until they had both entered. The admiral found that his only piece of luggage had already been delivered and awaiting him on the king-sized bed.

Michael made sure that everything was to his father's satisfaction and then turned back for the exit.

“Michael.”

*It couldn't have been that easy*, he thought as he turned around to face his father.

“We haven't spoken, I mean really spoken to each other in what, two, three years?” he said, standing up straighter.

“We met last year at the house,” said Michael, referring to his father's surprise visit to their family home in Wisconsin when he had talked him into taking another command after losing *Columbia*.

He uttered a short, mostly humorless laugh. “We saw each other for all but two minutes.”

“And whose fault was that?” Michael shot back regretting the outburst immediately. He didn't want to get into an argument. There were so many things that he wanted to yell at his father, so many things he felt he had to take responsibility for. And yet confronting him, here and now was not something he wished to do.

The admiral took a step closer to his son. “Mine, yes, I know that. But I'm here now, aren't I? Do I not deserve to spend some private time with my *onlyson*?”

Michael wanted to laugh out loud.

*Now he wants to spend time with me? Why didn't you do that when I needed you the most? When I was young, when mother passed away? When I desperately needed somebody?*

But what made Michael truly cringe was his father's emphasis on *onlyson*.

Michael turned back to the door. “I'm busy, Dad. I'm trying to run a starship here.”

The admiral laughed. “You're are busy, huh? How does that feel?”

The doors had already opened to let him leave the cabin but he froze when he reached the threshold. He had promised himself he wouldn't get angry. He was about to break that promise. He spun around. “All right, let's talk then. How about you start telling me why everybody I meet seems to be convinced that I only got *Eagle* because of you?”

The admiral's facial features tensed up. “That's ridiculous,” he said quickly but then turned away to head for the bedroom as if to preempt any further conversation on the subject.

“Is it? Then why can't you face me when telling me that?” he said following his father into the adjacent room.

“Son, we're going to be together for only a few days and I'm more than willing to do some catching up with you. But if all you're interested in is throwing accusations at me, then perhaps we should keep away from each other,” he said as he began to open his suitcase to retrieve a few padds.

Michael remained in the doorway to the bedroom. “I don't understand it, I really don't. You've spent most of your life negotiating with Klingons, Romulans, and Cardassians but when it comes to your own son you cannot face the tough questions. I wonder why that is, Dad? Is it because you fear the answers?”

The admiral slowly turned to look at Michael. “I'm the first one to admit that I wasn't the best father.”

Michael interrupted him with a loud sneer.

“I know I wasn't,” he continued his voice gaining intensity. “But I have always done what I thought was best for you. And you are right. You wouldn't be here without me because I didn't raise a man who can't rise to the occasion and take what he deserves.”

“Raise? Is that what you call it? When did you find time to do that?”

“If you realize it or not, I have sacrificed much for you and your brother and I lost him. Twice. Damn it, can't you see that I don't want that to happen to you?”

For a short moment Michael had hoped to remain calm and perhaps finally get to the truth. To for once and for all find out if his career was really all his. But that moment had passed when his father had decided to bring up Matthew; his brother.

“I can’t believe this,” he said and looked straight into his father’s eyes. “How dare you bring him up? How dare you?” Without uttering another word, he turned his back to his father and left.

# Chapter Four: Ties

Replicated food simply didn't taste like the real thing. Nora Laas had never been more painfully aware of that fact until now. She looked down at her plate that contained what remained of the large omelet she had decided to have for dinner. She found it quite a miracle that she had managed to eat half of it but now she could simply no longer stand it.

She sat on the upper level of The Nest at a table near the panoramic windows. Her favorite spot, not because she could glance out into space but because she sat exactly in the eye line of Goldie, the nickname the crew had given to the golden statue of a life-sized *Haliaeetus albicilla*, or more commonly known as a white-tailed sea eagle.

The impressive animal stood on a large rock, its wings majestically unfolded and its gaze fixed forward as if it had laid eyes on prey somewhere out in the infinity of space.

The man-high statue was surrounded by tall green vegetation that was commonly found on Earth or at least that's what Nora had been told.

The animal and namesake of the starship she served on had always impressed her and she enjoyed its company when having a meal.

"I'm not sure if I should be thankful to the captain for throwing that great dinner or curse him for having ruined my taste for replicated food," she said and looked at her more lively dinner companion, So'Dan Leva.

The half-Romulan had just finished with his own plate, seemingly unconcerned with the artificiality of his meal. He took a large sip of his beverage and merely shrugged his shoulder in response to her dilemma.

"You know, you haven't talked much today," she said.

"Do you know where Farga is?"

"Sigma Hydra sector," she said.

So'Dan nodded.

"Close to the Romulan border," she realized. "How close is it to the planet you grew up on?"

"Close."

Laas understood. So'Dan was coming closer to his home than he had been since he'd left it as a boy. Laas and So'Dan had become friends years earlier when they were stationed together on the same starbase. They had found that they both had left their homes at a young age and had never returned. It was one of the many things they had in common.

Laas didn't know how she would feel if she was to return to Bajor now, the world that she had left behind so many years ago. She wouldn't feel any great pleasure, that she knew for certain.

"We won't be entering Romulan space," she said. "We're just going as far as Farga."

"I know and yet I can't help thinking about Henaka. The things that happened there—" his voice trailed off.

Laas didn't know much of what he had experienced on his home world. It had been a topic the half-Romulan had always tried to avoid. Whatever it was, it wasn't good.

"Do you still have family or friends there?"

He shook his head but she could see in his eyes that it wasn't the whole truth. She was almost relieved when she spotted two people enter The Nest she had not expected to see. She was certain they would cause sufficient distraction to get his mind off his depressing thoughts.

"Did you have a chance to speak to any members of the delegation yet?" she said with a smirk.

He aimed a frown at her. "In case you hadn't noticed, they're all Vulcans."

"I know," she said and nodded eagerly. "Perhaps they can offer advice on how you can overcome your most irrational phobia concerning Vulcans."

"It's not a phobia. I just have certain difficulties feeling comfortable around them. That's all," he said.

"Sounds like a phobia to me," she said, looking at the patrons who had recently entered. They noticed Laas' look and had apparently decided to approach her table. One was a young woman, wearing a formfitting suit and unusual blond highlights in her hair, the other a man of similar age in a green robe.

“Laas, your starting to—” he stopped himself when he noticed the two Vulcans approach. He quickly shot Laas a glare but she just smiled.

“Excuse the interruption,” the Vulcan woman said when they had stepped to the table. “But my associate and I were wondering if we could join you.”

“I don’t see why not,” said Laas and looked at her companion. “Do you have any objections?”

He let out a small sigh and then shook his head.

The two Vulcans sat down at the table. The woman spoke first. “This is Nakaar and my name is K’tera. We are part of the delegation to Farga.”

“Nice to meet you both,” Laas said. “I’m Lieutenant Nora Laas, I head security on *Eagle* and my friend here is Lieutenant Commander So’Dan Leva, tactical officer.”

Both Vulcans nodded.

“I have heard about you, Mister Leva,” K’tera said. “You are half-Romulan, I understand.”

“Yes, that is correct.”

“Fascinating,” said Nakaar.

“He is the only half-Romulan who serves in Starfleet. At least the only one I know of,” said Laas.

“What made you decide to join Starfleet, Mister Leva?” said Nakaar.

The Romulan gave him an incredulous look. He had not expected the conversation to turn this private that quickly.

Nakaar’s colleague sensed his reluctance to answer that question. “I must apologize for Nakaar’s straightforwardness,” she said in a much softer tone. “We are both very interested in Romulan culture and we were hoping to gain some insights from you. However, if you do not wish to speak about this matter, we completely understand and respectfully withdraw.”

Only now did So’Dan get a chance to really look at K’tera and he was surprised by what he saw. She was unlike any other Vulcan he had ever met. Her facial features were much softer and her face had more color than he had expected. He had to admit that she was an attractive woman.

He slowly shook his head. “I was not prepared for that question.”

She nodded understandingly.

“Well, I’ll let you to it then,” said Laas, took her plate, and stood.

K’tera looked up at the Bajoran. “My apologies to you also, Lieutenant. We did not intend to exclude you from our conversation.”

Laas smiled. “That’s quite all right. I do have a meeting to get to. I’m sure Commander Leva will be delighted to keep you company,” she said but found her sarcasm to fall on deaf ears.

All of a sudden, she wasn’t even quite sure if So’Dan was not actually wanting to stay. She had not been dishonest, however, and was due to meet with her deputy. She gave everybody a short nod and then departed.

“Why exactly are you curious about Romulans?” So’Dan said.

“Romulans and Vulcans are related as I am sure you are aware,” said Nakaar. “Our interest is scientific in nature.”

So’Dan studied Nakaar for a moment. He was not a typical Vulcan either but it was more difficult to point out the differences with him. He certainly spoke and dressed like most.

“You are scientists, then?”

“In a manner of speaking,” the woman said, a small smile forming on her lips.

“Forgive me for saying so, K’tera but I have to say that you’re not as I expected.”

She cocked her head slightly. “Please elaborate.”

“I have met Vulcans before. I work with them here on *Eagle* and you are ... well not quite like them.”

Her smile widened slightly.

He found it intoxicating. A beautiful Vulcan woman smiling was almost like a long-forgotten myth. Something one could easily imagine but had never been witness to. “Your smile for example.”

“I can understand your confusion,” she said. “Nakaar and I do not share the same beliefs as most of our people. We embrace logic but we do not hide all our emotions. Our philosophy is not widespread among Vulcans but our order has several followers.”

“Now that I find fascinating.” He noticed the two Vulcans exchanging a glance. “Are you two by any chance involved in some manner? If

you don't mind my question."

Now it was K'tera's turn to look uncomfortable. Not anywhere near the way So'Dan had looked just a minute ago but her brow tightened and she glanced away for a few moments.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have asked."

"No need to apologize, Commander," said Nakaar. "K'tera doesn't like to be reminded that we were to be married a week ago."

"What happened?" said Leva, not immediately realizing that their private life shouldn't have been any of his concern.

"There were matters to consider that had not previously been revealed," he said with a slight inflection in his voice. "Excuse me, while I will go and obtain a beverage," he added and then stood to head for the replicators.

It was quite obvious that Nakaar was upset. He suddenly felt uncomfortable for having caused this unease amongst the apparently troubled couple.

"Perhaps I should leave," he said and began to stand up as well.

But K'tera put one of her hands over his. She looked at him. "Please, don't."

So'Dan was surprised to feel her touch. It was smooth and warm. He looked at her hand and then at her. She quickly withdrew it. "Nakaar's assumptions are erroneous."

"I'm not sure I understand."

She smiled again. "He becomes emotional sometimes."

He turned to look at the Vulcan who was now standing by the replicators at the far side of the room, seemingly considering his choices. So'Dan turned back around. "You call that emotional?"

"For a Vulcan it is."

He nodded.

"The truth is that Nakaar still seems to believe that I will marry him. I am afraid he has not yet understood that that is not the case."

"Is that the matter that had not been previously revealed?"

K'tera sighed. "It is complicated."

And then her eyes opened wide as she looked at the doors.

He followed her glance and spotted Xylion who had just entered the room. The Vulcan science officer quickly proceeded to approach them.

K'tera stood and So'Dan followed suit. Even though he wasn't sure what was happening.

Xylion stopped by the table. "Commander Leva, I request to speak to K'tera in private," he said.

"You two know each other?"

Xylion faced the Vulcan woman. "K'tera and I are betrothed."

So'Dan's mouth popped open in surprise.

"I told you it was complicated," she said. Her smile was now gone, her face as serious as that of any Vulcan.

\* \* \*

Lieutenant Junior Grade Lif Culsten had found himself with little to do for five hours while sitting at his post on the bridge.

The ship was traveling at warp eight on a course for the Sigma Hydra sector and all he had to do was to keep an eye on the navigational sensors, making sure *Eagle* was not going to run into a meteor or another ship.

Considering the vastness of space, a very unlikely event in any case, numerous automated processes were in place to make sure something like that wouldn't happen.

Lif had hoped that his recent promotion to chief flight control officer would bring with it more interesting aspects but in reality, the only thing that had changed was that his hours were now longer and that he had more responsibilities than before.

He wasn't complaining. His promotion had also meant coming one small step closer to making it to the top someday.

After his shift had ended he had decided to drop by The Nest and get a bite to eat before returning to his quarters to look over the new flight

protocols that were to be put in place on *Eagle* soon.

He had just reached deck nine, where the entrance of the upper levels of The Nest was located when he spotted a Vulcan man turning a corner and walking away from him. He did not wear a Starfleet uniform and even though Lif was well aware that *Eagle* usually carried about a hundred fifty civilians, he knew immediately that the Vulcan man was not one of them.

He wore a knee-length green robe and Lif figured that he belonged to the delegation that had come aboard earlier. He guessed that he had visited The Nest and that he was now on his way back to his quarters. What startled him, however, was the fact that he was walking in the wrong direction.

The helmsman followed the Vulcan, slightly increasing his own pace to catch up with him and help him find his way. But it became quickly apparent that he didn't seem lost at all. In fact, he seemed to know exactly where he was going.

Lif slowed down.

*Of course, he thought. Wenera was right. These delegates are not who they say they are.*

He continued to follow the Vulcan but he dropped back a little, giving him more room and most importantly, staying undetected.

The delegate remained on deck nine.

Lif contemplated what he might be looking for. Besides the Nest, deck nine also contained the quarters of several senior officers, including his, as well as the main entrance to the large stellar cartography section. The Vulcan didn't seem to be interested in any of those destinations.

Lif could feel his heart rate fasten slightly. There was an undeniable element of excitement in following somebody without their knowledge. He had never done anything like it before but he thought he could get used to the thrill of it.

*Perhaps I should consider a job with Starfleet Intelligence.* A small smile came over his lips.

And then, with no warning, the Vulcan suddenly stopped. Lif spotted an intersecting corridor and quickly dashed into it. He pressed himself against the wall and slowly peeked around the corner. It seemed the Vulcan had not noticed him.

Lif retracted his head just as the man was about to look his way.

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. When he opened them again, he saw a young female Trill crewman looking right at him with a questioning look on her face.

Lif was suddenly painfully aware that he was still pressed against the wall. He quickly stepped away from the bulkhead and smiled at her.

"Long day," he said with an awkward laugh that didn't sound at all convincing.

The Trill nodded, clearly still befuddled, and then moved on, deciding that the lieutenant's unusual behavior was not worth her time.

Lif waited for a second until the crewman had disappeared before he returned to spy around the corner again.

He was just in time to see a green-clothed person turn into another corridor.

Lif jumped out from behind his cover and hastily made his way to the next corner. But he found the corridor in front of him empty. There were three doors, one on the left and two on the right. It seemed unlikely that the Vulcan could have reached the end of the corridor already so he decided to check the doors.

He carefully approached each door to read the labels and keep them from opening: *Stellar Cartography Storage III, Tertiary Transporter Emitter Station, Deck Nine Gravity Sub-control.*

*What could a diplomat want in any of those rooms?*

He decided against looking inside. If he found the Vulcan, he would have been hard-pressed to explain his own presence and potentially reveal that he had been following him. And while he could not imagine any reason for a civilian to visit any of those rooms, they were not exactly sensitive areas and therefore, strictly speaking, not off limits to him.

Then he heard one of the doors open. He felt his heart pounding in his chest. He quickly turned on his heel and walked away slowly, hoping that he would not cast any suspicion.

"Lieutenant Lif Culsten?"

*Busted.*

The helmsman froze. It took him a second before he had mustered up the courage to turn and face his accuser. "Yes?"

The Vulcan man approached him. "My name is Nakaar. I am a member of the delegation to Farga."

Lif nodded. And then a curious thought struck him. "How do you know my—"

"I have studied the names of all senior officers on this vessel before coming on board. I like to be aware of who will be responsible for the safety of my colleagues."

"Right," said Lif. Nakaar did not appear upset but then, of course, he was a Vulcan and if he was he would not have shown it. "I was just ..."



um,” he began and faced away, racking his brains as to think of something that would sound plausible. “I was just going to visit a friend of mine. Her quarters,” he said and pointed in the direction he had been going. “They’re over there.”

He couldn’t believe how clumsily his words were coming over his lips. He quickly decided that Starfleet Intelligence would do much better without him.

Nakaar did not seem to be irritated. “Perhaps I could walk with you. It would appear I have taken a wrong turn somewhere.”

Lif quickly nodded, eager to move on, and they both continued to walk.

“I am very interested in your vessel, Lieutenant,” Nakaar said. “Starfleet ships have always fascinated me. I understand that the USS *Eagle* is a *Nebula*-class vessel?”

“Third generation.”

“Cruising speed: warp six point zero five; maximum speed: warp nine point six two; emergency speed: warp nine point nine three.”

Lif shot the Vulcan a surprised look. He hadn’t even been aware of the exact figures and he was the helmsman. “You’re very well informed, sir.”

“I have spent some time familiarizing myself with starship statistics. I am, however, less knowledgeable with *Eagle*’s armaments.”

“We have eight, hull-mounted type-X phaser arrays and two torpedo launchers in a standard configuration. We can double that when *Eagle* carries a weapon’s pod,” he said. “But that is not really my specialty. You should speak with Commander Leva about that.”

“The Romulan officer.”

Lif nodded.

“Let me ask you a question, Lieutenant. Do you believe it is a wise decision to put a Romulan in charge of a Starfleet vessel’s weapon systems?”

“He is not fully Romulan,” Lif said quickly. “Besides, he is a really good tactician. You should watch him in action sometime. I bet you anything that he could have those phasers shoot off somebody’s hat from orbit.”

Nakaar raised an eyebrow.

“Not that .... we would ever have any reason to ... you know, do that.”

“It would be difficult to imagine a scenario in which what you have described would be necessary.”

“Yeah,” Lif said and then stopped when he spotted Louise Hopkins’ quarters. “Anyway, this is me,” he said pointing to the doors. “The turbolift to get you to your quarters is just down the corridor.”

The Vulcan stopped as well. “Thank you, Lieutenant. It was a pleasure meeting you,” he said and proceeded toward the lift.

Lif looked after him as he headed down the corridor. He had to admit that he found the man quite pleasant and not at all what he had expected. A stiff, joyless Vulcan diplomat. But he felt proud that he had managed to keep his efforts of shadowing him so expertly discreet.

The doors next to him slid open and chief engineer Hopkins stepped out, almost running right into the helmsman.

“Lif!”

He turned in surprise.

“What are you doing here? Come for a visit?”

The helmsman looked at the sandy-blond woman for a moment and then shook his head. “No time, Lou, I’m working on a very important case. Can’t talk now,” he said in an overly weighty manner and rushed away, leaving a puzzled Louise Hopkins behind.

\* \* \*

There was a perfectly good reason why Michael Owens had decided to spend more time in his ready room instead of his quarters. And it was not so he could be closer to the bridge.

The guest quarters that housed his father happened to be on the same deck as his own quarters, in fact, they were just a short walk apart from each other. Putting his father so close to himself had not been his decision at all. The ship’s designers had decided—for reasons completely lost on him—that the VIP quarters had to be close to the ones of the captain.

Of course, he could have given his father one of the less luxurious residences on the lower decks but those were hardly fitting for a man of his rank.

None of this mattered if he simply stayed in his office on deck one, right next to the bridge, and a long way from his father down on deck

eight.

If he was lucky, perhaps he could go through this entire mission without having to run into him again. It seemed a futile hope, it even seemed slightly immature but he didn't care about any of that at the moment. There was going to be a time when he was going to face his father and address all the issues that he felt needed to be addressed. But that time was not now.

Michael had thrown himself into work to keep his mind on other things. Reviewing status reports, looking through personnel files and recommendations as well as condemnations and censures. He had to admit that all this paperwork was causing his eyelids to grow heavy and he was relieved when the annunciator heralded a much-needed distraction.

"Come in, please."

The doors parted and *Eagle's* first officer stepped inside.

"Ah, Commander, take a seat."

The first officer nodded and proceeded to sit down by the desk.

"Were you aware that Ensign Chendren'eck in astrophysics has been working much less efficiently in the last two weeks? I've just finished reviewing his performance review and I have to say, it's a bit concerning, wouldn't you agree?"

Edison looked at his commanding officer with surprise. Owens was not usually in the practice of closely scrutinizing crew evaluations. He leaned forward and let the captain give him the padd he had been reading. He glanced over the file.

Edison nodded. "Chendren'eck is a Gorgrosian. He is currently entering his hibernation phase. He will be working less and less in the next few weeks until he will begin to hibernate properly."

"Hibernate, really? For how long?" said Michael, having realized his mistake, he was more curious than worried.

"Three months."

He leaned back in his chair, a thoughtful expression on his face. "He'll be sleeping for three months? Isn't that a bit excessive?"

"Not when considering that Gorgrosians do not sleep for the rest of the year," said the first officer with a smile.

Michael nodded. "Indeed. Three months of sleep? I wish I could do that," he said more to himself.

"Sir, if I may ask, why are you reviewing the personnel reports? Have you been unsatisfied with the way I handle them?"

The captain quickly shook his head. "Not at all, Commander. I think you're doing a great job. But quite obviously I need to freshen up my knowledge of the crew. I didn't even know we had a Gorgrosian on board." Michael couldn't deny he felt a little bit guilty for that oversight.

Crew rotations, especially in the lower ranks were quite usual and commonplace on a starship of *Eagle's* size and it would have been near impossible for him to be well informed about every member of his nearly eight-hundred-strong crew. Not with all his other obligations as a starship captain.

"I'd be more than happy to brief you in detail about the current crew complement," he said with a little, boyish smirk.

"Maybe some other time, Commander. Am I right in assuming that you came in here for another reason than to remind me I don't know my own crew?"

"You're a regular mind reader, sir."

"Comes with that fourth pip. Now tell me, I can't take the suspense."

"It's about the mission, sir," he said, taking on a much more serious-sounding tone. "I'm not sure what to think of it."

"It seems rather simple to me."

"Too simple."

Michael shot him a quizzical look.

The first officer sat up straighter. "I have tried to speak to some of the members of the delegation and they seem rather deflective when it comes to questions about their job on Farga."

"And you think they shouldn't be considering that all they're doing is negotiating the release of a medical vaccine."

Commander Edison nodded. "In my experience, whenever there is secrecy, there is danger."

Michael had to agree with his first officer. He had not given the mission much thought, having been too distracted by his personal problems. But now that he had time to think about it, he felt that more information was not only required, it also should have been provided without question. But Starfleet and his father had been very vague from the very beginning.

"I see what you mean. I'll contact Admiral Throl and have him tell me more about what this mission is about."

"I have already done that."

Michael wasn't sure if he should feel pride or anger. His first officer had taken the initiative and tried to find out as much as possible about a mission. On the other hand, he had gone over his head to contact Throl.

Michael decided that whatever Edison had done was for the good of the ship and its crew.

"I'm sorry I should have come to you first," he added.

"That leaves us with little more options," said Michael, perfectly willing to overlook Edison's minor divergence from the chain of command.

"There is one other person, currently on this vessel you could approach," Edison said after a few seconds of silence had passed. By now it didn't take a mind reader to understand that Owens' relationship with his father was at best strained. But Edison clearly felt that he needed to suggest the idea nevertheless.

"To be honest I don't see the point of doing that," said the captain a little bit too quickly. He regretted the statement, which he realized was not only untrue but also allowed the first officer too much insight into his feelings for his father.

"Sir, I'm worried about the ship. Farga takes us fairly close to contested territory. If this mission possess any threats, we need to know about it. We need to be prepared."

Michael slowly nodded. "I'll see what I can do. Is there anything else, Commander?"

Edison stood, correctly realizing that the mood had shifted, mostly thanks to his suggestion. "That's all. Thank you, sir," he said and left the ready room.

Michael remained in his seat, playing out numerous scenarios in his mind on how to face his father again without getting into another fight.

None of them seemed realistic.

\* \* \*

The arrangement for Xylion and K'tera to be married had been made by their prospective families before either one of them had even been born.

Xylion had been quite surprised to find K'tera on *Eagle* as part of the Farga delegation. He was not in regular contact with her and had last spoken to her shortly after accepting the position as chief science officer on the Starfleet vessel.

He had already passed the age at which most Vulcans were traditionally married but that didn't mean that he did not wish to do so. On the contrary, he had no intention to ignore the century-old tradition and had always been certain that he would form a permanent bond with K'tera in the not-so-distant future.

Xylion had found his betrothed in The Nest and realized that she continued to be as irrational as she had always been.

Although had not chosen her to be his wife, he had always found her stimulating. Perhaps because she was different. But it had made things more difficult for him as she often dismissed the obvious logic that he proposed and instead insisted on behaving unreasonably.

Having served with many emotional species over the last year, Xylion believed he might have been better prepared engaging with K'tera.

It turned out, he was mistaken.

After a very short conversation in which K'tera had declared, in no uncertain terms, that she did no longer wish to marry him she had stormed out of The Nest, leaving Xylion behind.

The Vulcan science officer was not willing to have her defy tradition that easily. He had decided to face her once more, this time in the privacy of her quarters.

"Come in," she said over the intercom after Xylion had activated the annunciator.

The doors hissed open and he stepped inside. He found the light levels in the room too dark and his eyes needed a few moments to adjust.

He spotted her sitting in a chair facing away from the entrance. He watched as she put down an almost empty glass, containing an amber-colored liquid. He easily picked up the faint smell of alcohol.

"I have come to speak with you."

She stood to face him. "I expected you would," she said with little emotion in her voice. "I did not behave very logically earlier."

Xylion nodded; satisfied that she realized her mistake.

She turned away. "However, my decision remains unchanged. I do not wish to marry you."

He followed her deeper into the room. "What you or I wish is irrelevant in this matter. This decision has been made by our families a long

time ago.”

“Not everybody on Vulcan adheres to the old ways anymore,” she said and put her glass back into the alcove. She entered a few commands into a computer panel and the replicator refilled her beverage.

“I do not understand how that is relevant to our situation.”

She whipped around and her facial expressions had changed. Her brow was furrowed and the edges of her mouth were uneven. “Seven years ago. Do you remember seven years ago?” her voice unable to hide her anger.

Xylion cocked an eyebrow but didn’t speak.

“Do you remember that I came to you, telling you that I was ready?” she continued, calmer now. “And do you remember what you said?”

“I asked to postpone our wedding so that I could complete my studies. I was about to leave on an expedition.”

“The expedition lasted three years.”

The Vulcan nodded. “I informed you of the expected length of the expedition before I undertook it.”

She sighed and took a sip from her drink Xylion believed to be a distilled liquor beverage from Earth.

For a moment, neither of them spoke. K’tera discarded her glass and stepped to the window of her quarters, watching the stars streak by. “When you returned to Vulcan your new findings kept you so busy, you hardly had time to see me.”

“I apologize if I was not as readily available as you may have wished. My work opened up new research opportunities that could not be ignored.”

“There is a human saying, Xylion. Time flies. It did for us.”

He didn’t quite understand and didn’t appreciate K’tera using human aphorisms which he found were usually imprecise or plain false. “Time has elapsed at a constant and unchanging rate.”

She turned to face him. “Things have changed. For me. While you were busy with your work, I learned things I had never been exposed to before. And I made new friends.”

“You speak of Nakaar?”

A flicker of dread crossed her attractive features. It was gone as quickly as it had appeared. “You were aware of him?”

“I have always cared for you, K’tera. I was always well aware of what you were doing and of the kind of people you surrounded yourself with. I did not know about Nakaar specifically but I was aware that you had shown an interest in another man. When I observed your interaction with him earlier, I concluded him to be that man.”

A small smile crept on K’tera’s face. “You have always been a very perceptive person.”

Xylion was not to be deterred, however. “Do you intend to marry Nakaar?”

She considered him for a moment but soon found that it was impossible to read his thoughts. She then turned away and it seemed there was a hint of annoyance in her voice when she spoke again. “Isn’t it irrelevant? I wouldn’t be able to even if I wished it. I have been chosen to marry you.”

The science officer found her answer unsatisfactory. Not only had she already stated her intentions to defy traditions, Xylion knew that she was quite capable of doing so. “I implore you to fulfill the role that was intended for you and take me as your husband. It is what our respective families expect,” he said.

She uttered an almost inaudible sneer. She had never felt it necessary to do what others expected from her nor was she worried about disappointing her family. “How do you see our future, Xylion? Tell me,” she said and faced him once more. “Living together in a house in the Vulcan desert, raising our children, and keeping a pet *sehlat*?”

“If that is what you wish.”

A small smile returned to her lips. “I have difficulties seeing you being satisfied living such a life,” she said and the smile disappeared. “Indeed, I am not certain if it is what I wish for myself. I need more time, Xylion. Please, leave me now and I will promise I will consider what you have said.”

He nodded and raised his right hand, his palm facing outward as he quietly performed the traditional Vulcan greeting.

K’tera mirrored the gesture.

He turned and left her quarters. He hadn’t learned much from his visit. But he now realized that K’tera had strong reservations about her relationship with Nakaar.

And that meant that chances were good that she would soon come to understand that the only logical choice for her was to marry him just as she had been preordained to do.

If that meant that he had to leave *Eagle* and perhaps even Starfleet, then that was a sacrifice he was willing to make.



# Chapter Five: Agenda

“I asked the Ferengi why he was in such a foul mood. After downing another shot of Romulan Ale, he lamented that his mother had died three weeks ago. I felt sorry, of course, and was about to buy him another drink when he added that she’d left him with a small fortune.”

Michael was telling the story with a straight face, sitting in the center seat on the bridge. His officers around him were all listening intently. Lif Culsten at the helm and the relief operations manager Ensign Lutira Rei had turned their chairs, quite happy to pass the time by hearing the captain’s anecdote.

“I would have assumed a Ferengi would be pleased if a relative died and left them with material wealth,” So’Dan Leva said as he stood straight as a beam behind the captain at the tactical station.

Michael nodded. “That’s what I thought, too. In any case, the ale certainly helped loose his tongue. I learned that just a week later, his father had also passed away.”

“That’s horrible,” Rei said. The un-joined Trill was young and hadn’t been on *Eagle* very long. She was a capable officer but possessed all the naiveté of a fresh-faced Academy graduate.

Michael shot her a glare, indicating that he was not done with his story. She gave him an apologetic look and swallowed another comment.

“Apparently his father had left him with one-hundred bars of gold pressed latinum. But that wasn’t all of it. The week thereafter he also lost his favorite aunt in a freak shuttle accident. She had been quite wealthy as well and left him everything. I thought I finally understood the poor guy. Within under a month, he had lost half his family.”

“Sounds tragic,” said Eugene Edison who sat next to his commanding officer. A smirk was beginning to form on his face. “Then what happened?”

Michael’s face turned dead serious as he looked young Rei straight in the eye while she was seemingly hanging on his every word. “He turned to me, drunk and despondent, clearly a man filled with more grief than most could bear, and he said to me: ‘And this week’,” Michael paused dramatically. “Nothing.”

Lutira Rei looked at the captain with befuddlement.

Culsten however, sitting at the station right next to her, broke out in uncontrollable laughter.

The Romulan at tactical found the Krellonian’s amusement infectious and began laughing as well.

Edison chuckled but Rei just looked at everybody as though they had lost their mind. The first officer took pity on her confusion. “It’s a joke, Ensign.”

“But ... but he lost half his family,” she said. “How is that funny?”

Michael couldn’t help but smile. He found her youthful innocence refreshing. He was certain that she would lose it after serving in Starfleet for another year or so. Most everybody did.

“It didn’t actually happen, Lu, it’s just a story,” said Culsten who had finally managed to get his heartfelt laughter under control.

Michael stood up and gave the helmsman an icy look. “Lieutenant, are you implying that I made this all up?”

“Uh, no sir. Of course not,” he said quickly.

The captain let his smile return. “Good then.”

The doors to the aft turbolift opened. As Michael turned to see who was entering the bridge, he wished that he hadn’t.

“And finally, the bridge,” said DeMara Deen while leading Admiral Jonathan Owens out of the lift.

Leva snapped to attention. “Admiral on deck.”

Culsten and Rei turned back to their stations. Edison left his seat to stand next to the captain.

“Please,” the admiral quickly said. “I’m just taking a tour of the ship. No need for official protocol.”

Leva nodded and relaxed.

Jonathan Owens stepped next to the tactical officer, the elevated position giving him a good view of the rest of the bridge.

“How do you like *Eagle*, Admiral?” said the first officer.

“She’s a fine ship,” he said, sounding sincere. He looked around the bridge, savoring the moment. “I can’t say how much I miss blazing through space. But I’m afraid men of my age have to leave the adventuring to younger generations.”

“I don’t see why it should be a matter of age, Admiral,” DeMara said with a wide smile. “You should do whatever your heart desires. You certainly earned that right.”

Owens Senior shot a look at his son but found him unreceptive. He ignored his cold eyes. “She sure is a spirited little girl, isn’t she? You better watch out or I might follow her advice and commandeer your ship for one last bold and foolish adventure,” he said with mock sincerity in his voice. He turned back to look at the beautiful Tenarian. “You are still a most stunning sight, my dear.”

DeMara blushed slightly. She couldn’t exactly claim to be the victim of a dearth of compliments since she had joined Starfleet but hearing one from somebody she respected as much as Admiral Owens still affected her.

“But I must point out that I’m not sure if I agree with how my son runs his ship,” he said with more seriousness. “In my time we would not have allowed female officers to wear their hair this loosely. How is anyone supposed to get any work done with these kinds of distractions?” The admiral betrayed himself when his lips cracked slightly to reveal a tiny smile.

DeMara brushed her free-flowing golden locks over her shoulder self-consciously

“It would seem much has changed since the twenty-first century,” said Michael Owens dryly.

DeMara couldn’t help but chuckle.

Jonathan Owens looked at his son for a moment, as if considering if he appreciated being mocked in public. He finally laughed out loud. “And here I was thinking that you had lost your sense of humor.”

“You’d be glad to hear that the captain is a great source of funny anecdotes. You missed a hilarious story about a Ferengi family crisis by just a few seconds,” said the first officer.

“Not the Ferengi inheritance one again?” said DeMara with a smile. She had heard the story numerous times since she had been friends with Michael Owens.

But the captain ignored all of his officers and instead continued to consider his father. “Admiral, may I speak with you in private?”

Jon Owens exchanged a glance with DeMara. “I better go and talk to him. I wouldn’t want to fall out of favor with the man calling the shots around here.”

She nodded, still smiling. When she glanced over at Michael however, she wasn’t quite sure anymore if her bemusement was called for.

The captain waited a moment as his father stepped down from the upper part of the bridge and then followed him into his ready room.

Inside, Michael walked past his father and toward his desk. “Can I offer you anything?” he said but made no attempt to approach the replicator. Instead, he walked around his desk and sat down in his chair.

Jon Owens shook his head. “I have to say, I’m quite impressed with *Eagle*. As well as her crew. It’s a good one, Michael. I hope you realize that.”

“Yes, I do,” he said almost annoyed. He didn’t need his father to point out how efficient his officers were. If anyone knew it was him.

“It’s not always easy to assemble the right people but you certainly did. I’m proud of you. I mean that. I might not have said it before but I’m very proud of what you have accomplished.”

For a brief moment, Michael felt like a child again. He remembered the marvelous sensation that would come with the realization that his parents were truly pleased with what he had done. Learning how to swim, learning how to ride a bicycle, getting good grades in school, being accepted to Starfleet Academy. He used to treasure those feelings. But then, when he looked back up at his father, seeing his self-satisfied grin, all sense of pride or joy disappeared instantly.

“I’d like to talk to you about this mission,” he said after a moment.

The admiral turned to the wall where a large picture had caught his attention. It had been drawn with bold brush strokes and washed-out colors, giving it a slightly surreal feel. The canvas surrounded by a golden frame displayed a large yellow house encircled by fields of high grass.

The picturesque landscape was drowned by the red and orange colors of a beautiful sunset. Even though not an entirely realistic depiction, the scenery was immediately familiar to him. It was his house after all. “I told you everything you need to know,” he said. “I didn’t know you had this,” he added and pointed to the painting that used to be his.

Michael knew his father well enough to realize what this distraction really meant. He did not wish to continue a conversation on that subject. It was a tactic that he guessed worked quite well with his subordinates but he was not going to be deterred that easily.

“I don’t think you did. I think there is much more to it than you’re willing to let on.”

Michael’s father sighed and turned to face him.

Jon Owens knew he hadn't raised a fool and yet somehow he had hoped that he would not question his orders. He realized that he would not have been a good starship captain if he hadn't.

He took a seat on the sofa by the opposite wall of the office. "Michael, there are things you better don't know about. *Eagle's* mission is quite straightforward as far as you are concerned, and we should keep it that way. Nothing is expected of you or your ship besides delivering us to Farga and remaining in orbit for a few days."

"You know that I can't accept that. The safety of my ship and crew will always be my top priority. I need to know about any potential risks that might arise--"

"I do not believe there are any," interrupted Jonathan Owens.

"I'm sorry if your word is not going to help put my mind at ease."

"Excuse me?"

"Dad," he said quickly, willing to move on. "I don't want to get into another argument."

Jonathan stood up. "No, I think we need to talk about this. I've always been honest with you, son. I might not have always been open but I have never lied to you."

"There isn't a big difference between a lie and not admitting the mistakes you've made."

"We've all made mistakes," said Jon Owens with no sign of compunction in his voice.

"Yes, but in your case, it cost me my brother," Michael nearly shouted while jumping to his feet. He stood there, surprised by the force in his own voice, looking at the paling face of his father.

The admiral slowly shook his head as if to pretend that he hadn't heard that. "You can't mean that."

Michael took a deep breath. Once again things had gone completely sideways. Why couldn't he face his father without getting himself worked up? Was there really so much anger in him?

*Perhaps I do need to talk to Trenira after all, he thought but then quickly forced himself to dismiss the idea. Everything will be all right. Once this is all over and he's out of my life again, everything will be all right.*

He sat down again.

Admiral Owens, however, was still visibly shaken. And the man had a well-known reputation for not being easily unsettled. Michael had seen him in this state only once before. It had been when his mother had died, twenty-two years earlier.

He took a few steps toward Michael's desk. They seemed unsteady. "Your brother's decision to leave us was entirely his own. I made every effort to change his mind but he was determined. There is nothing I could have done differently."

Michael didn't reply, avoiding his glance, eyes cast toward his desk. He only looked up again once he heard the doors shut close behind the leaving admiral.

He had achieved nothing but worsening his relationship with his father.

*Was I too harsh on him? Perhaps making him responsible for Matthew's death is not entirely fair to him.*

*No.* Michael decided that it was.

The relentless pressure he had put on his brother was the sole reason why he had left before even turning sixteen. It was why he had decided to stay as far away from home as possible and why he had believed that he had to prove to his father and the rest of the universe that he was able to succeed at something that his father did not want him to do.

It was time Jonathan Owens understood that he had driven his son to his own demise.

\* \* \*

The night shift had taken over the bridge and because *Eagle's* journey to Farga seemed to be a fairly routine procedure, no senior officer had been placed in charge of the ship.

Instead, a young Tellarite junior lieutenant was currently the on-duty officer, quietly sitting in the captain's chair and absently observing the stars streak by on the view screen.

So'Dan Leva had decided that it was the perfect opportunity to work on training his new deputy ensign.

He had not been exactly ecstatic when he found out that the beta shift officer was a Vulcan. Having had to deal with Xylion for the last year had been difficult enough and he had no desire to improve his interspecies relations with the notoriously pragmatic race.

They had always irritated him and he had managed quite successfully to limit his exposure to Vulcans for most of his career in Starfleet.



That was until he had come on board *Eagle* and had found the chief science officer and second officer to hail from the planet Vulcan.

His prejudices were unreasonable, of course, and he knew it.

He had resented being mistaken for a Vulcan during his Academy years but that wasn't reason enough to hold a grudge against an entire people.

He had surprisingly felt more at ease with Vulcans lately. But he wasn't quite sure what had brought about that particular change in thinking.

"We would increase the efficiency of phaser array two by point eight four percent if we channel main power through the secondary EPS converter," said Ensign Trinik as he familiarized himself with the tactical systems

So'Dan sighed. He had not asked him for any opinions on increasing weapon efficiency. Unfortunately, many Vulcans tended to suggest what they considered to be more efficient practices and procedures even when not asked for an opinion.

"Just focus on the simulation for now," he said. "We might talk about improving efficiency once I'm convinced that you know what you're doing."

Trinik gave him a quick nod and then re-focused his attention on the tactical board.

So'Dan stood close behind him, observing his progress at defending against a simulated attack on the ship. He had to admit that Trinik had quick fingers and avoided making any obvious mistakes. Although the fact that his inexperience was showing, gave him a small amount of satisfaction. No matter how precise or logical Vulcans liked to think of themselves, a good tactical officer had never been born overnight.

The doors of the aft turbolift swished open and he turned to find out who had decided to visit the bridge at this late hour.

It was Naakar, the Vulcan delegate and he immediately approached the tactical station.

"May I help you?" said So'Dan, unable to hide the irritation he felt by this unexpected visit.

"Lieutenant Commander Leva," he said in way of greeting. "I am rather curious about starship operations," he continued. "I was hoping that I could observe for a short while. Only if it is not too much trouble for you of course," he added with a hint of a smile.

While he had found K'tera's smile earlier intoxicating, Nakaar's disturbed him. He wondered if it had something to do with the fact that he wanted to marry her.

He quickly decided that none of that was any of his business nor should he have cared either way. "You picked a curious hour," he said. "There isn't much to see during gamma shift."

"I did not wish to interfere with routine operations during your primary shift. I assumed that observing the night shift would present a minimal chance of my presence being a disturbance."

He couldn't fault his logic. "Very well," he said and turned back to the tactical station to monitor Trinik's progress. The young officer, to his credit, had not been at all distracted by the visitor and continued to do quite well in the simulation.

So'Dan, however, was quite cognizant of the eyes watching him from the corner of the bridge where Nakaar had positioned himself. He couldn't shake the feeling that he was more interested in him than in ship operations and he had to suppress an urge to keep looking over his shoulder.

Even though he had told himself not to, the delegate's presence caused his thoughts to drift back to his encounter with K'tera.

There was no more denying that he had taken a liking to the unconventional Vulcan woman even though their meeting had been relatively brief.

She was attractive, of course, especially for a race that claimed to put no emphasis on physical appearance. But there seemed much more to it than her looks.

She had merged traditional Vulcan logic with an undeniable passion for life. They had spoken for only a few minutes and yet he had spent hours thinking of her ever since. It seemed no surprise that there were two men currently on the ship who competed for her attention. Perhaps even three.

"New simulated contact at two-seven-eight mark four-two. Shall I engage?"

So'Dan had been so preoccupied with his thoughts, he had not even noticed Trinik speak.

"Sir?"

He aimed a puzzled look at his understudy. When he finally realized how distracted he had been, he promptly put on a more serious expression. He silently cursed himself for his inattentiveness and then shook his head. "No, I've seen enough for now. End the simulation and take a break."

"I do not require any rest at this time, sir," he said.

So'Dan frowned. "Ensign, when a superior officer suggests you take a break, just go take a break. Get something to eat or study on your own time, whatever it is you think will keep you focused when it counts. We resume the training at oh-nine hundred."

Trinik nodded and turned to leave for the turbolift.

Nakaar used this opportunity to step closer to So'Dan, looking over his shoulder. "I cannot deny that I am intrigued by the ship's tactical systems, Commander. I would be grateful for a demonstration."

So'Dan operated a few panels and the entire console went offline. He turned around. "I have authorized your presence on the bridge out of respect for your position as a Federation delegate but I'm afraid I cannot allow you access to the tactical systems. It's a safety issue, I'm sure you understand."

Nakaar nodded. "Certainly."

So'Dan walked away from tactical and stepped to one of the aft consoles.

"Perhaps in that case," said the Vulcan, following him, "I may ask you some questions unrelated to *Eagle*."

He sighed. He had hoped that the Vulcan would have interpreted his uninviting demeanor as a hint for him to leave the bridge. "Go ahead," he said without looking up from the console he had tried to escape to.

"I am still curious about your mixed heritage. Do you feel more related to Romulans or humans?"

So'Dan certainly didn't like talking about questions concerning his heritage but for now, he decided to go along. Perhaps that would satisfy Nakaar's curiosity and prompt him to end this line of inquiry.

"I only spent my early childhood on a Romulan world so I suppose I would have to say, human."

"Fascinating. You must feel your Romulan nature surface occasionally. I imagine it difficult for you to keep control of those emotions."

So'Dan had heard about enough. Nakaar was probing into painful territory and he had no interest in being dissected like a lab animal. He turned around. "I'm sorry, what exactly is the point of these questions?" he said, his voice taking on a steely edge.

"I apologize if I offended you, Commander. I can see you are not comfortable speaking openly about these matters. I should have realized that this would not be an easy conversation for you."

His hope that Nakaar was through was short-lived.

"But you must understand my position as well. We are on a very delicate mission to a planet close to the Romulan border on a vessel whose tactical officer is Romulan."

"Half-Romulan."

"Of course."

So'Dan looked straight into Nakaar's green eyes. If he had hoped that his insistent stare would intimidate the Vulcan, he was soon disappointed when the other man stood his ground and answered in kind.

"Are you questioning my loyalty?"

"I am simply trying to ascertain how the proximity to Romulan space affects your abilities to perform your duties as a Starfleet officer."

"If it affects me at all," said So'Dan. "It only does so on a personal level. Does it bring back memories of my childhood? Of course, it does. That's no different from any other person who returns to a place where they've spent significant time. But does it interfere with my work on *Eagle*? Does it affect my loyalty to Starfleet and the Federation? Absolutely not. Do you have any reason to believe otherwise, Mister Nakaar?" he said with the fierceness of a cornered animal. He had spent much of his time as a cadet and junior officer having to justify his loyalty to narrow-minded people over and over again.

Whereas most of his fellow colleagues had always enjoyed complete trust from their superiors, his allegiances had always been put into question. If not implicitly then at least with subtle gestures and unspoken accusations.

He had hoped that after his spotless track record and years of exemplary service, he had put questions concerning his allegiance finally to rest. Now, he realized that some people would never be satisfied.

"No reason whatsoever, Commander."

"Good. If there is nothing else? I'm quite busy," he said. It was a lie but one he didn't feel guilty about in the least.

Nakaar nodded. That dry smile that So'Dan disliked once more on his lips. "I sincerely hope that my inquiries have not caused you too much of a nuisance. I will leave you to your work," he said and headed back to the turbolift.

\* \* \*

Ashely Wenera had done some investigating of her own.

She had learned that the delegation consisted of thirteen members. Ten Vulcans, two humans, and one Andorian.

It was one of the humans who had caught her attention.

His name was Haylen Samson. He was a junior member of the delegation and he had been assigned as an attaché. Samson had only served with the Diplomatic Corps for a few weeks.

While snooping through his file, Ashley had discovered that he had suffered from a minor and easily treatable disease when he had been a child. Something she figured she could use to her advantage in her mission to find out the truth about Farga.

She had managed to contact Samson and the young man was now lying on one of her bio-beds in sickbay while she pretended to run several tests on him.

"I still don't understand why you need to do this," the young red-haired man said. He had been utterly confused ever since the doctor had asked him to come to sickbay.

His main concern seemed to be with his own health. He had kept asking her if he was all right and pointed out that he had felt a bit dizzy lately. Ashley was quite sure that the young man had been under a lot of stress lately and that that was the only reason for his wooziness.

"You said you had some headaches," she said while studying the read-outs displayed on a screen.

"They weren't very strong and they usually go away quickly," he said and tried to sit up. "Do you think it's serious?"

She pushed him back onto the bed. "Please stay still."

Samson lay down again. "My mother always warned me to be more careful with my health. She always said—"

"You suffered from Reitmayer's Disease when you were a child, correct?" she said, interrupting Samson.

He nodded. "Yes, but I was cured," he said and then jerked up again. "Oh no, you don't think it's back, do you?"

She pushed him down again. "What did I say about staying still?"

"But that can't be," he stuttered once he was on his back again. Sweat pearls began forming on his forehead. He looked pleadingly at the doctor. "Can it?"

Ashley couldn't help but feel a pang of guilt. The poor man was in fear for his life. She had not wanted to push him that far. She quickly shook her head. "No, of course not."

But Samson didn't seem convinced. His mind now unable to focus on anything but this phantom sickness. "Please doctor, be honest with me," he said while trying to prop himself up once more. "I can take the truth."

"You'll pull some muscles if you don't stay still, that's about the worst that will happen," she said, using her firm doctor's voice.

Haylen Samson nodded and relaxed again, staring at the ceiling he asked, "But then why am I here?"

She turned away from his patient. Mostly to make sure he couldn't see her face. She feared that it might give her away. She needed to think of something quickly, making Samson fear for his life wasn't working, mostly because her own conscience wouldn't allow it.

"We had some reports of a virus going around on the ship that could affect people who suffered from Reitmayer's," she said and turned back around, still spotting the concern on the attaché's face. "Nothing serious but it could affect your balance and hand-eye coordination. You wouldn't want to trip over your own feet during the negotiations now, would you?" she said with a smile.

Samson shook his head quietly.

"I'll have something for you to avoid embarrassing yourself in front of a foreign delegation, just in case," said Ashley and was relieved to find that he seemed to go along with her story. She turned to a worktable and began to prepare a hypo-spray containing a harmless placebo.

"Thanks, Doctor," he said and remained perfectly still this time. "You gave me quite a little scare there."

"Don't worry, you'll be just fine by the time we reach Farga. You must be pretty excited to have been chosen for this assignment."

Samson nodded. "Yeah, a bit too much perhaps. I mean this is a very important meeting. To think of what could come out of this. It could have significant implications. Can you imagine what could happen if—" Samson quickly interrupted himself. "I mean ... yes, the Vulcans and the Fargans ... and the vaccine ... it's very important for them," he said, desperately trying to correct the mistake he had obviously almost made.

Ashley considered his words for a moment and then turned to him with a smile. "It's all right, Halyen. Just make sure you don't shoot your mouth off to anyone of the crew," she said just before her smile faded away. "You do realize how important it is that we keep a low profile on this mission."

Samson sat up again and looked right at the doctor. "You ... you know?"

"Of course, I do," she lied, now smiling again. "Do you really think I brought you here because of a virus?"

Samson seemed confused. He looked at her and then at the empty sickbay. "You mean you are ... with them?"

She approached him slowly. Her heart was pounding so hard, she hoped he wouldn't notice and she could feel the rush of adrenaline shooting through her veins. Culsten had been right. She was a spy now. She stepped next to him and put a hand on his shoulder.

"I didn't realize who you were," he said. "Are there any others on board?"

"You don't need to worry about that."

He nodded quickly. "Of course."

"What is important is that you watch what you say around strangers. You can consider yourself lucky that it was me this time. But you could have done some irreparable damage," she said sharply. She could feel a silly smile trying to force itself onto her lips. She needed all her focus to suppress it.

"I understand," said Samson. "It will not happen again, Doctor. I mean ... are you even a doctor?"

She shot him an icy stare.

"It doesn't matter."

"So, you are clear about your mission then?" she said, trying to sound nonchalant now.

The attaché nodded.

"Good. Let's go through it step by step then. Once we arrive on Farga you and the rest of the delegation will meet with whom exactly?" she said, hoping that Samson did not notice the slight tremble in her voice.

"We'll meet with--," Samson stopped himself and gave her a suspicious look.

The doctor immediately knew that she was found out. Her heart felt as though it was about to explode.

He confidently swung his legs over the edge of the bed and stood up. He gave her a sinister smile. "Nice try," he said. "But I know what you're trying to do."

*This is it*, she thought. She wondered what would happen to her. Would he report her to Starfleet Intelligence? Surely, they would force her to resign her commission and leave the fleet or worse, have her locked up for attempting to interfere with a secret mission.

"You're trying to test me, aren't you?"

Ashley had to fight the urge to utter a sigh of relief. Something that felt like a thick knot in the back of her throat prevented her from speaking and all she could muster was a nod.

"I thought so," he said with a somber expression. "Well, my lips are sealed, you can be sure of that." He walked right past her and toward the exit. Before he reached the doors he turned around once more. "Thanks for the talk, Doctor. You won't need to worry about me anymore," he said and then turned and left sickbay.

Once the door closed behind him Ashley allowed herself that sigh that she had denied herself before. It felt liberating. She felt her heartbeat slowly normalizing. She wondered how close she had come to a cardiac episode. Spying was not for her, she quickly decided.

She had been so proud of luring Samson to sickbay under false pretenses and of making the snap decision to pretend to be somebody she was not.

But it had all backfired. She had come close to being exposed as a potential enemy spy and she was pretty certain that it would be impossible to try and get information out of Samson now.

And he was the only member of the delegation that might have revealed anything.

The only consolidation was that it was now perfectly clear that the mission to Farga and the negotiations for the vaccine were nothing more than a cover story for something much bigger and more significant.

As to what that could be, she still didn't have the faintest idea.

\* \* \*

So Dan Leva wasn't exactly sure why but he found himself in front of K'tera's quarters, staring at the door chime control.

He had found it difficult to focus while working with Trinik on the bridge and had decided to postpone training the young tactical officer.

He had returned to his quarters but hadn't been able to put the Vulcan woman out of his mind and so he had decided that there was only one thing he could do to deal with those distracting thoughts.

But now that he actually stood in front of her door the sudden thought struck him that visiting Xylion's fiancée in her quarters was perhaps not the most appropriate course of action.

But then again, he had been present when she had made it quite clear to *Eagle*'s science officer that she was not planning on marrying him anymore.

*I've come this far*, he thought as his finger pressed down on the annunciator.

The voice that came over the speakers just seconds later sounded annoyed and So'Dan quickly regretted what he had done. "Come in."

It was too late to turn back.

The doors slid open and he stepped into the room. He didn't spot the Vulcan woman in the dark quarters. "I'm sorry if this is a bad time. I shouldn't have come."

K'tera walked out of the bedroom.

The starlight shining from the windows caught her face at just the right angle to emphasize her gentle features. So'Dan watched her for a moment, awestruck by what he saw.

As she stepped closer he noticed her smile. It was warm and genuine.

"I apologize for my tone, Commander. I expected somebody else."

He nodded. "I thought that you might be interested in a tour of the ship."

"An intriguing idea."

With little hesitation, K'tera followed him out of her quarters to let him show her the ship.

She seemed interested and listened carefully to everything he had to say about *Eagle*. She did ask a few questions but nothing that would have been difficult to answer.

After twenty minutes, they reached the arboretum that So'Dan had decided to keep for last.

On *Eagle*, the arboretum was an impressive botanical garden spread out over a quarter of deck seven. It featured small trees and plant life from over two-hundred worlds.

The hilly landscape also included a small stream and a handful of ponds. Many crewmembers came here after duty hours to relax and catch a breath of deceptively fresh air.

Due to the early hour, the place was mostly deserted. A handful of civilians and Starfleet crewmembers were busy maintaining the grounds.

K'tera seemed to enjoy the surroundings as they walked along one of the many pathways that crisscrossed the arboretum.

She stopped at the center of a small footbridge that led over a calm stream. Her eyes focused on a patch of crimson orchids that were blossoming near the water.

"This environment is very stimulating," she said while observing the flowers.

"I thought you might like it."

She turned to look at him. Her expression more serious now. "Did you plan this, Commander?"

"I figured that perhaps different surroundings might help you to relax. Give you a break from your recent worries."

She raised an eyebrow. "And what exactly led you to believe that Vulcans could be distracted by a few plants and flowers?"

He swallowed. "Well I assumed that ... you being--"

"Different?" she said with a stern expression.

"I'm not sure if that's the word I'd use," he said, suddenly very uncomfortable in his own skin.

A smile broke K'tera's focused visage. "Relax, Commander. You were most definitely correct in bringing me here."

"You were teasing me?" he said accusingly.

She slightly shrugged her shoulders and continued down the bridge. "I don't know what you mean."

Now it was his turn to smile as he followed her off the bridge, staying close by her side. "I've never met a woman like you. Vulcan or otherwise."

"I take that as a compliment, Commander."

"Could you do me a favor?"

She stopped and looked at him. "That depends on what it is you wish me to do."

"Could you not call me *commander*? My name So'Dan."

K'tera smiled and nodded. "I shall call you So'Dan then," she said and continued the stroll. "It is a fascinating name. Is it Romulan?"

"Not quite. My mother's name is Sonara and my father's Daniel. They had to keep their relationship a secret for obvious reasons but they decided to give me a name that would always remind them of their bond," he said, keeping his voice so even, it was impossible to know how he felt about the subject.

"I understand. You don't like talking about yourself, do you?"

"I spent a lifetime having to justify myself to others."

"It appears we are not so different from each other, So'Dan. As you might have guessed, I've had difficulties living amongst my own people. Many don't wish to accept that I desire to live my life differently," she said. She found a bench on a small hill and headed for it. He remained at her side.

"And now you are supposed to marry a person who is nothing like you."

She smiled. "He is not exactly the kind of man I would have chosen," she said, shortly before reaching the bench and sitting down.

He followed suit. "I never understood why a race as intelligent and as rational as the Vulcans insist on such irrational traditions as pre-arranged marriages."

"Most Vulcans believe that we can only maintain our way of life and our dedication to logic by continuing antiquated rituals that serve to remind us of how irrational and violent our past has been."

He considered those words for a moment. "I guess in a twisted way that makes sense."

"You will find very little about Vulcan traditions to make sense. At least that is how I feel."

For the first time, So'Dan felt another feeling for K'tera and this one was pity. She was an anomaly amongst her people. Surrounded by men and women who did not think as she did. Her life must have felt like a prison. Vulcans were well known for their tolerance toward other species but when it came to their own, they did not allow themselves the same luxury.

"I do not envy you for the decision that you must make," he said. "But I'm certain that you will make the right one."

K'tera looked him straight in the eye. "What do you think I should do?"

He quickly shook his head. "I wouldn't presume to know what would be the right decision for you."

So'Dan was surprised to hear K'tera laugh. It was much softer than the laugh of an average human but it was unmistakably a sound of amusement. "You are the first person I have met who does not have an opinion on my future. How refreshing."

"Thank you. I aim to be pleasing."

"However, I did not ask you what you think the correct decision would be. I asked what you *think* I should do."

He nodded understandingly. "Well, Xylion is a competent man and I believe he would make you a good and loyal husband," he said, surprising himself to find praise for *Eagle's* science officer. "But he obviously doesn't share your views on life. Nakaar on the other hand seems to be a more suitable candidate. Although I don't know him well."

K'tera nodded slowly. "Please continue."

He was amused to realize that K'tera had read him correctly. "But in my experience, there is always a third option. Even if it is not immediately apparent."

She turned to look at the pond the hill overlooked. "I find that the third option is becoming increasingly more apparent," she said without diverting her glance. Instead, she moved her right hand closer to his. She found his left hand resting on the bench and slipped hers inside.

He looked at her in surprise but she didn't make eye contact. He smiled, enjoying the touch of her skin against his.

He followed her gaze to the pond below.

# Chapter Six: Ghosts

“Now entering the Farga star system,” said Lieutenant Culsten from the flight control station at the front of the bridge.

“Drop to impulse,” said Edison.

Culsten didn't reply but a look at the viewscreen made it quite clear that he had followed the order. The stars that only seconds ago had streaked passed *Eagle* had now come to an almost complete standstill. One stood out more prominently than all others as it hung in the distant corner of the screen.

“Farga is the third planet in the system,” Deen said without glancing away from the operations console.

Michael, seated in his center chair, nodded. “Take us into orbit, Mister Culsten.”

“Aye, sir.”

Edison turned to the captain. “Shall I inform the delegation that we have arrived?”

But Michael, knowing his father well enough, suspected that it wasn't going to be necessary. His suspicions turned out to be correct when the doors to the forward turbolift hissed open to reveal the admiral not a moment later.

He stepped onto the bridge and curiously peeked at the view screen that now displayed a quickly growing bluish-colored globe at its center.

“Farga,” the admiral pointed out unnecessarily.

“Sir, sensors are detecting another starship in orbit around the planet,” said Trinik, the young Vulcan currently serving at tactical.

“On screen,” said Michael.

The viewer shifted to show a closer angle of the planet and revealed a gray vessel above it. Its color as well as its wide saucer section and long warp nacelles were all of familiar design.

“It's Starfleet,” said Commander Edison.

“The ship's signature identifies it as the USS *Agamemnon*,” Deen said.

“*Agamemnon*?” said Michael surprised. He had not been aware that a ship by that name was currently in service. “Must be a new one,” he said and looked at his first officer.

He nodded in agreement.

“Just a few months out of space dock,” said Admiral Owens as he stepped into the center of the bridge. “She's Captain Donners' ship.”

DeMara turned her chair to face the admiral. “Amaya Donners?”

The admiral nodded.

The Tenarian woman spotted Michael Owens' frown. She didn't know what was going through his head but she was certain that she wouldn't have liked it. She turned back to her station.

“If I may ask, what is the *Agamemnon* doing here, sir?” said the first officer.

“She's providing additional support to the negotiations on Fargo,” he said quickly and then headed back to the turbolift. “I'll assemble the delegation and beam down to the surface as soon as we're in orbit,” he added without addressing anybody in particular.

“Two starships to protect routine negotiations for a vaccine?” said the first officer skeptically once the admiral had left the bridge. “Doesn't that seem a bit excessive?”

“Starfleet must be worried about the Klingons,” Culsten said.

The first officer turned to the captain. “I take it you had no luck talking to the admiral.”

Michael fixed Edison with a look, wondering if he realized how outrageous his question had sounded. He then remembered why his first officer had wanted him to speak to his father in the first place and shook his head. “I'm afraid not, Commander.”

“Sir, we are receiving a message from the *Agamemnon*. They are sending an invitation for you and Lieutenant Deen to visit the ship,” Ensign Trinik said.

DeMara turned around again, this time looking at the Vulcan. "Me?"

Trinik nodded curtly.

Michael sighed. "I guess it would be unbecoming of a Starfleet captain to decline such an invitation," he said and stood.

Edison did the same. "You know Captain Donners?"

"Yes," he said, not quite able to hide the regret in his voice. "You could say that."

The first officer aimed a quizzical glance at Deen but the look on her face told him not to ask any more questions. He decided to take the unspoken advice.

Michael walked toward the turbolift. He wondered how many other unpleasant surprises this mission would hold in store for him. "I'll be on the *Agamemnon*, Commander. I don't expect to be gone for long."

Deen left her station and quickly followed him into the lift.

"Why do you think Captain Donners wants to see us?" she said as they stood side by side in the lift car.

"My guess? She wants to rub her new ship into my face."

The doors closed and the lift sped away.

\* \* \*

The *Eagle* slipped comfortably into orbit around the planet to join the smaller but sleeker and more modern-looking *Agamemnon*.

Michael had chosen the out-of-the-way transporter room on deck twenty-five to beam to the other ship to avoid another run-in with his father who was also getting ready to leave the ship as well.

Moments after he and DeMara had stepped onto the transporter platform they rematerialized in a very similar-looking room on the *Agamemnon*. The only real differences were the lighter-colored bulkheads and the slightly different carpet texture.

A tall Bolian officer stood ready to greet them. His red and black jumpsuit formed a stark contrast to his blue skin. His rank insignia identified him as a lieutenant commander. The bald man smiled at the two officers. "Welcome aboard the *Agamemnon*. I'm Arden Texx, executive officer."

Michael and DeMara stepped off the platform.

"Pleased to meet you, Commander," she said, mirroring his smile that reminded her a little of Edison's.

Texx nodded and pointed to the door. "The captain suggested that I give you a quick tour of the ship if you are interested."

Michael shot her an annoyed glance, conveying that his initial guess about Donners' motives had turned out to be correct.

But the Tenarian was not willing to provide additional fodder to his bad mood and disregarded him. Instead, she did as Texx suggested and left the transporter room.

Michael remained a second longer, which made the first officer slightly uncomfortable but before he could ask if something was the matter Michael had followed his operations manager.

As they walked toward a turbolift, Texx leading the way, Michael could find nothing special about the *Agamemnon*. Certainly, she was a newer ship, possibly faster and more maneuverable than *Eagle* but the general look of the interior left him unimpressed.

Perhaps because most Starfleet ships' interior designs were quite similar or because he didn't want to acknowledge that *Agamemnon* could be superior to *Eagle* in any way.

"We'll start in the engine room if you don't mind," said Texx while continuing his way down the corridor.

"This is an *Akira*-class?" said Michael.

The first officer nodded with a proud smile. "Indeed."

"I've seen it before."

Texx smile faded quickly.

DeMara clearly disapproved of his tone and behavior. She left his side and caught up with Texx. "Well, I haven't and I'd love to see more."

The first officer gave her an appreciative nod. "Certainly, Lieutenant," he said a little louder than necessary.

For the next fifteen minutes, Commander Texx gave the two officers from *Eagle* the dime tour of *Agamemnon*.



For most of it, Michael was quite content to remain in the background and rarely spoke at all while DeMara showed an active interest in the vessel, especially its science department.

As the only Tenarian serving in Starfleet and being on a ship unaccustomed to her aura, she was warmly welcomed everywhere she went.

Michael usually observed people's reactions to her with a certain glee but today it only helped to irritate him further. He decided to break up a conversation between her and Wayne Daystrom, the ship's young science officer when it threatened to go on for no end.

He was determined to get his encounter with Amaya Donners behind him as quickly as possible.

Texx finally delivered the guests to the Captain's empty ready room which Michael was annoyed to find to be slightly larger than his own. Texx excused himself after explaining that Captain Donners had been held up but would join them momentarily.

Michael stared at the doors that had just shut behind the first officer. "You do see what's happening here, don't you?"

She turned to look at him. "What do you mean?"

He stepped away from the door. "Isn't it obvious? She orders his first officer to give us an endless tour of her new ship and now she lets us sweat it out in her ready room. The power play at work here couldn't possibly be any more obvious."

"It wasn't an endless tour," she said. "You need to lighten up a little, Michael. You've been behaving as though you've come to face your greatest nemesis."

He sighed. She had a point, of course. He had never been comfortable with the animosity that had grown between him and Amaya. But something else had suddenly become painfully aware to him. Something that hurt him deeply and Amaya Donners was the reason for that pain.

DeMara had started to study the room more closely. The walls were decorated with what she believed to be ritual masks from tribes originating on Earth's African continent. She found them beautiful but also slightly haunting in appearance. On a stand nearby she found a model of another starship.

"She must have enjoyed being on the *Columbia*," she said.

"What makes you say that?"

She stepped aside to reveal the model.

Michael felt a sudden jolt of agitation when he spotted the miniature version of the *Columbia*.

Seeing that ship again brought back unhappy memories. He didn't have any images or representations of that vessel in his possession and for a good reason.

He had commanded *Columbia* for less than a year but he had never called it his ship. She had always belonged to Captain Mendez whose shoes he had only stepped into very reluctantly after his death.

He would never be able to forget the image of *Columbia* burning up in space after he had sacrificed her to save a populated world under alien attack.

Almost the entire crew had survived the demise of the ship but Michael had always felt as if he had failed his mentor in carrying on the responsibility of watching over his ship. Donners kept a model of the vessel right in her office and Michael suspected that in some way she did so to remind herself who had ultimately led it to its destruction.

He tried to ban those thoughts out of his head and nodded slowly. "She served on it for five years," he said and turned away. "Only to leave when I came on board."

She turned to face him. "Don't you think it's about time that you two ... how do you say it?" she paused to think of the right words. "Bury the axe?"

Michael couldn't help but chuckle. "Hatchet. It's *bury the hatchet*."

She shrugged.

The doors to the ready room finally opened and Captain Amaya Donners stepped into her ready room.

His amusement vanished into thin air as he spotted her stride confidently into the room.

She was as breathtaking as she had been six years earlier as the chief engineer of the *Columbia*. Her straight black hair had become a bit longer and her eyes seemed a little less vibrant but besides that Michael thought her to be a spitting image of the person he had last seen half a decade earlier.

Her brown skin showed no signs of aging and neither did her body. He could certainly remember why he had made those fateful decisions when they both had been a lot younger. He had made a terrible mistake once, there was no doubt about that in his mind, but he could see why he had made it.

She hesitated for a split second when she came face to face with him. But the hesitation was quickly overcome and she continued her stride toward her chair behind the desk. Her demeanor was unmistakable; she owned this room.

“Thank you both for coming,” she said with little emotion to be found in her voice. “Please sit down,” she said as she took her chair.

Michael and DeMara followed the suggestion and helped themselves to the seats opposite her desk.

Michael could tell that after all these years she was still dreading to just be in the same room with him. She wanted to get this over with as quickly as he did.

“You have a fine ship, Captain,” said DeMara with a warm smile. She had always liked Donners even though she had only met her a few times on *Columbia*. But then again DeMara had the amazing ability to like everybody almost instantly.

The *Agamemnon*’s captain returned her smile, displaying her perfectly white teeth. “Thank you, Lieutenant. I appreciate you saying that.”

Again, Michael felt as though the comment had been directed at him. He studied her closely but didn’t speak.

Donners now turned to face him. “It’s been a while.”

He nodded. “It has.” Only now did Michael notice that Donners had brought a padd with her into the room. She had placed it on her desk and not drawn any more attention to it.

“If I may ask, Captain, what is your mission here?” he said.

Donners looked at him, not replying immediately. “We are to provide support for a meeting taking place on the planet. Do you know anything more?”

He shook his head. His earlier suspicions were confirmed, however. One: She knew as much about this mission as he did and two: She had been chosen for a reason.

“I hadn’t been aware you had been given a command,” he said while watching Donners’ reactions intently. “Congratulations.”

She gave him a curt nod. “Just a few weeks ago actually,” she said and then turned to DeMara. “I always meant to beat him to the captain’s chair. Looks like he won by a whole year,” she said, giving her tired-looking smile.

DeMara also smiled now realizing for the first time that the two of them must have gone back as far as the Academy.

“I can see now that you’re not above what you accused me of. Only human after all, huh?”

Donners turned to Michael, her smile gone. “I beg your pardon?”

“Taking personal favors. Isn’t that how you claimed I got my career? And yet it seems you don’t shy away from the same tactics, exploiting your relationships to get what you want,” said Michael with a voice that hardened with every word he spoke.

DeMara threw him a sideward glance. She did not like where this conversation was headed. But Michael ignored her; his glance was now firmly fixed on Donners.

“What the hell are you talking about?” she said, unable or unwilling to suppress her anger any longer. “Where do you take the nerve to throw such accusations at me in my own office?”

“Oh please, you wouldn’t have this office if it wasn’t for me.”

That did it. Donners jumped to her feet. “You are way out of line.”

“Am I?” Michael shot back now leaving his seat also. “My father contacted me because he needed somebody he could trust for this mission of his. Who better than his son? The son that many claim—including you—to have gotten his command only because of his influence. And now here you are. Recruited by the same man, for the same mission. Recently promoted and given your own ship. I wonder by whom?”

The two stared at each other but nobody spoke.

After a few seconds that seemed more like minutes to Michael, Donners sat back down.

“Turned out pretty good for you, didn’t it? Being the former girlfriend of an admiral’s son. Tell me, how did you keep in touch with my father all these years?”

DeMara stared at the two captains closely. She had known Michael since her childhood. She had always believed to know everything that there was to know about him. This, however, was news to her.

“You have no right to bring that up,” said Donners in a much calmer tone now. “Not after what you did.”

Michael sat down in his chair. “And you never had the right of blaming me for receiving preferential treatment.”

The room went silent once more. Uncomfortably so.

DeMara quickly realized that neither captain seemed to be the one wanting to break it first and so she decided to take the initiative. “Perhaps we should leave the past where it belongs for now and focus on the present. There must be another reason why you asked us to come here.”

Donners looked at DeMara and managed a small smile. She looked back at Michael. “She’s young and she’s pretty but she’s certainly no fool.”

“Yes, and I really enjoy it when people start talking about me as though I wasn’t in the room,” she said quickly. There wasn’t the slightest indication of spite in her voice but she did mean her words. This hadn’t been the first time she had been treated that way by superiors who disregarded her because of her young age. In the past, she had learned to sit by quietly. This time she had decided not to.

Donners shot her a quick look. “I apologize, Lieutenant.”

The Tenarian nodded with a forgiving smile.

Michael suppressed a chuckle he felt coming on.

Amaya Donners picked up the padd she had come in with and looked at Michael. “I’m afraid the reason I’ve asked you here concerns the past as well,” she said and handed it to *Eagle’s* captain. “Now, to make something perfectly clear, I do not feel as if I owe you anything. I’m showing you this because I believe you deserve to see it.”

He took the padd and looked at it.

It contained a single image that chilled him to the bone.

It displayed something he had seen only once before but never thought he would ever see again.

It was a gray device of sorts, shaped like a chalice or a wine glass. It was sitting in space, the edge of a yellow planet was visible in the corner of the image, suggesting that the device was within that planet’s orbit. At the bottom of the image, he found a time index that revealed that it had been taken just a few days earlier.

DeMara noticed his shocked expression and leaned over to catch a glimpse of what had stunned him so. She immediately understood his reaction.

“This is impossible,” he said while his eyes remained fixed on the image in his hand.

“My science officer has verified the authenticity of the image. It is definitely not a fake,” she said, studying him closely as if she had anticipated this reaction.

“But Frobisher died a few years ago. It can’t be him,” said DeMara.

Michael shook his head, still looking at the image. “When they finally tracked him down the starship sent to capture him witnessed his shuttle explode. But a body was never recovered.”

“Still,” she said, “It could be somebody else trying to imitate his work.”

“He and my brother were the only ones who knew all the plans, all the schematics, and the groundwork. The remaining documents were sealed by Starfleet. It has to be him. This ... this thing looks exactly like the one he used on Periphocles V,” he said and then looked up at Donners. “How did you get this?”

“We recovered it from the wreckage of a freighter not far from here. Looks like it ran into an ion storm it couldn’t handle.”

“Do you have any idea where it was taken?”

She shook her head. “I don’t have exact coordinates if that’s what you mean. My science officer narrowed it down to this sector but that’s about it. There are literally thousands of planets that could fit the description. I know there is a rumor of a secret Romulan base on this side of the border. I wouldn’t be surprised if that were somehow linked to that image.”

DeMara nodded. “That would make sense. If Frobisher is trying to recreate his experiment, he would need significant help. He can’t go back to Starfleet but the Romulans I’m sure would be eager to help him if they’d see a benefit in it.”

Michael had heard enough and stood. “We’ll have to find him and put a stop to this once and for all.”

“Don’t you think you’re overreacting? This could be anything. All we have is a fuzzy image of what may or may not be Frobisher’s satellite.”

“He is a convicted criminal, Dee. He must be brought to justice. If there is any chance that he is still alive it’s our duty to investigate.”

The two women notice the fire in his eyes now. He had made a decision and he was going to go after Frobisher no matter what. And they both knew he was not going to be deterred until he had found his brother’s killer dead or alive.

He turned to *Agamemnon’s* captain. “Thank you for bringing this to me, Amaya. I’ll take it from here.”

Donners stood. “I thought you would. Good hunting.”

With that, Michael turned and left *Agamemnon’s* ready room.

Deen quickly said her goodbyes to Donners and then followed her friend.

She wasn’t sure if she liked this turn of events.

Michael Owens had clearly just made it his personal mission to go after Frobisher. The need for revenge had never been something she had been able to understand.

She feared it was going to be a destructive emotion not so much for Frobisher if he was indeed still alive but for her friend and captain.

For the first time in a few days, So'Dan Leva found himself in a pleasant mood.

Never mind that *Eagle* had entered a sector of space just a few short light-years from the planet on which he had grown up.

A time of his life that usually brought back painful memories.

He was also no longer irritated by having a Vulcan delegation on board. In fact, he had spent a few nights with one of its members and it was her presence alone that was to thank for his agreeable disposition.

He stepped into the turbolift ready to begin his shift on the bridge, casually greeting a young male ensign inside.

The lift set back in motion after he had stated his destination only to come to a halt once more seconds later.

The doors opened and *Eagle*'s Vulcan science officer stepped inside. Xylion acknowledged the presence of the two officers with a simple nod.

"Bridge," the Vulcan officer said.

The car sped away once more.

Again, it stopped after just a few short moments. This time for the ensign, who stepped out of the lift as soon as the doors had opened.

The doors hissed shut behind him and the car continued with its two remaining occupants.

"Computer, halt lift," said Xylion.

The computer obeyed the command instantly and the lift came to a stop in between decks.

So'Dan looked at the science officer with puzzlement. "Commander?"

"Am I correct in assuming that you have been spending time with K'tera?"

So'Dan let out a small sigh. Suddenly painfully aware that he had been foolish not to expect some form of repercussions for getting involved with a woman who was supposed to marry somebody else.

"I've seen her once or twice, yes," he said, still in the process of attempting to formulate a justification for his actions.

"You are aware, of course, that K'tera has been chosen to become my wife." If Xylion was angry or upset, his voice didn't betray him.

"I believe that is up to her."

"You are mistaken."

So'Dan shot him a surprised look. If he hadn't known better, he could have sworn that Xylion was becoming agitated. A seemingly natural reaction to discovering that one's fiancée was seeing another man. However, the situation here was much more complicated. At least it was to him.

"The choice is not hers to make. It has been made before she was born and tradition demands that she adheres to that decision."

The So'Dan turned to face Xylion. "Perhaps. But if she is not willing to follow tradition, are you telling me that you will force her to marry you?"

The Vulcan didn't move a single muscle in response.

"I didn't think so. Besides I have no intentions of marrying a *Vulcan*woman," he said not even realizing how much emphasis he put on the word. "Perhaps you should be more worried about Mister Nakaar."

"Computer, continue," said Xylion without giving the other man another look.

*That didn't go too badly*, thought So'Dan. He couldn't help, however, to think that Xylion had made a decent enough point. What was he doing getting involved with a Vulcan woman who was being courted by two other men?

"I feel that I should inform you that K'tera has a history of engaging in intimate relationships," the Vulcan said as the lift continued its way to the bridge.

"What do you mean?"

"She is unstable and she always has been. In the past, she has tried to compensate for her lack of control by involving herself with willing partners. Those relationships have never lasted," he said without guiding his eyes toward the tactical officer.

So'Dan shot him a sidelong look but the Vulcan simply refused to make eye contact.

The turbolift finally reached its destination. The doors hissed open and without hesitation, Xylion stepped out.

So'Dan remained frozen inside.

He didn't think that Xylion would be able to lie to him out of personal spite. But then love made fools out of the greatest men.

He quickly dismissed the idea that Xylion was in it for love. But that realization opened up a whole new line of questions. Question to which he knew he didn't have any answers.

\* \* \*

Ashley Wenera was at the fish tank in her office containing the large red turtle eggs that were due to hatch any day now. Her thoughts were somewhere else entirely, however.

She was trying to put puzzle pieces together that didn't want to fit.

That this mission had nothing to do with trading a medical vaccine with the Fargans was now as obvious as a seven-foot *mugato* on a bright summer day. But she hadn't made any progress in finding out what it was truly about.

She had even considered sneaking down to the surface to see what the delegation was up to. The crew had been given strict orders not to set foot on Farga and she had no idea how she could leave the ship undetected. Perhaps Lif Culsten with his unwavering enthusiasm would be able to think of a way.

She quickly shook off the entire notion as ridiculous.

*"She's right in there."*

Nurse Leila Adams's voice broke her concentration. She looked up and out of the window into her ward.

One of the Vulcans had entered sickbay and approached the nurse. She was pointing at her office. The tall man gave her a courteous nod before heading toward the doctor.

She recognized the man. Culsten had told her about him. She knew he was unconventional for a Vulcan, more emotional and much less dedicated to logic than most others of his species.

She figured if any of the Vulcans would shed any more light on this mission, it might be him. She stood from her chair and instinctively grabbed a medical tricorder.

"Doctor Wenera?" he said as he stepped through the door.

She nodded. "Mister Nakaar, I presume?"

"You are well informed, Doctor."

She stepped around her desk. "It is part of my job to know who comes aboard *Eagle*."

Nakaar raised an eyebrow.

"For medical reasons," she added quickly and activated her tricorder. "How can I help you today?"

Nakaar stepped closer to Wenera and the doctor was surprised to find that he did not stop. Nakaar was almost intimidatingly tall and strongly built, seeing him step up to her directly was borderline threatening. She took a small step back but found herself trapped by her own desk.

Nakaar shortened the distance to the doctor even further until he was truly inside her personal space. He looked down at the shorter woman. Then he gently took the tricorder out of her hand. "I didn't come here for medical reasons."

She nodded and managed to slip out between the towering man and her desk. "Then what brings you here?" she said as she retreated to a far corner, pretending to attend a console but in fact trying to put as much distance to him as possible.

"I learned that you recently asked Mister Samson to come visit you."

Ashley froze. It took her a second to muster the courage to turn around and face the Vulcan again. "There was a medical issue that I wanted to address with him," she said surprised by the conviction that she managed to bring to her voice.

"I understand," he said and gave her a curt nod. "I trust that he is in good health now."

"Yes. I don't think my concerns were warranted," she forced a smile on her lips.

“Good. Mister Samson is instrumental in our negotiation efforts and I am relieved to know that he is fit to serve.” Nakaar also smiled now and began to turn for the exit.

She saw a chance and decided to go for it. She hadn’t much to lose, she decided. “However,” she said and took a few steps forward. “If you want to be absolutely certain, I recommend that I observe him for a few days. He needn’t interrupt his regular obligations. I could accompany him to the surface and keep an eye on him. I’ll be very discreet; he won’t even know I’m there.”

Nakaar turned back to the doctor and scrutinized her carefully.

*Damn, I’ve gone too far*, she thought. She believed that she was able to maintain a calm outward appearance as the Vulcan’s probing eyes remained focused on her. Inside, however, she felt a terrible anxiety growing.

“I suggest you stop what you are doing,” Nakaar said coolly, his smile now gone.

“I beg your pardon?”

Nakaar took a step forward. “Do you think me a fool, Doctor?”

“I . . . I don’t know what –” she stammered but didn’t get a chance to finish.

“You are endangering a crucial mission with your ill-motivated efforts,” said Nakaar taking yet another step closer. “You will cease your unsanctioned activities immediately or you will suffer the consequences of your thoughtless actions.”

This time she stood her ground. But she felt a cold shiver run up her spine.

She had been found out and there was no more denying it. But suddenly the only thing she was afraid of was Nakaar himself. His eyes gleamed with a brilliance she hadn’t spotted before. His voice was ice cold and it made her fear for her life.

It took her some effort to stand up to the man. Even more so to speak to him. “Are you threatening me?”

Nakaar stopped and once again his eyes locked with hers.

She cursed herself when she couldn’t avoid swallowing.

His smile returned. It was cold and dishonest. “You are mistaken if you believe that I would harm you in any fashion,” he said more calmly now. “However, I am certain that Starfleet would not look at your efforts kindly if they were made aware of them.” He gave her one last look and then turned and headed for the exit. “If you continue to interfere with these negotiations, you will leave me no choice but to inform your superiors,” he said as he stepped out of the office.

Ashley took a deep breath when she heard the doors to sickbay close behind him. A strong sense of relief washed over her the moment Nakaar had left. The man was menacing to an extent she hadn’t thought possible.

She let herself fall back into her chair. She knew her investigations were over.

# Chapter Seven: Revenge

“Absolutely not.”

Michael Owens stood in his father’s quarters and stared at him with a mixture of disbelief and disappointment.

He had not liked the idea of having to confront his dad once more but given the circumstances, there hadn’t been much of a choice. *Eagle* was currently serving under the admiral’s command and he could not take her to hunt for Frobisher without his permission. Something he had expected easy enough to obtain considering what the scientist had done to his family. But Jonathan Owens had unexpectedly balked at the idea for reasons Michael simply couldn’t understand.

“I will not have you take *Eagle* on a wild goose chase around the sector,” said the admiral and then turned away, apparently considering the discussion closed.

“There is a decent chance that Frobisher is still alive. And this is good enough proof to at least investigate the matter,” said Michael holding up the padd with the satellite’s image.

“*Eagle* is needed here.”

“You’ll still have *Agamemnon*. Whatever the hell you’re doing down there, I’m sure one starship will be enough to deal with it,” he said.

The older Owens turned to face his son again and then took a small breath before looking him straight in the eye when he spoke. “Frobisher is dead, son. The sooner you accept that the better.”

“You don’t know that for sure. If there is the slightest chance that he is still alive, don’t we owe it to Matthew that we look into it?”

The admiral seemed to become uncomfortable at the mention of Michael’s brother. But he quickly regained his composure. “Michael, I will not discuss this further. I will not allow you to take *Eagle* away from Farga and that is the bottom line,” he said in a tone of voice that left no doubt of its finality. His mind was not going to be changed.

Michael wanted to yell at him. To tell him that he owed it to Matthew to let him go and find his killer. But he knew that wouldn’t achieve anything. And he was sick of arguing and fighting. It seemed that lately that was all he did, be it with his father or with Amaya Donners.

He was done talking. He had made a decision before he had ever set foot into his father’s cabin.

“Son, listen to me,” he said, his tone was much softer now and his eyes revealed a hint of vulnerability. “Matthew’s death was painful to all of us. But we must not allow ourselves to dwell on those feelings. If we cannot move on from the past we can never hope to deal with the present. It’s a lesson I have learned after much pain and I don’t want you to repeat my mistakes.”

Michael was hardly listening anymore. He didn’t much care what he had to say now that he had made it clear that he wouldn’t sanction his plan. He simply stood there and pretended to agree to whatever platitudes came over his lips.

He gave his father a curt nod. “If there’s nothing else.”

Disappointment washed over the admiral’s face upon hearing his son’s indifferent tone. He slowly shook his head.

Without another word, Michael turned around and left. He had not received what he had come for but it would change nothing.

\* \* \*

Lif Culsten had decided to follow Nakaar more purposefully this time.

His plan was sound, he had decided.

He had borrowed a tricorder, claiming to need it for a manual diagnostic of the ship’s many thruster modules. That excuse gave him a good excuse to run all across the ship without raising any suspicion.

Initially, he hadn’t liked the idea of being dishonest with his fellow crewmembers but his deceit was not going to hurt anybody. On the contrary, if he could uncover the true reason for *Eagle*’s stay at Farga, the ship, and crew would be much better off.

At least, that’s what he told himself.

The tricorder’s scanners allowed him to pinpoint Nakaar’s life signs extremely accurately. This way he was going to be able to keep a safe

distance from his target while at the same time finding out exactly where he was going.

Lif knew that almost the entire delegation was on the surface. However, Nakaar was not. That in itself he found suspicious.

More so was the fact that he had spent the last hour walking all across the ship.

Lif had stayed close to investigate all locations that Nakaar had been interested in but had not been able to spot an apparent pattern.

The Vulcan had not attempted to access or enter any of *Eagle's* more critical areas. Instead, he had limited his short visits to out-of-the-way substations that were not directly linked to any primary systems. So far there was no reason to assume that Nakaar had any other motivation than to satisfy his curiosity for starships.

Lif's time was running out. His bridge shift was about to commence in less than an hour and he began to grow anxious with his fruitless investigation.

He stopped once more like he had done many times before, to allow his target to gain some distance and keep his surveillance efforts undetected. He intently observed the blue dot on the small screen of his tricorder that indicated the Vulcan's position.

According to the tricorder, he had just entered a corridor that ran parallel to the one he was standing in.

It was the same routine as dozens of times before. He couldn't help his thoughts from beginning to wander. The excitement of shadowing Nakaar had caused him to imagine what the life of a real spy would be like. The constant risk of being discovered, the persistent fear of sudden death or torture. It was a life Lif only knew from books and holo-novels.

"Whatcha doing?"

He was ripped out of his thoughts. He turned in the direction from which he thought the unknown voice had come from but found nobody there.

"With the tricorder? Whatcha doing?"

The reason he didn't see the person the voice belonged to at first was because the person was very short. Standing right next to him the brunette girl stood just about three feet tall.

Lif guessed her age at about nine or ten but from the bony ridges running across her temples and the side of her head, he knew she was Rengenerian. A race that usually didn't grow significantly in height until puberty.

Her red eyes were wide open and she wore an inquisitive expression on her face as she looked up at the helmsman.

"Uhm ... what?" He suddenly wished that he did not serve on a ship that carried civilians. He didn't mind having children aboard but he had never quite learned how to properly deal with them.

The girl pointed at the device he held in his hand. "That's a TR-590 Mark X tricorder. Whatcha doing with it?"

Lif was dumbfounded by the girl's technical knowledge. He looked at the tricorder in his hand as if he had never seen it before and then back at the little girl.

She smiled proudly. "I wanna be a scientist when I grow up."

"Right," he said.

"So?"

"So what?"

The girl let out a dramatic sigh. "What are you doing with a TR-590 Mark X here?"

"Oh," Lif said, desperately trying to stall for time and think of a clever reply. He had planned for the eventuality that somebody might ask him what he was up to but being asked by a girl who had a surprisingly detailed familiarity with Starfleet equipment had completely thrown him.

He noticed that he stood close to the wall. He approached it and began tapping it with his hand and running his tricorder over its surface.

"Just checking the bulkhead's structural integrity," he said quickly. "A boring job but somebody's got to do it."

The Rengenerian girl put her hands on her hips defiantly. "Then why is it set to detect bio-signs?"

*What the hell are you? Vulcan?*

Lif quickly turned the tricorder over so she could no longer peek onto the display. "Listen ... girl. I'm doing very important official business here so if-

"What kinda business?" she said, interrupting him.

*I can't believe this. I'm being interrogated by a ten-year-old.*

"Official," he said. "Now don't you have a class or something to go to?"



She shook her head. "School's out."

"Well, I'd love to stand here and explain my duties to you in more detail but I'm afraid you're too young to understand," he said not all too proud of his snide reply and quickly walked away before he had a chance to embarrass himself any further.

The short girl remained but shot the leaving lieutenant a glare.

As soon as he had managed to get out of the girl's sight he quickly turned back to his tricorder. His eyes opened wide when the blue dot was no longer to be seen.

*This is impossible.*

He quickly widened the scan radius but Nakaar's life signs were gone.

Lif cursed quietly for allowing himself to get distracted by the nosey youngster. He checked the tricorder's memory to replay the last data it had received. True enough his signal had simply disappeared a minute ago. A quick diagnostic of the device showed that it was working fine.

He walked into the corridor where he had picked up his life signs last and found it empty. Nakaar had disappeared into thin air.

*This doesn't make sense. Either he's no longer alive or he is no longer—* Lif interrupted his line of thought when he looked up again from his tricorder and realized that he had walked right in front of a possible explanation for this mystery.

He holstered his tricorder and walked toward the crimson-colored double doors which parted with a hiss as he approached.

Moments later he found himself inside one of *Eagle's* transporter rooms. The room was empty except for Chief Chow who was working in the back at a control panel. He turned when he heard the doors opening.

Chow gave Lif a wide smile, his bald head turning a darker shade of red. "How can I help you, Lieutenant?"

"Uh, just popping by to say hello, chief," Lif said, trying to slip behind the transporter control console in an inconspicuous manner. Of course, he tried too hard and suspicion was exactly what he elicited.

Chow's grin grew even wider. "Are you looking for somebody?"

The young helmsman glanced at the chief. "Who me? No, why would you say that?"

The chief shrugged and walked over to the console Lif had almost reached. "Just a hunch, I guess. Well, if you were to look for somebody, a certain Vulcan for example, I would be able to tell you that he beamed over to the *Agamemnon* two minutes ago."

The helmsman froze and watched the older noncom take up position behind the console. "Interesting."

Chow nodded and checked his console. "In fact, it is the third time he has beamed over since we got here. He said it's because he's interested in Starfleet ship designs."

He nodded absently while he wondered what other motivation Nakaar could have had to beam to the *Agamemnon*.

Chow turned to the officer. "But then that's not why you're here, is it?"

Lif looked up into the Chinese man's smiling visage. "That's right. I just came by to say—"

"Hello," the chief completed his sentence.

"Yeah," he replied awkwardly. "Well then, you take it easy, Chief," he said with a smile and backtracked out of the transporter room.

Chief Chow just shook his head slightly, realizing that young and eager officers were never going to change.

As Lif left the room he pondered why no matter how hard he tried, he seemed to be getting no better at this spying game.

\* \* \*

Michael had made up his mind.

He was going to find Frobisher. He knew that there was a chance that the scientist was indeed dead. He had escaped Starfleet custody shortly after the incident on *Periphocles V* six years earlier.

For the next three years, he had been on the run from Starfleet which had been determined to catch him and charge him with the reckless endangerment of an entire planet's population as well as manslaughter and possibly murder.

But Frobisher had been elusive and resourceful. When Starfleet finally discovered his whereabouts the shuttle on which he had been trying to escape was destroyed. Starfleet had declared him dead even though his body was never recovered. Investigators at the time had ruled it unlikely that he could have survived the accident. And even though Starfleet had decided the matter to be closed, Michael had never been so convinced. The image Donners had supplied him with had finally given him some substance to his suspicions.

There was another reason for him to follow this lead beside his burning desire to catch Frobisher.

Even if he wasn't among the living anymore, somebody was planning to recreate his deadly experiment and lives could be at stake once more. That to him was more than enough justification to go and find that planet even if he had to go against orders.

He knew it wasn't a strong point and that it would have little chance to stand up in an official hearing. And even though he believed his father to be capable of a great number of things, somehow he doubted that he would have his own son court-martialed.

He stood by the window of his ready room, looking down at the planet Farga. As his glance moved upward, he spotted the *Agamemnon* coming into view. He let out a small sigh. He needed to get away from here and doing so by trying to capture a man who had caused him so much pain was the perfect opportunity.

The door chime sounded and he turned away from the window, bracing himself for the upcoming confrontation he was expecting. "Enter."

The doors slid open to reveal *Eagle's* first officer. He stepped into the middle of the room. "You wished to see me?"

Michael nodded. He had the greatest respect for his first officer. He was incredibly good at his job, having exceeded his expectations since day one. Edison had quickly grown very close to both his senior officers and to himself. He knew that the objections he was going to raise were the same Michael would have brought up if the situation had been reversed.

"Gene, I'm leaving *Eagle* in the morning."

"Where are you going, sir?"

"It's a personal matter."

Edison's body tensed slightly. "Sir, we are close to the Romulan Neutral Zone and the Klingon border during a time of open hostilities with the empire. We are also on a joint mission under the direct command of Admiral Owens and you intend to leave the ship on a personal matter? I think I know you well enough to assume that this isn't a pleasure cruise you're having in mind."

"That it certainly isn't."

"If I were to speak with the admiral about your intentions to leave *Eagle*, would I find him to consider your plans favorably?"

Michael sighed. "I'll be straight with you. The admiral has made it clear to me that I'm not to take this ship away from Farga."

Edison was about to reply but the captain cut him off.

"However, he did not say anything specifically about me leaving Farga. Therefore, I do not believe that I'm acting against orders by taking the runabout for my journey."

"Are you really willing to risk your career over semantics? Is this really that important?"

Michael took a step toward his first officer. "It is to me, Gene," he said, employing a much more personal tone.

Edison's facial features softened; he was beginning to be swayed. But he was still not convinced to just stand idly by while his captain would go off galloping around the galaxy on his own. It went against everything he had trained for, not to mention his better judgment.

"What is this about, sir?"

Michael had hoped that he would be able to convince Edison without having to go into specifics. But he knew he deserved to know. He turned back to the window, *Agamemnon* now fully in view.

"Have you ever heard of a man called Westren Frobisher?"

Edison stepped closer to the desk. "You found him?"

Michael was surprised that Edison knew of the man. It was of course no secret. Edison had most likely studied his file closely and found out about the incident on Periphocles V.

"He is alive?"

Michael turned to look at his first officer. "I think he is."

Edison nodded. "Captain, to be honest with you, I don't think you should do this."

This time it was Edison's turn to speak up again before Michael had the chance.

"But I can certainly understand why you would feel that you need to go after him. I will not attempt to stop you under one condition."

Michael frowned. He always thought he ran a pretty lax ship but imposing conditions on him was clearly stepping over the line.

"The way I see it, you require my help to cover for your absence. I believe I'm entitled to some sort of assurances on your part."

Michael didn't like being put into this position but for now, it seemed he had little choice. "What kind of assurances?"

"Take Nora with you."

Michael smirked. This wasn't so much an assurance for Edison but a safety precaution for himself. It was also a request that made sense even if he wasn't entirely comfortable with the idea of dragging more people into his act of insubordination.

He nodded. "I will put it to her but I won't order her to accompany me."

But they both knew the Bajoran security officer well enough to understand that asking her was all it would take. In fact, she'd probably demand to go on the mission as soon as she learned that her captain was going.

"Thank you, sir," said the first officer. "And I hope you catch the bastard. Dead or alive," he added with a wicked grin.

Michael gave him a small nod and the commander left the ready room, leaving Michael to consider how fortunate he was to have Eugene Edison as his first officer. A different man might have made his life a great deal more difficult.

\* \* \*

Ashley Wenera was conferring with her college Doctor Nelson when she spotted Leva entering sickbay. A knowing smile formed on her lips as she turned to face the approaching tactical officer. "What can I do for you, Commander?"

Leva spotted the smile and found it immediately irritating. He felt uncomfortable as it was to come to sickbay. He decided to dismiss the doctor's amusement. "I'd prefer speaking to you in private."

Ashley exchanged a glance with young Barry Nelson who, judging by his smile, was in on the joke as well. She turned back to the Romulan officer. "Of course, you would. My office?"

Leva nodded and speedily headed for the chief medical officer's room adjacent to the main ward.

She followed him. Once inside she walked past him to get to her desk. "How are you, Commander?"

Leva noticed the implication in her voice but again decided not to go along with it. "I cannot complain, Doctor."

She turned, still wearing that irritating smile. "What can I help you with?"

The Romulan cleared his throat. He quickly looked around, making sure they were alone. "I require a specific substance for a ... personal reason."

The doctor nodded.

"Is it possible that you have already anticipated my request?"

"I'd say so," she said.

"How?"

"Do you think you can keep a secret like that on this ship? You've been seen wandering around with the Vulcan delegate and news has spread at warp speed."

Leva nodded slowly. "I see. I certainly hope that you have not partaken in the distribution of such rumors and speculations."

A mock frown came over her face. "Who me? Commander, I'm a senior officer on this ship. I take my responsibilities quite seriously. Frankly, I'm hurt by your implication."

The tactical officer tried to judge her words but came up short. He couldn't be entirely certain if she was being honest or not. It mattered little now, he decided. He had anticipated some degree of embarrassment associated with his request and had been willing to put up with it as long as the entire process wouldn't take too long.

"The substance?"

She nodded quickly. "Of course. I'll get it right away," she said and headed for the exit. When she passed by Leva on her way out she added with a smirk, "And I'll be very discreet."

He let out a small sigh and watched the doctor leave the office and cross into the main ward.

So'Dan had not anticipated that the crew was already aware of his relationship with K'tera. However, he had to admit that he had not been very delicate with this affair. He had been with her three times since she had come on *Eagle* and had not shied away from being with her in public.

He regretted his lack of discretion now and not just because of the ship's rumor mill. What made the matter worse was K'tera's complicated relationship with two other men on the ship.

By now, not only the crew but also Xylion and Nakaar were well aware of his relationship with the woman they both wished to marry. Curiously, however, K'tera herself had not made any attempts to keep their affair a secret.

Wenera returned, holding a very small white plastic bottle. She stepped back to her desk and inspected the content. "There are thirty-five

capsules here,” she said and looked at him. “That should be more than enough for the time being. However, if you need any more—“

“Capsules? What happened to injections?”

“Oh, these little guys are much more effective. Also, they have shown to have much fewer possible side effects,” she explained. The smirk returned to her face. “Now if you need some advice on interspecies—“

The doctor did not get to finish her sentence. In an effort to cut the doctor short, So'Dan had quickly closed the gap between them while she had been distracted.

Just as she looked up again, and she saw him up close, a sudden cold shudder went up her spine. She couldn't explain why but the sudden proximity to the half-Romulan officer scared her half to death.

She uttered a shriek and dropped the container causing the capsules to scatter on the floor behind her desk.

“Doctor?”

She quickly took a few steps away from the tactical officer, a look of apprehension on her face.

“I'm sorry I didn't mean to startle you,” he said and also took a step backward, surprised by her reaction.

“It's my fault,” she said after a deep breath. “I guess I've been a bit jumpy today.”

“Are you sure you're all right? You look somewhat pale.”

She quickly nodded and cracked her lips for a smile. “I'm fine. But look at the mess I made,” she said glancing at the floor. “I clean this up and get you another batch.”

“Why don't you go ahead and get the other batch? I'll take care of this.”

She nodded and slowly walked toward the exit.

He knelt behind the desk to begin collecting the scattered capsules.

As the doctor headed for the door, she spotted Culsten. He had entered sickbay and was heading straight for her office.

She quickly glanced back at Leva but he had disappeared out of view behind her desk. By the time she looked back at Culsten, he had already entered her office.

“Doc, I've got news you need to know,” he said with enthusiasm.

“Now is not a good time.”

He ignored her and instead pushed her back into her office. “You need to hear this, doc.”

“Lieutenant, this is really not the time to talk about this,” she said trying hard to emphasize her words. She glanced nervously back at the desk.

Culsten didn't seem to pay attention. “Nakaar has been all over the ship. I'm telling you, something is going on we don't know about.”

The young helmsman looked at her curiously when she began to signal him to stop by waving her hand close to her neck.

“What have you found out? Is something wrong with your neck?”

Leva's head shot out from behind the desk.

Culsten spotted the movement from the corner of his eye and flinched noticeably in shock. “Holy mother of King Nartok!”

“Looks like you're not the only one a bit jumpy today, Doctor,” he said.

“What are you doing here?” Culsten managed to ask after he had managed to collect himself again.

He held up the white container. “I'm just here to—,” he stopped in mid-sentence. He placed the container on the desk and stood. “Never mind what I'm doing here. What is going on with you two?”

Both Culsten and Wenera forced their most innocent-looking expressions on their faces, neither making eye contact with the tall tactical officer.

He stepped around the desk. “What was that you've been talking about? What are you working on exactly?”

“Just a bit of harmless small talk, Commander,” Culsten said and quickly wished he hadn't.

“If you two don't want to talk to me I'm sure Commander Edison would be very interested in hearing about this.”

Wenera sighed. This entire spying business had backfired on her more than once. She decided that there was nothing left to do but to come clean. “We've been trying to investigate the delegation,” she said.

“The delegation? For what purpose?”

"They're not here for the reason they say they are," Culsten quickly answered. "Tell him, doc."

She nodded. "I found out from a very credible source that the delegation couldn't possibly be on Farga to negotiate for a vaccine."

"Commander, we need to find out what's going on here. *Eagle's* safety could be at stake," Culsten said with a surprising passion flaring up in his voice.

So'Dan responded with a cold stare, causing the younger man's enthusiasm to melt away.

Wenera just shook her head and retreated to her desk. "It doesn't matter anymore in any case. Our little secret mission is over. Nakaar knows all about us."

That came as a surprise to Culsten. "How?"

"He found out about me talking to Mister Samson. He paid me a visit and reminded me in a very unsettling way to keep my distance."

Neither man missed the concern in the doctor's eyes. Her voice had become much smaller.

"What did he do, doc? Did he try to intimidate you?"

The doctor didn't answer but the look on her face seemed to speak volumes.

So'Dan shook his head. "That doesn't make any sense."

"There is something very off about Nakaar. He's been snooping around the ship and even beamed over to the *Agamemnon* a few times," Culsten said. "I tracked him with a tricorder and sometimes he simply disappears, almost as if he's able to shield himself from sensors."

So'Dan shot the Krellonian a quizzical look which he answered with a reaffirming nod.

"What are you thinking, Lif?" said the doctor.

"I'm not sure but something shifty seems to be going on here. And I'm certain Nakaar is involved."

Culsten's words made So'Dan think. He didn't much like the Vulcan but he wasn't exactly sure why that was. His unconventional ways had unnerved him at first but he couldn't claim that it was the sole reason for his apprehensive feelings. After all, it was that same eccentricity that attracted him to K'tera.

He turned to the doctor. "What exactly did Mister Nakaar say to you?"

She shrugged her shoulders. From her expression, it seemed obvious that she didn't care to relive the encounter. "That he knew what I was trying to do and to stay away from the delegation or else. Not quite in those words perhaps."

The Romulan nodded. "You didn't happen to examine him when he came in, did you?"

She shook her head.

"You think he might be suffering from something?" asked Culsten.

Before So'Dan could reply, Wenera cut him off. "I do remember reaching for a tricorder though," she said.

He faced her again. "Did you make any scans?"

Wenera spotted the same tricorder sitting at the edge of her desk. She took it and opened the device. "I don't think so. He took it out of my hand before I had a chance."

"Let me have a look," he said and took the tricorder. He studied the content intently, seemingly oblivious to the eyes resting upon him.

Culsten couldn't take the anticipation any longer. "What does it say?"

So'Dan looked up but his eyes made contact with nobody. Instead, he glanced thoughtfully into space. Then, abruptly, he looked at the doctor. "I'll have to borrow this."

He didn't even wait for a reply and stormed out of the office. A moment later he was gone.

"What was that all about?" Culsten said still staring at the doors that had closed behind him.

Ashley shrugged her shoulders. "I don't know but something tells me that we're no longer in the loop," she said and began to clean up the rest of the capsules on the floor.

Culsten spied over the desk, examining the small white pills. "His new girlfriend?" he said with a smirk.

Ashley said nothing.

The young man's smile faded. "It is a bit suspicious however, don't you think?"

She stopped and looked at Culsten hovering above her. "What do you mean?"

"Think about it. He is involved with a woman who was supposed to marry another man. The very same man he seems to be eager now to

accuse of heavens knows what.”

She didn't quite follow the helmsman's twisted logic and went back to cleaning up her office.

\* \* \*

It had been a while since Michael Owens had last piloted a runabout or any space-faring vessel for that matter.

But steering a starship was in many regards like riding a bicycle. It was something not easily forgotten. Especially not if the person in question had started his career at the helm controls of a starship. In Michael's case that had been sixteen years ago.

He needed just a few minutes to re-familiarize himself with the controls. It quickly came all back to him while he sat in the pilot's seat of the USS *Nebuchadrezzar*, the runabout *Eagle* carried and Michael had decided to use for his unsanctioned away mission.

He had become anxious about leaving as quickly as possible and a glance at the ship's chronometer revealed that his planned time of departure was approaching swiftly.

Just when he thought that security chief Nora was not going to make it in time, he heard the familiar noise of the heavy shuttle bay doors parting.

Through the side window of the cockpit, he spotted Nora Laas and three other members of her security team stepping into the shuttle bay.

He sighed. He had secretly hoped that he could find an excuse to leave her behind. Now it had turned out that she had decided to bring an entire team.

He left his seat and headed for the exit. As he stepped out, he found Nora standing in front of her security detail.

The first person that caught his attention was a Caitian ensign, distinctly covered in orange fur and possessing a face with strong feline features that made him appear much more like a wild predator than a humanoid. Michael had met the man before but he couldn't recall his name.

Also part of the team was a young female petty officer with shoulder-length red hair and green eyes. Her slender body frame made it seem as if she was out of place amongst her peers. He didn't remember having seen her before.

Junior Lieutenant Jose Carlos rounded out the team. He was an impressively built man of Latin American descent and Nora's deputy. All the team members were well armed with phaser rifles and side arms and all except for Nora now stood at attention.

“At ease,” he said and then turned to Bajoran who had a wicked grin on her face almost as if she enjoyed seeing the captain taken aback. “Commander Edison practically made me promise I ask you to come along but there was never talk about anyone else.”

“That was my idea, sir. With all due respect, you're leaving the ship with minimum protection to head deeper into a potentially hostile sector of space. You'll need all the help you can get.”

Michael suppressed another sigh. He neither had the time nor the inclination to argue that point with her, a woman who was notorious for her stubbornness. Instead, he turned to the assembled entourage.

“Before we get underway, I want to make one thing perfectly clear. This mission is in violation of direct orders by Admiral Owens.”

Apparently, that was news to the Caitian and the human woman who quickly proceeded to exchange surprised looks. Carlos, however, remained unimpressed.

“I'm taking full responsibility for this expedition but I will not order anybody to come along. So, if you do not wish to knowingly violate orders, I must ask you to stay behind. I will absolutely not think any less of you if you decide to stay.” *In fact, I would encourage it*, he added without saying.

“Sir,” began Jose Carlos. “I believe I speak for all of us when I say that there is no chance in hell that we're letting you go off by yourself.”

The two others quickly nodded in agreement.

Michael considered each of them carefully but found that their determination was unwavering in that regard. He couldn't help but be touched by their loyalty. “In that case, let's stop wasting time and get going.”

The three security officers quickly proceeded to enter the *Nebuchadrezzar*.

Nora stayed behind. “Nice speech, sir.”

“You expected this, didn't you?”

She simply gave him a nod and put on a self-satisfied smile.

The doors to the shuttle bay opened once again, this time to allow DeMara Deen to enter. She carried a couple of padds.

“Permission to join the away team, sir.”

“Not you too.”

Nora stepped next to Michael. “I think it would be better if you didn’t come along, Dee.”

“Why?” she said with a perplexed expression.

“We don’t know what to expect and to be honest, you’re not exactly the fighting type. It would be easier for me and my team if we only have to worry about protecting one person.”

DeMara glared at the other woman. “I know how to handle a phaser.”

Nora was about to reply when Michael beat her to it. “She has a point. We might run into the Romulans and—“

“The point is that you might need somebody who actually knows something about Frobisher’s accelerator. If it has to be shut down, I might be able to do that. Can you?” she said, directing her question at the Bajoran security chief.

Michael turned to look at the *Nebuchadrezzar* standing idly by behind him. He was trying but couldn’t think of a way to deny her logic.

“Do you want to stay here and talk about this or do you want to go get that man?” she said in a voice filled with provocation. It was a tone most atypical for her.

Too much time had already been wasted, Michael quickly decided. “Let’s go,” he said and headed back to the runabout.

Deen followed but hesitated when passing Nora. “And thank you for your vote of confidence,” she said with a smile she clearly didn’t mean before following him into the *Nebuchadrezzar*.

Nora just shook her head. “I still think it’s a bad idea,” she said quietly under her breath.

As the security chief on *Eagle*, she had almost gotten used to her advice being disregarded by Owens and the command staff.

She had long since found out that the captain liked to insist on doing things in a way that in her opinion were unnecessarily risky, particularly when his safety was involved. That had never deterred her from continuing to suggest alternatives and to stand by them when necessary. Even if it often turned out to be a fruitless effort.

A few moments later Nora had joined Owens and Deen in the runabout’s cockpit. Her security detail had taken up quarters in the back of the ship.

Michael wasted little time powering up the engines and ask the bridge for permission to depart, which he swiftly received.

The large bay door was raised to reveal the blue planet which was Farga. It took only a couple more seconds until the runabout lifted off gently and slipped through the protective force field and into outer space.

Michael steered the vessel away from the planet and toward the dark vastness of the galaxy. The impulse engines kicked in and the *Nebuchadrezzar* lurched forward and away from the protection of the two powerful starships in orbit.

Nora already felt uneasy. “Where exactly are we going?”

“We don’t really know our final destination yet. Our first stop is going to be a planet in the E nubria system. I’ve been told that we’ll be able to find information there,” said Michael while he prepared to engage the warp drive.

“Not Eteron?”

Michael swiveled around in his chair. “You know it?”

“Only by reputation. I’ve heard plenty of stories about that place. And not the kind of stories that lend themselves to pleasant anecdotes,” she said in a voice that gave him goosebumps.

He ignored it and turned back around to tend to the controls.

“You’ll wish you hadn’t come,” the Bajoran said to the young Tenarian.

Moments later, Michael engaged the warp engines and *Nebuchadrezzar* jumped to warp five on a direct course to one of the most notorious destinations in the entire sector.

## Chapter Eight: Cornered

So'Dan Leva had been rather cryptic when he had contacted him and asked to meet him on deck seven. He had, however, insisted that it was a matter of great urgency and that he best arrived armed.

It was the last request that worried Gene Edison the most and had made him give the matter his full attention.

Leva was not known for overreacting and besides being an outstanding tactical officer he was also a well-established security officer, a post he had held on a previous assignment. With Nora and her deputy having left *Eagle* along with the captain, Leva was more than capable of handling security matters for the time being.

Eugene stepped out of the turbolift on deck seven and found Leva already waiting for him. Like himself, he had a phaser holstered at the waist. He also held a medical tricorder.

“What is this about, Commander?” he said while approaching the tactical officer.

“I have become aware of a possible security risk on *Eagle*. It might be linked directly to our current mission.”

“Go on.”

“I believe Mister Nakaar might not be who he claims to be.”

The first officer frowned. “Can you be more specific?”

“I’m afraid not,” Leva said. “But I’m certain we’re about to find out,” he said and began to walk down the corridor.

Gene fell into step beside him. “Where are we going?”

“To pay Mister Nakaar a visit. If I’m correct, he will tell us what we need to know.”

“This is not the way to his quarters,” Edison realized.

Leva nodded. “He is in K’tera’s cabin.”

Like many others onboard, Gene had heard about Leva’s relationship with the Vulcan woman and according to the rumor mill he was not her only suitor on *Eagle*.

He did not approve of the tactical officer’s seemingly shortsighted dalliance. The situation was clearly complicated and he would have expected that an officer of Leva’s stature would have seen that and stayed away.

It was not his wont to interfere in his officer’s personal matters. However, now he couldn’t help but worry that the situation was going to get out of hand if Leva intended to confront Nakaar.

He could already spot a strange look in the other man’s eyes and it didn’t help to make him feel any more at ease with the ensuing conflict.

At the same time, he could not ignore Leva’s insistence that ship security was at stake.

“Commander, I seriously hope that you know what you’re doing.”

But Leva didn’t reply, seemingly completely focused on the task at hand now, almost as though the world around him had ceased to exist.

\* \* \*

The *Nebuchadrezzar* entered the busy orbit of Eteron a good sixteen hours after its departure from *Eagle*.

The small Starfleet ship joined several other vessels both big and small that were either parked in orbit or in transit from or to the planet’s surface. Eteron was one of the most popular destinations in this sector and Michael suspected that it wasn’t because of its sights or resources.

He sat at the head of an elongated table in the main compartment at the back end of the runabout with the chairs around him occupied by the rest of his six-man strong away team.

“It’s not a very friendly place. Even though technically within Federation territory, law and order are not enforced stringently here,” said Nora who had spent the last ten minutes briefing the team on the place they were about to visit.



“Law and order are not stringently enforced anywhere within Federation space,” said Deen.

“That’s because it doesn’t have to be,” Nora replied quickly. “But this isn’t a core world. People who come here are predominantly smugglers and criminals. It’s material possessions that matter most in this part of the sector and some are willing to kill for it,” she said and turned to the captain. “We need to be extremely careful. There is no permanent Starfleet presence on Eteron and we’re not going to be welcomed with open arms.”

Michael nodded and briefly considered the members of his away team, satisfied that each of them had replaced their uniforms with inconspicuous casual wear. He noticed that T’Nerr, the Caitian ensign, had decided not to wear a shirt at all. The young man was most likely relieved to be out of his uniform, not requiring clothes thanks to the thick fur that covered his entire body.

Petty Officer Skyler McIntyre wore a loose blue shirt and black leggings, Jose Carlos had opted for a simple suit with a fitting vest, Nora wore a one-piece gray jumpsuit with a blue jacket, and DeMara, on Nora’s urging, had dressed in a cloak that covered her full body and included an attached hood she could wear to conceal most of her face.

Michael himself wore dark blue pants, a white high-color shirt, and an open black vest. As he studied each and every one of his people, he realized that save for their combadges they would hide before transporting to the surface, they looked nothing like Starfleet officers.

“Very well. I suspect the secret Romulan base to be nearby. With all these smugglers around I’m sure some of them do business with them. However, they’re going to be wary about talking to strangers about it. We’ll head for the largest city on Eteron and make our way through the establishments that usually attract seedier elements. Make sure you’re all familiar with our cover story.

We’re smugglers who have mostly dealt with the Klingons and the Ferengi but we’re looking to branch out by getting into business with the Romulans. To make money we’ll have to spend it. I was able to procure a decent amount of latinum for this operation. Hopefully enough to make somebody talk sooner or later so don’t be shy to flaunt it around a little.”

“Remember that these people have different priorities and very few if any moral standards. They will more likely respond to violence and aggression than diplomacy,” added Nora and glanced at Deen. “If you must come, please remain in the background and do as little talking as possible. And keep yourself concealed.”

Nora and Deen had gotten into an argument earlier about her necessity to join the away mission to Eteron’s surface. Nora had made a pretty decent point when she had suggested that she stay on the ship as her presence on the planet would not be beneficial to the mission.

But DeMara had insisted quite forcefully. It was not because she liked the prospect of being surrounded by the kind of people that Nora had described but because she felt that she needed to see firsthand how these people lived.

Only that way could she gain a better understanding of the galaxy and all forms of life that populated it. After all, learning to understand the galaxy was the reason she had left the comfort and security of her home world.

To Nora’s disappointment, Michael had reluctantly granted her request to join the away team.

DeMara nodded. “You won’t even know I’m there,” she said with a small smile. “It’ll be as if I were invisible.”

“If only you could be,” said Nora under her breath.

Carlos who sat next to her chuckled at the comment but nobody else in the room had registered it.

Michael stood. “Let’s go to work people. Once you have located somebody you think might know about the Romulan base I want you to report back to me,” he said and removed his combadge to hide it under his vest.

The other team members nodded and did the same. They followed him to the transporter platform in the front of the ship.

Each of them checked their small, matchbox-sized phasers that they kept in a concealed pocket before stepping on the platform—two at a time—to beam onto the surface of Eteron.

\* \* \*

What the away team found on the planet was very similar to what Nora had described.

Eteron didn’t have a large population as most of the people who frequented the capital city were not locals but traders and smugglers who lived everywhere and nowhere. The narrow streets of the city were crowded, however, and most of the visitors seemed to be drawn to the sheer endless number of taverns and bars or other less respectable establishments. As Michael had expected it was in those locations that most business transactions took place.

To cover as many locations as possible, the group had split up into three teams. Nora had insisted to stay close to the captain, Carlos teamed up with Deen, and T’Nerr and McIntyre formed the third group. They went their separate ways but remained in constant contact.

All three teams found it very difficult to find anyone even remotely interested in talking about the Romulans. In one way or another most of

the smugglers seemed to have some sort of relationship with the nearby star empire, no doubt engaged in illegal trading with their equally unlawful counterparts on the opposite side of the Neutral Zone. But no one seemed willing to risk their business enterprise by involving strangers. Not necessarily out of fear of Starfleet intervention but out of concern that the competition might cut into their profits.

Michael soon realized that Nora was especially skilled in dealing with the smugglers. He remembered that Nora, who had grown up on Bajor, had left her home world before her seventeenth's birthday and had spent the next two years traveling through the galaxy, undoubtedly exposed to crowds not very different from the ones on Eteron. But in the end, it was he who had tracked down their most promising lead after hours of unsuccessful and mostly brief conversations.

"I like you, human. Something about you I find invigorating," said the Nausicaan woman. She was well over six feet tall with long reddish hair hanging over her shoulders. Her body was built for battle with biceps the size of Michael's head. She sat at a table opposite the disguised captain and security chief. She smiled at him, revealing her razor-sharp teeth inside a mouth ringed by equally sharp fangs outside.

Michael smiled also. "I would be delighted if we could enter into a business partnership," he said, putting all he had into working his charms.

"Partnership. I like that word," she said. Her facial features changed slightly but neither Michael nor Nora knew Nausicaans well enough to interpret the gesture.

Then she lurched forward, her large hand finding Michael's wrist, squeezing it forcefully.

Nora jumped to action. In an instant, she had drawn the small phaser and pushed it against the Nausicaan's neck. "Let him go."

The woman turned her head to look at the Bajoran curiously but showed no interest in ending her assault.

Michael winced in pain. It took all his focus to ignore it and keep the smile on his face. "It's alright, Laas. There's no problem here."

Nora shot the captain a worried glance but kept her ground.

"Stand down," he said a little more forcefully, clenching his teeth as he felt the circulation to his hand being cut off.

Slowly Nora withdrew her weapon.

The woman let go of Michael's wrist with a sneer and jumped to her feet. She looked at Nora with disgust and then back at Michael. "Too bad," she said. "I kind of liked you. But it looks as if you already have a partner." She promptly turned on her heel and strode toward the exit, forcefully shoving a Ferengi out of her way.

Michael immediately went for his bruised wrist, hoping to alleviate some of the pressure. "I don't think she meant to attack me."

Nora had concealed her weapon again and quickly surveyed their surroundings. It seemed nobody in the bar had taken much notice or interest in the incident that had just transpired. She turned back to the captain and gave him a quizzical look.

"I believe she had other intentions," he said, and then when Nora still didn't seem to understand he added. "Of a more intimate nature."

"Oh?" She caught a glance of the broad-shouldered woman storming out of the establishment. "Oh," she added with more understanding. She slightly blushed for reasons not completely apparent to her. "I'm sorry."

Michael shook his head. "Not at all. Come to think of it, you probably saved my life," he said with a tiny smirk and reached for the mug of ale that sat on the table in front of him.

Nora nodded sheepishly and returned her attention to the large and noisy hall. "She was our best lead though. What do we do now?"

Michael took a large gulp from his drink, one he desperately needed after the Nausicaan encounter. Once he had replaced the mug, he spotted Carlos and DeMara entering the bar, heading for their table.

"We hope that the others were more successful."

The two officers made their way through the packed tavern and joined Michael and Nora at the table. It was obvious from Carlos' expression that the two had had about as much luck as the captain. DeMara's face was difficult to make out under the hood she wore.

"These people are fascinating," she said. "Their greed completely outweighs any other priorities. They care little or nothing for their fellow men beyond the profits they can help provide."

Nora shot her a glare. "I'm happy you find this trip enlightening."

She nodded, seemingly oblivious to the sarcasm. "Oh yes. It most definitely warrants additional study."

José Carlos smirked. He had become frustrated with their ineffectiveness but working with the Tenarian woman had been a great pleasure even if she had remained in the background for most of the time and spoken only very little. Her constant optimism, however, had been encouraging in ways he couldn't fully fathom.

"I wish this was a sociological field trip but it isn't. I take it you had no success?"

"I'm afraid not," said Carlos, forcing himself to avoid saying *sir* when speaking to the captain. Michael had made clear before they had left for Eteron that nobody made a reference to rank or used titles. "These people are more tight-lipped than a group of Ferengi at a charity auction."

Nora Laas chuckled at the joke but the serious look on Michael's face sobered her up quickly. She had noticed that the captain had been quite

serious about this mission ever since they had left *Eagle*.

She knew that they were looking for a criminal scientist but she did not know Owens' personal stake in the matter. That he had an ulterior motive in finding Doctor Frobisher seemed quite apparent to all members of the team.

At that moment Ensign T'Nerr entered the bar. He didn't make eye contact with his colleagues; instead, he was in conversation with another man. He had a handsome quality, in a roguish way, which Laas could not deny. His short black hair and his rugged features made him appear like somebody who had seen much in his time and was not easily unnerved. He wore a weapon's belt loosely around his waist, one hand comfortably resting on his sidearm.

T'Nerr seemed confident and undisturbed, however. Together the two made their way to a quiet table on the opposite side of the bar.

Then Petty Officer McIntyre appeared by the same entrance. The young woman stayed there for a moment and scanned the room. She found the captain and the others and made eye contact with Nora. She gave her a nod and then inconspicuously indicated toward the table where T'Nerr and the man had just taken up seats.

Nora acknowledged and quickly drew Owens' attention to the other table. "I think Skyler and T'Nerr got something."

Michael spotted the Caitian and nodded. "Let's hope it is," he said and stood.

The others followed suit and carefully followed him across the establishment.

Michael stepped up behind the Caitian officer.

The other man, upon seeing Owens approach, slowly drew his weapon and placed it on the table. This caused T'Nerr to turn around and see the captain. They exchanged a glance and the ensign looked back at his conversational partner.

"No need to be alarmed. This is the man I told you about. He makes all the deals," T'Nerr said and stood up to give Micheal his seat. "This is Mister Creegan. He says he might be interested in some sort of arrangement."

Michael nodded and took the chair. Nora and Deen sat to the left and right of him while the Caitian remained close by to keep an eye on them.

"Any sort of arrangement that involves a lot of latinum that is," said Creegan with a smirk, withdrawing his gun. "What am I gonna call you?"

"The name is Owens. This is my associate, Nora," he said pointing at the Bajoran at his right. They had shortly played with the idea of using fake names but had ultimately decided that it wasn't worth the effort. Nobody here knew of them.

But Creegan's focus had shifted to the other woman at the table. "And who might you be?"

"DeMara," she said with a smile. "We would be very interested in what you know. We can provide payment in exchange for information."

Creegan nodded. "I'm sure you can. You have a beautiful smile, sister. Something tells me the rest of you is as marvelous."

"Do you know about the base?" Nora said sharply, forcing Creegan's attention away from Deen.

"Temperamental, aren't we?" he said with a smirk. "You might want to keep your voice down if you are interested in doing business with me."

Nora gritted her teeth, cursing herself for the outburst. She nodded compliantly.

"The question is, do you really know or are we just wasting our time with you? I'm sure we can find plenty of others who'd be interested in our latinum." Michael had decided to try a different approach. It was risky but it would stress how serious they were. He needed results and he needed them soon.

Creegan leaned back in his chair. "Nice try," he said. "But I bet my right hand that you're having the hardest time finding anybody to talk to you in this dump. Hell, I shouldn't even be considering making a deal with you."

"Then why are you?" said DeMara and immediately regretted the new attention it garnered her.

Creegan's smile widened. "Because I'm a damn fool, I guess. Because I could use some extra latinum and mostly," he said and leaned closer to her. "Because I can't resist a pretty smile."

"Very well then," interjected Michael softly. "What do you know and how much is it going to cost us?"

The ruffian tore himself away from DeMara once more to look straight into Michael's blue eyes. He kept his smile. "How much you got?"

\* \* \*

Skyler McIntyre had taken up position by the only entrance to the bar, her steely gaze focused on the table at which Captain Owens and the

others had sat down.

From time to time she let her eyes wander across the room to make sure nobody had the foolhardy idea of trying to ambush the away team. T’Nerr had stayed close to the table itself but she couldn’t see Lieutenant Carlos.

The noisy tavern was making her uncomfortable and not just because it was a security nightmare. It wasn’t easy to ignore the many lecherous glances being thrown her way from various patrons. Considering the number of much more scantily clad females—many of whom she was certain had to be working women—this seemed odd to her. She tried to not let it deter her from keeping her vigilance.

The tall and wiry Trill with a shock of dark-brown hair had been the least bit subtle about his interest in her and she had made him out as a potential threat long before he had consumed enough alcohol to approach her.

He had done so in what he must have felt to be a very subtle manner, by slowly inching down the bar counter. She had seen him from miles away.

“Hey gorgeous, what you say I buy you a drink?”

The Trill McIntyre had encountered over the years had given her the impression that their race was made up of savvy and intelligent individuals. This one seemed to be the exception that proved the rule. The mixture of cheap liquor and strong body odor made her want to gag.

“I’m not thirsty,” she said without ever making eye contact.

She felt relieved when she sensed him turning away. It was a short-lived sensation. He had quickly changed his mind and turned back her way. “I come over here and ask you an innocent question, least you could do is look at me when I speak to you. Or are you too good for that?”

McIntyre sighed and faced the man. “I’m sorry, Mister but I am not thirsty,” she said, took a moment to look him square in the eye, and then turned back around. She slowly moved her hand toward the spot where her weapon was hidden.

The man began to nod with exaggeration. “That’s better. But I can’t say I like your attitude much. All uppity and self-important. Just cuz you got a pretty face don’t make you no better than anyone else in here.

Skyler tensed noticeably. She didn’t need a degree in psychology to realize that this man had issues that could quickly turn violent.

“You ain’t got a drink, you ain’t talking to nobody, what you doing here anyway?” he said and moved a bit closer. “Who you watching,” he added when he followed her glance to the table. “That your boyfriend?”

Skyler forced herself not to laugh. The idea that she and the captain would have a relationship was amusing.

Not that she would have minded. But something told her that she was not at all his type. Not to mention that she knew that Owens would never engage in an intimate affair with a crewmember, especially not an enlisted one who was probably twenty years his junior.

She shook off that particular train of thought and turned back to face the Trill once more. “See here, Mister. I ask you respectfully to leave me be. I do not wish to have a drink with you,” she said and this time kept her eyes on him and tried her best not to sound the least bit uppity or self-important.

“You sure about that? You seem kinda tense.”

“Is there a problem here?”

The sudden voice coming from behind McIntyre almost made her jump. The voice belonged to José Carlos and she was impressed that she had not noticed him approach.

“Who the hell are you?” the man barked.

“That’s my boyfriend,” Skyler said without looking at Carlos. It was a lie, of course, but one that seemed much more plausible, at least to her.

“So what?” the Trill said with a sneer. “I’m just asking if you want a drink. No big deal.”

Carlos took a step forward, positioning himself between the Trill and Skylar. “She isn’t interested.”

“I was talking to her.”

“And now you’re talking to me,” Carlos’s wide shoulders and upper body strength were no match for the wiry Trill who actually shrunk away a little.

A hand slipped onto McIntyre’s shoulder from behind.

“If not him how ‘bout me, love?”

The hand yanked back hard, spinning her around and making her come face to face with a human man with rotten teeth and very little hair. He was brandishing a long knife in his other hand.

Skyler moved fast. The lower part of her palm connected with the man’s chin while at the same time reaching out for his wrist, twisting it until the knife dropped to the floor.

Carlos had spun around and turned his back to the Trill who had now seen his chance and brought his balled fists down hard onto Carlos’ neck causing him to drop to his knees.

Michael had placed a sizeable amount of latinum on the table and right into Creegan's line of sight to keep his interest alive.

His eyes had opened wide when he saw the money. However, the ensuing fight near the entrance was quickly refocusing his attention and Michael didn't miss that his glance had wandered over his shoulder.

"I sure hope those guys aren't friends of yours," he said with a smirk.

Michael turned just in time to see Carlos on the floor and McIntyre facing two ruffians who had begun to circle her.

"Laas," he said without taking his eyes off the scene.

But the Bajoran was already out of her seat with her weapon drawn. As she approached the brawl, she was glad to notice that Carlos was quickly coming around, apparently only slightly dazed. He skillfully avoided a badly placed kick by a thin Trill man and rolled onto his side. His legs slipped between his attacker's and with a quick twist, he brought him down.

Before Nora could reach them, however, a hand grabbed hold of her. She looked down to see that it belonged to a fat Ferengi sitting at a table. He glanced up at her and smiled, revealing two rows of crooked teeth.

"Why don't we let them to their own devices and have some fun ourselves?"

Laas nodded. "Good idea."

The fat Ferengi's smile widened as he stood, still holding the Bajoran's arm. "I say we get out--"

A fist hitting him in the nose cut him off short and he fell backward and over his chair. "That's my idea of having fun."

McIntyre found herself facing two opponents while another had already been neutralized and was lying on the floor beside her, stunned.

The first one, a blue-skinned Bolian, made the mistake of underestimating the young, innocent-looking woman and tried a frontal attack. A high-kick, connecting painfully with his lower jaw ended his plans prematurely and he found himself face down next to the other ruffian.

McIntyre spun around to prepare for the next attack but instead was greeted by the ugly-looking barrel of a very large gun pointed straight at her face.

The wielder, a young Tellarite, laughed when he noticed her confidence slipping away.

Michael who was still watching the spectacle from his chair now jumped to his feet and reached for his weapon. Even as his fingers found the small phaser, he was desperately aware that he was going to be too late to save McIntyre.

A crimson energy beam ripped through the bar and connected with the shoulder of the gun-wielding Tellarite, forcefully pushing him backward.

McIntyre took a breath and found her savior. The shooter had been T'Nerr who now stood on a table at the opposite end of the bar. It took him just one powerful jump, leaping through the air like a wildcat, to land right next to her.

"Thanks."

"Don't mention it," he said and pointed his weapon at two other ruffians who had just entered the bar and now reached for their weapons.

McIntyre had pulled out her phaser and used it to keep another attacker at bay who was approaching from the opposite direction, her back pressed against T'Nerr's.

Carlos had gotten onto his feet and joined the two. Meanwhile, more of the patrons had left their seats and were beginning to close in on the heavily outnumbered trio.

DeMara, now standing as well, tried to approach the scene of the fight but was held back by one of the many other patrons in the tavern. The short man didn't get a chance to take a good look at the Tenarian, however, as he was struck down by Creegan.

She turned to look at her unlikely rescuer with surprise.

"You people sure are trouble," he said with his crooked grin. He took a small step closer.

She tried to avoid him but her only escape route was now blocked by the bar counter.

"You're something special, aren't you?" he said and reached for her hood. "I wonder what you're hiding."

Creegan froze before he had a chance to reveal her face. He felt a cold metallic device push against his temple.

"I suggest you reconsider your next move," said Nora coolly.

Creegan's hands went up. "Hey, can't blame a fellow for trying," he said. He gave DeMara one last smirk and then promptly disappeared

within the quickly growing crowd.

Michael had almost reached his trapped team when he noticed a large Klingon picking up a chair just to smash it into pieces over a table, leaving him with a dangerous-looking spike.

The Klingon slowly approached the security detail while using the surrounding crowd as cover. Just as he found a gap to launch his attack from, Michael had climbed a table and jumped onto the man's back, pulling them both to the ground. Michael's boot found the Klingon's face, knocking him out cold with one vicious kick.

A bulky woman wielding a large and menacing rifle approached the increasingly expanding ring of onlookers and pushed them aside with her weapon. "What the hell is going on? Stop this! You morons are destroying my bar!"

Michael got back to his feet and quickly turned to the woman. "We need the backdoor, now!"

She sneered at him. "You're the ones making all the trouble here."

Michael knew he didn't have the time to argue with her. Out of the corner of his eye, he could spot two ruffians trying to reach Carlos and McIntyre while T'Nerr was having difficulties keeping the armed men by the door from attacking.

He pointed at the table he had sat at earlier and was relieved to find that the latinum was still sitting there, as yet undiscovered by the distracted patrons and troublemakers.

The woman's eyes opened wide. She nodded slowly. "There is an exit behind the counter. Hurry up," she spat and pushed some of the ruffians away as she began to break up the crowd surrounding Carlos and the others. "Anybody feel bold enough to find out what this little firecracker can do?" she shouted at them. A pleased grin came over her face when some of the troublemakers began to back off.

Michael stepped next to her, addressing his trapped people. "Let's get out of here," he said and gestured to the bar counter.

The trio nodded and slowly made its way in that direction while Michael watched carefully to make sure nobody tried to ambush their retreat. When he turned, he found Nora and DeMara already heading for the back exit. There was no sign of Creegan. Carlos and the others reached the large wooden counter and one by one hopped over it to make it to a door at the other side.

DeMara and Nora did the same and Michael took small backward steps toward the others, suddenly very much aware that all eyes in the bar were focused on him.

He decided not to waste any more time and hurried to the backdoor.

Moments later he and the entire away team had escaped the establishment, finding themselves in a narrow alleyway behind the tavern.

Michael took a deep breath and looked at his people. "Everybody all right?"

"I think so," said Nora once she had made sure that Carlos, McIntyre, and T'Nerr had not been wounded in the fight.

"Michael."

He looked at DeMara and found her gesturing to the far end of the alleyway. He turned just in time to see Creegan pass by before he disappeared.

Michael was not willing to give up on Creegan just yet. The man had been right after all. So far, nobody else on Eteron had been willing to deal with them. He could have been their only chance to find Frobisher.

He looked to Carlos. "José, shadow him. See where he's going and report back."

The man nodded and without another word rushed down the alley to catch up with Creegan.

"We lost all our latinum," said Nora. "Any ideas of how to sway him now?"

"I might know a way," said DeMara and looked straight at the Bajoran. "But you're not going to like it."

\* \* \*

"There are other options available other than moving back to Vulcan. I see no reason why you could not join me here on *Eagle*."

"And do what exactly?" said Nakaar. Xylion's statement had been directed at K'tera but that hadn't stopped the other man to intrude into their conversation.

All three of them had assembled in K'tera's quarters. Xylion had decided to make one last effort to convince the woman who had been chosen to marry him to fulfill her obligation. He had, however, not expected to find Nakaar already present, who apparently had also decided to speak to K'tera in hopes to reaffirm his own proposition.

K'tera had been suspiciously silent since Xylion had arrived. She was seated in a chair, her eyes closed but attentively listening to both men.

Xylion glanced at Nakaar. "There are many positions available on this vessel which she could fulfill if she so desired."

"K'tera is not interested in living on a Starfleet ship. She is too much like myself," he said and looked at her calm, unmoving face. "What she desires is to be free from any and all obligations and to be able to move through life at her own pace."

"And you are able to offer her that opportunity?"

Nakaar nodded. "Indeed. I am surprised that you cannot see that, Mister Xylion. It is plainly obvious that K'tera and I are meant to be together in ways that you and she could never be."

"It is not your place to make that assessment," Xylion said, his voice remaining much more neutral in tone.

Nakaar approached K'tera and gently brushed her shoulder-long hair. It was an insult directed at Xylion. He knew that the habitual Vulcan would never have gone as far as making physical contact with K'tera. But if Xylion was bothered by the gesture, he hid it well.

K'tera herself didn't attempt to stop him nor did she react in any manner to this intimate move.

Nakaar looked up. "If you care for her, truly care for her, you would let her make her own decision. You would not stand in the way of her happiness."

"I doubt that she would find happiness if she were to decide to ignore her obligations."

Nakaar was about to reply but the sound of the door chime cut him short.

K'tera opened her eyes and looked at the door. It took another chime before she spoke. "Come in."

The doors slid apart and So'Dan Leva entered the room.

Nakaar sighed when he noticed the half-Romulan. "I guess now we are all here."

Gene Edison entered the quarters after Leva and immediately felt uneasy when he realized that the room was already crowded.

Xylion noticed the weapons both officers were wearing and he shot the first officer a curious look. Edison chose to ignore it for the moment and at least until he was sure himself of what was going on.

K'tera stood. "This is not a good time, So'Dan."

"No, I think this is a perfect time," Nakaar said quickly and took a step toward the tactical officer. "Have you come to claim what you think belongs to you now?"

"We have come for you," Leva said.

"What is all this about?" said K'tera with puzzlement evident in her voice. It had been the first time she had shown any signs of emotions since this particular conversation had begun.

"That's what I would like to know," Edison said.

"Isn't it obvious, Commander?" said Nakaar with a crooked smile. "It is that Romulan instinct in him. He knows that he is about to lose K'tera and he has come to fight for her."

"You would know a few things about those instincts," Leva said, staring the man right in the eyes.

Nakaar ignored the statement and turned back to K'tera. "Do you really think she would be interested in you? She has made her choice a long time ago."

K'tera considered Nakaar's for a moment. She tore herself away from him to face Leva. "I am sorry, So'. He is right," she looked at Xylion. "I need to do this. I have to be able to make my own decisions."

Leva didn't know how Xylion felt about hearing her words but he could not deny the pain it caused himself. Regardless of why he had come to K'tera's quarters, he had not wanted their relationship to end. Even if his rational mind had tried to convince him that there was no future for them, he desperately wanted to believe that there was a chance for them. It had never been clearer to him. He was in love with her.

For a moment that love was all he could think about. It filled him with rage. Rage directed not at K'tera but at the man who wanted to take her away from him. "She will not be yours."

"Please, don't do this. I am sorry for what happened between us. I truly am. But it was wrong. We both knew that there couldn't be a future for us," said K'tera, her eyes now pleading.

Leva shook his head. "You don't mean that. You have a third option, remember?"

Nakaar turned to the first officer. It wasn't difficult to tell that Edison was very uncomfortable at being thrown right into the middle of a love triangle. "Commander, I assure you that there is no need for you to be here. Our negotiations will end in three days after which K'tera and I will leave your ship."

Edison nodded. He shot a glance at Leva but his mind seemed to be somewhere else entirely. His eyes lost in K'tera's. He was glad for the chance to be able to leave and edged toward the exit.

"Where will you go?" said Xylion.

"Away from here," Nakaar said and looked at K'tera. "We both have the desire to travel and see the galaxy."

Leva's eyes focused on Nakaar like twin lasers. "I hear Romulus is lovely this time of year."

Xylion raised an eyebrow.

Edison froze just as he had reached the exit.

Nakaar looked at Leva with disbelief and so did K'tera.

"Commander?" Edison stepped back into the room.

"It is on the list of places you were planning to visit in the near future, is it not?"

"What are you saying?" said Nakaar his smile threatening to drop off his face as he placed himself closer to the woman he was planning to marry.

"Yes, what exactly are you saying, Commander?" the first officer said.

"Your interest in me, your interest in *Eagle's* systems, your more than atypical behavior for a Vulcan—"

Nakaar laughed out loud in a fit of apparent amusement. "And all that leads you to believe that I am not? I am sorry for you Mister Leva. Your blind desire for this woman has completely clouded your judgment and your reasoning."

"I disagree. I think it has sharpened my mind," he said, glaring at Nakaar, his hand moving for his phaser.

Edison was becoming increasingly impatient. "Commander, you'd better explain yourself. And do it quickly."

Leva didn't even seem to register Edison or the urgency that had crept into his voice. Instead, his eyes remained fixed on the man he had accused. He stepped away from the first officer, beginning to close in on the other man.

"You could have gotten away with this. But you made a mistake."

Nakaar's smile did not waver. "Very well then, I will play your little game, Commander. Do tell, what gave me away?"

"Intimidating the doctor. Of course, you didn't want her to investigate the real reason for this mission but your approach was clumsy. You scared her half to death; I could see it in her eyes."

Nakaar looked at the first officer. "Commander, I hope you are getting all this. I hope everybody here is listening intently. I fear I shall need witnesses."

Edison had heard enough. "Mister Leva, I sincerely hope that these are not baseless accusations. Mister Nakaar is a senior official and if you don't have evidence—"

Leva cut him off. "But your biggest mistake was that you failed to destroy this," he said and presented the tricorder he held.

"I will not listen to this any longer," said K'tera and moved away. But Nakaar reached for her arm and held her close.

"Please, stay. I find this whole affair rather amusing."

"When you entered sickbay that day to scare off the doctor, she scanned you for just a moment. Can you guess what the analysis of that data showed?"

There was a moment of silence in the room. All eyes now rested on Nakaar. And then, as if having been punched in the face, his smile disappeared.

Xylion was the first to react.

He took a few quick steps toward K'tera to get her away from him. But Nakaar had anticipated the move. He spun around while still holding the Vulcan woman and used his free hand to lurch out against Xylion's chest. The impact of the blow caused the science officer to stumble backward.

Leva and Edison drew their weapons but by the time they took aim, Nakaar had spun around again to face them both, using K'tera like a puppet and moving her to shield himself.

"Let me go," she cried and tried to fight against his grip but with no success.

Nakaar ignored her pleas and instead focused on Leva. "I must say, I underestimated you. Perhaps there is hope for you yet."

"There is no hope for you," he said. "Give yourself up."

Nakaar removed a tiny weapon that he had been hiding somewhere under his tunic and pushed it against the back of K'tera's neck.



"You should know that a true Romulan always has a contingency plan. If I release my finger from this trigger, she will die instantly. I hope it won't come to that," he said as he moved toward the door with K'tera firmly held in front of him.

"There is no place for you to go," said Edison.

"That remains to be seen," he replied as the doors opened behind him to let him slip through.

Edison and Leva followed him out of the corridor. Moments later they were joined by Xylion as well.

Edison looked at Leva. "Why didn't you tell me you had solid evidence?"

"Because I didn't."

Nakaar stopped, considered the tactical officer, and uttered a heartfelt laugh. "You continue to surprise me, Mister Leva. That tricorder doesn't contain anything, does it?"

"It didn't get a chance to scan you long enough. You implicated yourself."

The man continued down the corridor. A few crewmembers stopped and stared but Edison quickly gestured for them to clear the way and not to interfere.

Nakaar's tactic was working. They could not risk making a move as his weapon would possibly kill K'tera the moment he'd let go of it.

"I can't believe I let you fool me this easily, Nakaar. That's not even your real name, is it?" she said as she was being dragged along against her will.

He continued to move backward and towards a corridor intersection with K'tera held firmly in place in front of him. He moved his head until their cheeks were side by side. "The reason you believed me is because I was honest with you. At least as far as my feelings for you are concerned. Trust me, I hate that it had to come to this."

"Then let me go."

"But you can't do that, can you? Because your duty is more important to you than her life," said Leva.

Nakaar glanced up at the half-Romulan, anger now brimming in his dark eyes. "My offer still stands," he said and looked back at K'tera. "You can still come with me and get away from all this."

Now it was K'tera's turn to laugh. "You must be joking."

"I'm sorry you think that way. And I'm sorry for what must happen now."

Leva jumped forward. "No!"

Nakaar forcefully pushed K'tera away from him. She flew across the corridor and toward Leva. When he saw her approach, he tried to reach out for her so he could move her out of the line of fire. But all his hopes were crushed the instance he heard the discharge of a weapon.

K'tera's eyes opened wide in shock and she collapsed forward, landing in Leva's arms.

Edison couldn't get a clear shot as K'tera's body was blocking his own line of fire. By the time she was out of the way, Nakaar was gone. He had disappeared down the corner the moment after he had fired his weapon.

"Commander Edison to security, find and detain delegate Nakaar immediately. Be aware he is armed and dangerous."

Xylion was at K'tera's side right away. While the now kneeling Leva held her in his arms and stared into her empty eyes, the Vulcan inspected the gashing wound that poured out green blood on her back.

"She requires immediate medical attention," Xylion said and looked at the first officer.

Edison nodded. "Medical emergency on deck seven. Beam delegate K'tera directly to sickbay."

Before the transporter could get a lock on the Vulcan woman, Leva tore himself away from her. It was perhaps one of the most difficult things he ever had to do as he watched her and Xylion dematerialize in front of his eyes, leaving her to an undetermined fate.

But he knew that there was nothing he could do for her now. The only thing left was to stop the man who had done this to her.

*"Ensign Trinik to Commander Edison."*

"Go ahead, Ensign," the first officer said.

*"Sir, we are unable to locate Mister Nakaar on internal sensors,"* the tactical officer said from the bridge.

"Understood. Instruct security to begin a manual sweep of the ship, starting with this deck. Shut down all transporters and shuttle bays. Edison out," he said and turned to Leva. "There is no place for him to go. We'll find him."

But he wasn't listening. He reached for the phaser he had dropped earlier and gripped it resolutely.

He knew where he had to go and he knew what he had to do. There was no time to waste and without another word he was on his way,

heading in the opposite direction to the one Nakaar had taken.

# Nine: Face-To-Face

Creegan wasn't a coward.

Quite the contrary. He was known for making use of his blaster on more than a few occasions even when the odds had not been stacked in his favor.

He possessed a calculative mind and once he arrived at the conclusion that a substantial profit was to be made by quick action he would usually not hesitate to use force.

When the first signs of violence had emerged at the tavern, he had decided that taking sides held no benefit for him.

He couldn't deny that he had been interested in a deal with the strangers but helping them would not have been worth it. After all, he had business ties of some sort or other with most of the patrons who frequented that establishment. Ties he did not want to endanger by defending people he hardly knew. So instead of getting caught in the crossfire, he had made for a quick exit.

There had been something unusual about the strangers and even though it seemed unlikely that he would see them again, he couldn't shake the feeling that something about them was not quite right.

On Eteron, of course, most were not who they claimed to be. Many were escaped criminals and convicts who had come here to start a new life. Others had simply shed their previous identities for whatever reason and planned on getting rich fast by trading illegal goods across the Romulan or Klingon border.

His mind was still preoccupied with his would-be business partners when he entered a rundown apartment building at the outer edge of the city. Like most others, it was not much more than a sleek four-sided tower that had been constructed in a hurry a few decades ago and saw just enough maintenance to keep it from collapsing on itself.

Creegan walked off the elevator on the eighteenth floor, greeted a few of his neighbors who knew as little about him as he knew about them, turned a corner, and then froze.

His first instinct upon seeing a person close to the door of his apartment was to draw his weapon. As he did so, he slowly took a few steps back and toward the corner. The person in the dark cloak was looking in the opposite direction and had not spotted him yet.

There were several gangsters and ruffians out there he had crossed over the years. He cursed himself for not having been more careful. But before he had reached the safety of the corner he stopped again, realizing that the figure was distinctly female and that he had seen that cloak before.

She turned and Creegan's suspicions were affirmed when he caught a few glances at the face hidden under the deep hood.

He holstered his weapon and slowly approached her. But not before making sure that they were alone in the corridor. "DeMara, right?"

The woman nodded. "I'm sorry for startling you but I had to see you again," she said in that kind of voice that could make somebody believe that she had known him all his life and not just a couple of hours.

"Who's startled?" he said, trying to maintain his cool. "How did you know where I live?"

"I followed you," she said. It was a lie but even if Creegan realized it, at that moment he didn't much care.

"Where're your friends?"

"They're not my friends. They're more... business associates. And our business has ended. That's why I have come to you."

Creegan studied the woman from top to bottom. Her simple robe did not give away much of what was underneath. It was her lips that fascinated him the most. And he watched them carefully as she spoke. He didn't understand why so little of her could fascinate him so much. He had to see more.

And as if she could read his mind, DeMara threw back the hood. "I require your help."

But Creegan didn't hear. He stood as if petrified while he glanced at the most beautiful woman he had ever laid eyes upon. Her physical appearance alone was mesmerizing but her beauty was not just skin deep, it seemed to radiate from every pore of her skin.

"You're..." Creegan tried to speak but the words would not come over his lips as he continued to stare at her. "What exactly are you?" he said after a moment.

She smiled and his pulse began to race faster.

"I'm Tenarian."

Creegan nodded slowly. He had heard of Tenarians before but he had never encountered one. In fact, he had believed them to be nothing more than a myth.

DeMara Deen turned when she heard footsteps approach. "Perhaps we could continue this conversation in your apartment."

"Yes," was all he managed to say before he moved to the entrance and turned back around to make sure she was still there. She gave him another reassuring smile and he quickly entered a code into the door panel.

The heavy door slid open with a loud hissing sound and Creegan stepped aside to let Deen enter first. As soon as she was inside, he quickly checked the corridor one more time before following her and locking the door behind him.

Creegan's apartment was a simple one-bedroom design and it perfectly mirrored his lifestyle. Sparsely decorated, containing nothing of value or interest that could not be packed into a bag quickly for a hasty departure. It contained only the most necessary furniture and it was dirty. Creegan didn't believe in housekeeping; glasses, bottles, and a few clothes littered the entirety of his small, dark dwelling.

Deen seemed completely undisturbed by the messy surroundings.

Creegan, however, felt a sudden sense of shame of having her exposed to his dirty quarters, clearly an environment entirely unbecoming of a woman of such grace and beauty.

He quickly began to pick up the pieces of clothing that were scattered on the floor. "I'm sorry for the mess. I had to let my maid go."

Deen smirked to herself as she watched Creegan pick up every last bit of his wardrobe only to dump it unceremoniously into the adjacent bedroom.

He awkwardly turned back to face her. "I usually do not conduct my business here."

Something in the way he said that led her to believe that by business he meant more than just deals involving trade negotiations.

"There is a great place... well, a decent place, around the corner we could go to."

Deen took a small step toward Creegan. "This will do," she said with a smile.

He nodded. "Can I offer you something? A drink?" he turned to look for a bottle before she could answer. He inspected a few glasses that lay on the floor. "I'm sure I have a clean one here somewhere."

"I'm not particularly thirsty."

Creegan stopped and looked at her. His face seemed to mirror a small amount of disappointment. Then his eyes opened wide and for a second she was worried that she might have made a big mistake in coming here.

He took a quick step closer to her, causing Deen to take one back. But he wasn't focusing on her. Instead, he passed her by and reached for a bottle containing a brown liquid that sat on a shelf by the far wall. He opened the bottle and was about to gulp it when he noticed Deen's eyes watching him intently.

"Uhm, do you mind?"

DeMara smiled, amused.

A sigh of relief seemed to come over his face and he quickly proceeded to take a large gulp from the clearly alcoholic beverage. When he put the bottle down again, he appeared to be much more composed, his eyes mirroring a focus that hadn't been there before.

"Boy, when I assumed that you had a beautiful face, I didn't realize how much of an understatement that would be."

The Tenarian woman didn't blush easily but this time she didn't even make an effort to hide it.

"Now," he said and pointed at a seat that he hastily cleared for her. He continued once she had sat down. "What brings a woman like you to Eteron? And more importantly into my most humble residence?"

"You already know why I'm here."

He nodded slowly. "The Romulan base. I guess I might have hoped that you had another reason for showing up at my doorstep," he said and grinned. "But then I guess somebody like you would never..." he stopped himself as he realized how embarrassing he was beginning to sound.

She seemed to be paying no attention to his image concerns. "You do know where it is, don't you?"

Creegan's face hardened slightly. He was alone with the woman of his dreams. Or at least the woman he would have dreamed about if he could have been able to imagine her.

She was a sight to behold in every respect. And yet he now realized that for all her beauty and her charms, she was here for nothing more than a business transaction. He chose to turn his back on her. A choice that turned out to be more difficult than he had anticipated.

"Perhaps," he said. "Why do you need to find it?"

"I have a personal reason that I'd rather not reveal," she said sweetly. "It is very important to me to find it. My previous associates failed me but I was hoping that perhaps you could help me."

"I might be able to take you there," he said. He couldn't believe his own words. That had not been part of his plan. Actually, he didn't have a plan but even if he did, his thoughtless proposal would not have been part of it.

He turned back around, longing to see her purple eyes and golden hair again. He found her standing. She had taken off her robe to reveal a white and blue suit she wore underneath. It was a seamless outfit and it clung to her body, accentuating her feminine form. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he heard a small voice of caution, warning him not to be manipulated by this siren. He chose to ignore it.

"I could take you there."

She stepped closer and noticed the small pearls of sweat forming on his forehead and even the increased beating of his heart inside his chest. She put both her hands on his chest and they slowly began to move upward across his muscular body. Her purple eyes began to gleam as they made contact with his.

Creegan swallowed. He couldn't explain what was happening to him. He had been no stranger to dealings with the opposite sex, both in business and in pleasure, sometimes at the same time. On a few occasions competing female smugglers had tried to sway his mind by using their sensuality and sometimes it had resulted in profitable endeavors. But this didn't even come close to any of those encounters. He was completely under her spell and he didn't mind at all.

Her hands had reached his face and gently touched the stubble on his chin and cheeks. Her hands were warm and soft. She smiled at him as she reached around his neck.

"What are you doing?" he said, his voice threatening to crack. He was lost in her sparkling eyes that seemed to lure him with promises of an experience he couldn't possibly regret and certainly would never forget.

She didn't reply. Instead, her lips made contact with his. He found no strength whatsoever to resist and they kissed.

Creegan became slightly dizzy but it wasn't discomforting in the least. He seemed to lose all perception of time and when the kiss was over, all he wanted to do was to feel it again. But as he moved in, she moved away. He looked at her like she had taken away the very air he needed to breathe.

"Where is the base?"

"Shakanara System. Third planet," he said without even thinking.

She smiled again and moved back in to give him another kiss. She broke it and she pushed her head close to his ear. "I'm sorry," she said.

"Don't be."

She took a few steps back to get some distance from him and considered him for a moment. Her smile gone.

He looked back with a startled expression. And then he understood. Anger was beginning to dwell inside of him. "You used me."

"I'm sorry," she said again. "It was necessary." She picked up her cloak and began to slip back into it.

"I'm a damned fool," he said and turned away, his fists balling in anger.

"Don't say that," she said now mostly concealed again. "For what it's worth, I do like you."

Creegan laughed. "Oh, yes?" he turned back around.

She nodded slowly. "But I have to go now."

His hand moved to his hip and onto the handle of his weapon. "You think you can come in here, put me under your siren spell and trick me into giving you information and then just walk out? How stupid do you think I am?"

She took a step closer again and he unholstered his weapon. "I don't think you are stupid at all. But I know you're not going to shoot me."

He held his blaster close to his hip but it was unmistakably pointed at her now. "Are you willing to bet your life on that, sister?"

She seemed undeterred by his gesture of force. She ignored the weapon completely and locked eyes with him. "Believe it or not, I think you're a good man. I think that you made a few bad decisions here or there and that you wear a mask to survive the life you live now. But I don't think it is who you really are. I don't think it's who you want to be."

Creegan sneered. "You don't know the first thing about me."

She reached out and against his better judgment, Creegan let her touch him once again. Her palm pressed against his chest. For a moment it seemed as though she could see right through him and into his very soul.

"Perhaps not," she finally said and looked up at him. "Perhaps you will shoot me in the back while I walk out. I suppose I can only hope that you'll make the right decision for both our sakes."

She retracted her hand and turned to the door leading back outside. She hesitated for a moment.

Creegan pointed his weapon at her back and took a deep breath. He wasn't proud of it but he had shot people in the back before. He had done this knowing for certain that they would not have hesitated to do the same to him. Why he was hesitating now, he wasn't sure.

Then the door opened and DeMara Deen was gone.

Slowly Creegan holstered his weapon. He had been seduced and tricked but the feeling was not as miserable as he had expected it to be. Somehow, he felt relieved. A smile came over his face. And all he could think of was that kiss. Her words had been inconsequential, of course. She had spoken them in a desperate attempt to keep him from cutting her down. But then why did they suddenly ring so true?

He came to the conclusion that he could not have her walk out of his life that easily. She was too precious. He stormed out of his quarters but didn't get very far. Before he had even crossed the threshold, he was greeted by the muzzle of a phaser rifle, pointed straight at his head.

He recognized the wielder immediately. It was DeMara's Bajoran associate from the tavern.

He ignored her and the weapon and instead looked around for the woman who had just left his apartment. She was nowhere to be seen. The only people in the corridor were the Bajoran, the Caitian, and another young woman, all armed with rifles, all pointed right at him.

"Where is she?" he said, seemingly oblivious to the danger.

"She's gone," Nora Laas said.

Creegan let out a heavy sigh.

The Bajoran did not miss the apparent serenity of his demeanor even while being threatened to have his head blown off. She could only imagine what DeMara Deen must have done to him.

"You are a very lucky man."

Nora gestured her companions to move out which they promptly did.

She looked at him a little while longer and when she was determined that he no longer posed a threat she lowered her rifle and quickly followed her people.

"I know," he sighed as he watched them disappear around the corner.

Nora caught up with her outside the building.

"What happened to the signal? Did the communicator malfunction?"

She had put the hood back up again and aimed a wry little smile at her. "There are other ways to disarm a man besides using force," she said.

The Bajoran security officer gave her a puzzled expression.

She ignored it. Instead, she presented the combadge she had been hiding inside her robe. She tapped it slightly. "Deen to Owens. I have the information. We are ready to beam back onboard."

While Deen and the rest of the away team dematerialized she wondered if she'd had any positive effect on Creegan whatsoever.

She had not enjoyed lying to him but she had been honest with him once she had acquired what she had come for. She hoped that there was a small chance that he would take her words to heart. She was certain that the chances were anything but marginal.

\* \* \*

The *Agamemnon*'s secondary shuttle bay was not a vast facility but it was large enough to comfortably hold the four medium-sized shuttle crafts that had been lined up on the flight deck.

This was no standard way of storing the small vessels on any Starfleet ship and So'Dan assumed that they had been readied for a routine inspection. The technicians and engineers were curiously nowhere in sight. *Eagle*'s tactical officer had a sneaking suspicion as to why that was.

He drew his weapon and cautiously approached the nearest vessel.

It would have been prudent to have informed the ship's security team of his presence on *Agamemnon*. Not to mention his own superior officer.

In fact, regulations demanded that he did. But he had decided against doing so. His Starfleet training and sense of duty taking a back seat to his personal need for satisfaction on this occasion.

It wasn't just revenge.

He didn't know K'tera's condition even though judging by the look in her eyes when she had been shot, he feared the worst.

He had forced himself to ban thoughts of the woman he was in love with out of his mind to focus on catching Nakaar before he got away.

It was more than revenge. He had to prove something. He had to show that he was not about to be outsmarted by his own kind. He was not going to let Nakaar, or whatever his name was, get back to Romulus so he could demonstrate that Starfleet's tamed Romulan was as weak and susceptible as they perceived the rest of the Federation to be.

So far, he had been one step ahead of him. He had put the dots together and found him out, clearly long before he had intended to conclude his mission. Now So'Dan was certain he had figured out his exit strategy as well.

It was what young Culsten had said that had put him on this path. The helmsman had apparently followed the Romulan spy all across the ship to seemingly unrelated destinations.

But So'Dan was certain that he had been working on a way to swiftly escape *Eagle* if the occasion called for it. Even though he had not accessed any vital systems directly—that would have aroused too much suspicion—he had instead made discreet modifications to several of *Eagle's* subsystems. This way he had been able to beam off the ship undetected even once the ship had been put on high alert.

That his destination would be *Agamemnon*, So'Dan had surmised after Culsten had found out that he had made a few trips to the other ship since *Eagle* had arrived at Farga, no doubt to prepare for a quick escape and sabotage systems the way he had done on *Eagle*. His cover as a Vulcan delegate with an interest in starships had allowed him virtually unlimited access to both vessels.

From *Agamemnon*, he obviously had intended to steal a shuttlecraft and disappear before anybody had even figured out that he was no longer on *Eagle*. He had to admit, it had been a cunning plan. But So'Dan was going to make dead certain it would fail.

He reached one of the shuttles and quickly determined that only one of the four ships was likely prepared for departure, while the other three were decoys, perhaps even sabotaged.

He didn't get the chance to find the right shuttle when he was distracted by the large hangar bay door starting to open, dispensing any last shreds of doubt that his theory had been wrong.

He spun around to find the windows to the control room on the upper deck from where the doors were usually operated and brought his phaser to bear. But there was nobody there. The room looked empty from where he stood.

"Nakaar!" he yelled, his voice reverberating from the high, walls of the shuttle bay.

*"To be honest, you didn't make much of an impression on me when we first met."*

The familiar voice was coming from behind him. He instantly whipped around. Besides the neatly lined up shuttles, he found the bay still empty.

*"A half-Romulan. A bastard child. With inferior human blood mixing with Romulan. What good could you possibly be?"*

Nakaar's voice was coming from somewhere between those shuttles but he couldn't be sure which ones. He slowly approached the hatch of the first vessel, his weapon at the ready.

*"Turns out, you surprised me. Twice."*

He pushed his back against the outer hull of the shuttle and then quickly shot around toward the open hatch.

Empty.

*"I admit I misjudged you, So'Dan. You should consider coming back with me. A man of your talents could go far in the Star Empire."*

So'Dan checked the space in between the parked shuttles. Still no sign of the spy.

*"And work alongside cowards the likes of you? I think I'm going to pass."*

There was a moment of silence. So'Dan stopped, trying to hone his hearing, trying to locate footsteps or breathing.

*"I know it doesn't mean much but I had genuine feelings for her as well. I regret that it had come to this but I had no choice."*

*"You're wrong. It means absolutely nothing."*

He had no luck. He could not locate Nakaar simply by following his voice, the echo was too distracting.

*"I can hear that passion in your voice. You might want to deny it but you're still Romulan. And I know you secretly long to be with your own people again. It is not too late, So'Dan."*

"For a spy, it is amazing how badly informed you are," he said as he checked the empty cockpit of the third shuttle. He had perhaps answered a little bit too rapidly. A sense of insecurity washed over him that he desperately tried to suppress.

The truth was that he had never really felt comfortable living on Earth being surrounded by humans. He had spent most of his childhood on a Romulan colony, being raised as a Romulan. Even though it had sometimes been a cruel experience, due to his underdeveloped Romulan features that had often caused other children to torment him, it had been all he had known for a long time.

"Why don't you behave like a real Romulan and come out and fight me?" he yelled, trying to drown out the thoughts that had invaded his mind.

Nakaar's laugh echoed throughout the bay. *"You mistake Romulan cunningness for thoughtless Klingon belligerence."*

And then he heard something drop to the floor behind him. Out of the corner of his eye, he realized that whatever the small device was, it was flashing. His instincts took over and he jumped forward and away from it.

A heartbeat later it exploded and within seconds an impenetrable white fog began to cloud his vision.

He landed harshly on the hard floor. Ignoring the pain as best he could, he flipped onto his back, set his weapon to a wide beam setting, and fired in the only direction he figured would make any sense. At the roofs of the parked shuttles.

He couldn't see where he was firing but a loud clatter confirmed that he had been right. He didn't hear the satisfactory thud of a body falling, however, and he instantly assumed he hadn't hit Nakaar directly.

Moments later two feet landed on the floor. From the sound of it, he knew that it had been a controlled jump. He swiveled around to bring his weapon to bear in the direction he thought he had landed. But it was too late.

A dark shadow emerged from the white fog in front of him. Nakaar jumped him and pulled him to the ground, his phaser dropping out of his hand.

A well-placed blow against his windpipe left him gasping for air.

"I will take you with me to Romulus. What a prize you'll be," Nakaar said as he pinned him to the floor.

So'Dan started feeling lightheaded, as his air supply was being cut off and for a moment, he thought it was over.

Then his outstretched hand made contact with a familiar shape nearby. It was his phaser. Unfortunately, the grip of the weapon was just out of reach and he could only hold on to the emitter cone.

Nakaar increased the pressure on his neck, determined to strangle him to death.

There was no time left. Any move could be his last. With all his remaining strength he clenched the weapon at an awkward angle and brought it down hard against Nakaar's skull.

He heard a satisfactory thud and moan from the other man.

The pressure disappeared almost instantly.

As his vision slowly returned, he could see that the force of the impact had pushed Nakaar off of him. He reached out for the dazed man who had landed on the floor. But Nakaar was already getting back to his feet, freeing himself easily from So'Dan's attempt to hold onto him.

He was still mostly preoccupied with getting air back into his lungs, fighting for every breath, he watched helplessly as Nakaar stumbled toward one of the shuttles.

Green blood was pouring out of a gashing wound on his head. He had seemingly decided that he was in no condition to continue to fight and that his best bet was to make a run for it.

So'Dan was probably in worse shape. His vision still not fully restored and breathing remaining painful, he managed to get onto his feet nevertheless. He found his phaser again and ignored the pain as he picked it up.

He lifted his arm and fired. The unsteady shot went wide and missed Nakaar completely.

When he took aim again, the spy had already stepped inside the vessel and the outer hatch was beginning to close. The shuttlecraft took off quickly and moved toward the open hangar door.

So'Dan began to slowly follow the shuttle as though he could somehow chase it down and stop it by sheer will alone. He fired his weapon again but the beam intensity had no hopes of causing damage to the hull of the small starship other than leaving a scorch mark.

Before he could adjust the phaser to a higher power setting, the shuttle accelerated, slipped through the force field and into open space.

So'Dan walked as far as the force field separating the ship's atmosphere and the vacuum of outer space allowed.

A small smile crept onto his lips when he saw the flash of the shuttle's warp engines powering up and it disappeared in a flash of light.

\* \* \*

As the *Nebuchadrezzar* zipped through space at warp four, closing in on its destination, Michael, Nora Laas, and DeMara had assembled in the front of the vessel.

DeMara had opened up a star chart of the Shakanara system on one of the monitors and all three were now studying it intently.

It featured a small central star and four planets. A medium-sized asteroid belt sat at the outer edge of the system.

She pointed at the asteroids. "According to previous surveys, these asteroids are extremely rich in both kelbonite and tricyanate, making it almost impossible to accurately scan the system with long-range sensors. If I wanted to hide a secret base, this is the system I'd choose. Not sure why I didn't think of this sooner."



“Isn’t tricyanate toxic?” said Nora.

DeMara shook her head. “Not if we don’t stay too close to the asteroids for long.”

Michael turned back to the controls. “In that case, you better prepare some anti-radiation shots.”

Nora looked at him in surprise. “Captain?”

“I intend to drop us out of warp right next to the asteroid field.”

DeMara nodded. “A tricky maneuver but it just might hide our approach.”

“That’s what I was thinking.”

“We’re closing on Shakanara. Thirty seconds,” DeMara said while keeping her eyes fixed on the read-outs. “You better be spot on with your calculations.”

Nora leaned forward. “Just out of curiosity, what happens if the calculations are off?”

She glanced at the monitor that still showed the chart. “You see those asteroids?”

Nora nodded.

“We’ll end up inside one of them.”

The security officer looked like she was sorry she’d asked. She leaned back in her chair, bracing herself for the upcoming brush with death that was so completely out of her hands.

Seconds later she felt the familiar sensation of the inertia dampers adjusting to a significant change in speed and then, all of a sudden, the small runabout was surrounded by asteroid fragments twice its size. And just like that the dreaded event was over.

Nora let out a small sigh of relief. “Nice job, sir.”

He turned around in his chair, a large grin plastered on his face. “Thanks. And to think I’ve never even tried this before.”

Nora’s eyes opened wider.

“Michael.”

He turned back around to see what she had found. She directed his attention to another monitor. The picture was not perfectly clear, the static was no doubt caused by the surrounding radiation, but it was just good enough to make out a yellow planet and a distinctly shaped satellite in its orbit.

Michael looked up to see the same yellow planet through the window of the runabout. It was much smaller, of course, as they were still thousands of kilometers away. From this distance, he could not spot the satellite but he knew that it was there. They had come to the right place.

“Now what do we do?” said DeMara.

“If we approach directly, they would undoubtedly see us coming and prepare a warm reception,” said the Bajoran.

“There might be another way,” said DeMara and went to work at her console. “I’m detecting a small freighter that will enter the system in about forty-four minutes.”

“No doubt supplying the Romulans,” Nora said.

DeMara nodded. “If they maintain their present trajectory, they should drop out of warp fairly close to this asteroid belt. We should be able to find their blind spot and ride into the system on their tail undetected.”

“A Trojan Horse. I like it.”

“A what horse?” said Nora dumbfounded.

“Never mind,” said Michael. “Why don’t you get those shots ready? We might need them if we have to wait here for another forty minutes.”

Nora Laas nodded and headed for the back compartments to prepare all the while wondering how a horse could possibly help them stay hidden from the Romulans.

\* \* \*

The plan seemed to work flawlessly.

The freighter was a good ten times the size of the runabout, thanks to the four massive cargo pods it was hauling, giving them more than

enough nooks and crannies to hide in.

Just as projected the ship passed by the asteroid belt fairly closely and Michael had little trouble slipping out just at the right moment, using a swift burst from the thrusters, to snuck *Nebuchadrezzar* in between the freighter's large engine module and one of the outer cargo modules.

"I'm shutting down all non-essential systems and matching our shield frequency to that of the freighter," said DeMara as her fingers danced over her console. "Unless anyone gets a close visual or runs a high-resolution scan, nobody's going to notice us."

The lights inside the cockpit went dark, leaving illumination to the computer panels and the red glow of the freighter's engine block just a few dozen meters to starboard.

"So far so good," she said. "I do not believe we've been detected."

"We might have fooled the freighter's crew but the Romulans are going to be more vigilant." Michael's eyes were focused on Shakanara III, the yellow planet they were approaching.

DeMara looked at her read-outs. "I'm getting more information about the planet. I can't risk an active scan but from what I can gather, there seems to be an installation on the western continent of the planet. And we might be in for even more luck."

Michael glanced at her. "How is that?"

"Look at this," she said and showed him a computer representation of the planet on her screen. A projected line displayed their current trajectory.

Michael realized that the western continent was currently on the opposite side of the planet. The freighter would have to enter orbit at the far side of the planet and then travel around Shakanara III to get into a geosynchronous position.

"We should be able to disengage from the freighter here," she said and pointed at a spot on the planet that seemed to be more white than yellow. "Its proximity to the magnetic pole will render us nearly invisible."

"Kind of makes you want to tell them that we're coming. Who needs a cloaking device when you have such a resourceful science officer?"

She smiled sweetly.

The freighter entered Shakanara III's atmosphere exactly fourteen minutes later. At the pre-arranged location, the runabout dropped away from the larger vessel utilizing minimal thrusters.

They quietly descended toward the planet's surface. Only once the *Nebuchadrezzar* had entered the atmosphere did Michael increase velocity again to quickly drop them underneath the Romulans' sensors.

DeMara did not believe that the Romulans would expect a vessel approaching from the surface of an uninhabited planet and by keeping *Nebuchadrezzar* as close to ground as possible it was unlikely they'd be picked up by any kind of early warning system.

They could not use the impulse engines, however, as their power signature would have raised red flags. Instead, they had to rely on the runabout's thrusters that provided only low super-sonic speeds while traveling at such a low altitude.

Shakanara's surface was completely unimpressive. A mostly barren wasteland with irregular patches of vegetation and large lakes filled with yellowish water. The runabout was moving too fast to make out any details but Michael was certain they were not missing anything.

It took them three hours to travel halfway around the globe to the other side of the planet and because of the inherent noise created by any vessel traveling at those speeds, they were forced to slow their approach significantly to avoid detection.

They had entered the atmosphere during daylight but had long since crossed the terminator by the time the runabout finally sat down in a narrow and rocky valley.

"We should be about eight kilometers west from the installation. I've seen no evidence of any sensor posts so far," said DeMara.

Michael stood from the pilot chair after powering down the engines. "Laas, prepare your people and get ready for a hike on foot."

"*Understood,*" replied her voice through the intercom.

"The temperature outside is a lovely sixteen degrees centigrade and the relative humidity is fifty-five percent," said DeMara and turned in her chair to face the captain. "Perfect weather for a stroll."

Michael walked to the weapons locker and removed a phaser. "This isn't shore leave, Dee. Arm yourself and be ready to confront the enemy," he said as he checked the weapon's power settings.

She frowned and stood up. She had no false illusions of why they had come here. To stop a possibly deadly experiment, of course, to hopefully capture a known criminal but first and foremost they had come to this place so that Michael Owens could confront a demon from his past and perhaps avenge his brother's murder.

He had not spoken much about their ultimate goal since they had departed *Eagle* but she had not been able to ignore the gleam in her friend's eyes. He had tried to mask it for the most part but now that he was so close to his goal, it was as clear as crystal. His mind focused on one task and one task alone.

“Any plans on what to do when we get there?”

He ignored the question and holstered his weapon. He took another one and tossed it to her.

She caught the phaser easily. “Michael?”

He headed for the airlock. “I’m making that up as we go along.”

\* \* \*

DeMara had remained right about the weather.

It was comfortable and that helped the away team to traverse the eight-kilometer distance swiftly. The two bright moons in the sky shined just brightly enough to guide their way and keep them somewhat hidden in case they’d encounter any patrols.

For the first seven kilometers, however, there was no sign whatsoever of any kind of habitation. They moved through canyons and valleys, past lakes, and traversed large stretches of open land.

Besides knee-high grasses, bushes, and occasional trees, they encountered no forms of life. And they had no opportunity to look either. Michael kept a solid pace, seemingly more determined to reach their destination with every step he took.

Ensign T’Nerr, now dressed like all six members of the away team in a black full-body suit, registered the presence of some rudimentary detection systems about one kilometer from their destination.

Michael found that the Caitian was a very skilled technician and he had little difficulty bypassing the detection grid. Within a few minutes, they were back on track toward the base, moving much slower and more carefully now.

“I’m detecting several life signs,” said DeMara who had kept a constant eye on her tricorder. The device had been set to run low-powered, passive scans of their environment. The signal was unlikely to be detected and would give the away team the most basic information about what they were most likely to run into.

“How far?” said Nora.

“Four hundred meters,” she said and looked up to find a mountain peak blocking their path. “Right behind that range.”

Michael kept his eyes fixed on the way ahead. “Can you identify the life signs?”

She shook her head. “Not in passive mode, no.”

Michael was about to speak up again when a loud rumbling noise from behind the mountain cut him off. A bright light flashed and blinded them for a moment and when they could see again, they all spotted the powerful blue beam that shot far into the sky and disappeared into the clouds above. The beam remained steady and pulsated with regularity.

“The dark anti-matter accelerator,” said DeMara.

“Are we too late?” asked Nora once the shock of the sudden appearance had passed.

DeMara looked at her tricorder and then at the sky. “I don’t think so. Frobisher’s experiment required very particular atmospheric conditions and there is no evidence of that here.”

Michael had noticed that too. Something was missing on this planet that had been such a crucial factor six years earlier.

There was no storm. He recalled the many briefings and reports that had stressed that the experiment would be useless without the carefully anticipated atmospheric disturbances that would produce the optimal conditions to allow the creation of the wormhole. Disturbances and conditions so rare that they had only ever been expected to happen once in their lifetime and on a planet half a galaxy away.

“Is it possible that Frobisher could have found a way to make his experiment work without the atmospheric conditions on Periphocles V?” he said.

“It seems highly unlikely. Without those precise conditions, it would be impossible to create the required singularity and without the singularity, there’d be no way to transport anything to a distant destination.”

Michael considered that for a moment. Then he drew his sidearm. “I’m not interested in the details of the experiment. We are here to find Frobisher, stop him from doing whatever it is he’s trying to accomplish here, and bring him in for the crimes he has committed.”

With that he set in motion again, walking purposefully toward the mountain range ahead and the source of the pulsating light beam hidden beyond.

Nora and her team quickly joined him with DeMara bringing up the rear.

A few minutes later they had climbed a low embankment that gave them a good view of what was happening in the valley below.

What Michael and the others found was not very different from the installation that had been built on Periphocles V.

The centerpiece was the large, bowl-shaped dark anti-matter accelerator, or as his brother had nicknamed it Big Betty. The blue beam shot out from emitters mounted at the top of the machine. There were several other devices and machines surrounding the central platform on which Big Betty had been constructed.

The actual base itself was about six hundred meters away from the site of the experiment. It consisted of four or five large and unimpressive buildings. The metallic structures had seemingly no features or special markings and no windows. The only noteworthy structure was a large, flat array at the center of the installation, presumably a sensor used to spy on nearby Starfleet outposts and border activities.

Michael had produced a pair of binoculars and scanned the site below. Big Betty had come online only moments ago, meaning that whoever had activated it had to be close by.

He counted about ten Romulan guards all spread throughout the large testing site. A few civilian scientists and assistants were also present but they were being kept secluded from the accelerator itself.

“What do you see?” DeMara asked.

He passed her the binoculars so she could have a look.

“There’s the dark anti-matter accelerator. It looks just like the one on Periphocles V,” she said.

“I’ve got eleven armed guards patrolling the perimeter,” said Nora who had her own binoculars and observed the installation below with curious interest. “They seem to follow preset patrol routes. Romulans are nothing if not predictable,” she added with a smile.

“Oh no.”

Michael aimed a sharp look at DeMara but she refused to make eye contact with him. Instead, she continued to spy through the binoculars. She was trying to hide it now but something had clearly startled her.

He directed his glance back to the site below.

He couldn’t make out much with the naked eye but he could see that a figure had stepped onto the central platform. He immediately reached for the binoculars DeMara was still using and took them away from her to look at the figure.

She offered no resistance.

When he recognized him, he almost immediately broke out in a cold sweat, forming on his forehead and down his back.

Somehow, he had always known that he would someday find that man and he had mentally prepared himself for this moment.

But now that he finally had confirmation, he realized that he hadn’t prepared nearly enough. His hands began to tremble slightly and for a moment he had difficulties keeping the binoculars steady. He pushed a button on the small device to zoom onto his face.

There was no denying it. He was looking at Doctor Westren Jarett Frobisher.

A man he hadn’t laid eyes upon in six years. The man who had killed his only brother. He had aged quite significantly; his hairline had receded and was now almost completely white.

He appeared peaceful as he studied a padd that he held in his hands. He did not look like a man who had been on the run for half a decade. There seemed to be a strange sense of tranquility about him. Michael remembered that Frobisher had not looked this serene six years ago when he had been at the cusp of making history.

He felt a sudden repulsion come over him and put down his binoculars. He took a deep breath of air.

“Are you all right?” said DeMara. Her concern was mirrored both in her voice and in her facial expressions. She too had prepared for this moment.

He nodded slowly. “I thought I’d know exactly what I’d feel the moment I find him. When I’d finally have proof that he was not dead after all.”

“And?”

“I was wrong,” he said. His voice felt empty, his eyes drained of life. “I feel nothing.”

She didn’t quite know what to make of it. She had not expected that. She had been prepared for a sudden blood lust, rage, or even debilitating desolation. But she had no plans for *nothing*.

“Sir, how do you wish to proceed?” said Nora after a few moments of silence had passed.

Michael studied the installation without the binoculars. “We’ll go in, get Frobisher, and get out.”

She offered a sharp nod. “I recommend we act now. There are only a small number of guards and the civilians are nowhere close to the target. We have a good chance to extract him undetected.”

“What’s your plan?” DeMara asked her.

“I think I know the guards’ routes. If we approach from the west, we’ll only need to worry about three or maybe four of them. If we time it right, we’ll be in and out before anyone is the wiser.”

“Let’s stop wasting time then,” said Michael and began to crawl down the embankment.

“Sir,” said Nora and followed the captain. “I recommend you stay behind and let us handle the extraction.”

“Not a chance in hell. I want him to see my face when we take him.”

Nora sighed. She had by now surmised that Owens’ personal stake in this mission was quite significant. And while nobody had shared any details with her, she realized that Frobisher had done something terrible to the captain in the past, and that required needed personal satisfaction. She didn’t like the thought of exposing him to such a perilous situation but she knew that if the roles were reversed, very little could have stopped her to get her due.

\* \* \*

Laas had been surprised by how easy it had been to enter the testing site.

The Romulans had not been expecting any kind of ground attack or infiltration. The reason for the lax security was probably not because of carelessness but more likely to keep a low profile.

It seemed unlikely that this installation would be discovered by Starfleet, considering its relatively isolated location, but even if it did, keeping a low level of visibility would make it easier to pass off the base as a civilian installation.

The outpost staff had likely been trained in several scenarios that would allow them to hide the true nature of this facility.

Laas sneaked passed a small control complex and waited in the shadows. As she knelt by the edge of the building, she felt an all too familiar tingling sensation in her stomach.

She hated the feeling.

It brought back memories of her time as a resistance fighter on her home world.

She had spent countless hours sneaking through towns and bases, just like she did now, to get the drop on her enemies.

The fight against the Cardassian occupiers had been a seemingly never-ending guerilla war. Sneaking and waiting had been its hallmarks. Later when she had joined Starfleet and then the Marines she had been exposed to a much more open form of combat.

At first, she had thought that fighting was her calling since it was what she excelled in. And for a time, she had. She was good at it because she had never known anything else. But the truth was, she despised violence. Unfortunately, she knew that it was the only thing that was guaranteed to work. It was a necessity and she would continue using it as long as it would help protect the things and the people she believed in.

She heard the footsteps approach and just like that the sensation that had disturbed her was gone. It always did that. She focused on the task at hand.

The Romulan soldier didn’t notice her hidden in the shadows and walked right past her. He seemed attentive enough but he wasn’t expecting trouble. It was going to cost him.

Within a heartbeat, she was behind him. One hand covered his mouth while the crook of her elbow quickly slipped across his throat. The much taller man lost consciousness before he even knew what had happened.

Laas dragged his limp body into the shadows. Once she was satisfied that the guard was deposited out of view, she tapped her combadge twice.

Michael stepped onto the platform in an almost casual manner. He clenched his phaser tightly as he approached the unsuspecting Frobisher from behind. The man seemed too involved in reading the padd to notice him closing in.

Michael watched Frobisher’s back for a few seconds. Bracing himself for a confrontation that he’d had six years to prepare for.

“Time flies.”

Frobisher whipped around. Shock mirrored on his face as he stared at the black-clad man. And then a sudden flash of recognition made clear that he had not forgotten the man who had stopped and beaten him to a bloody pulp all that time ago.

His eyes opened wide and his mouth gaped. He had not expected this encounter. Not here.

The two men simply looked at each other, nobody spoke.

Then Frobisher turned his head as he spotted another figure approaching. She too held a phaser and he recognized her immediately. She had one of those faces impossible to forget.

He turned back. His surprise gone and instead a small, crooked smile on his face. "Michael Owens."

Michael wasn't sure what exactly was causing the scientist's amusement. It was irritating and not what he had expected.

DeMara had warned him that the doctor had shown some signs of mental instability even six years ago and to be very careful when approaching him.

"Doctor Westren Frobisher, I'm placing you under arrest for reckless endangerment and murder. You can come quietly or we can blast you off your feet. It's your choice," he said and emphasized his phaser. "You can venture a guess as to which one I'd prefer."

Frobisher looked at the weapon and then at him. "I did not think you would find me. I've been very careful, you see. I had a lot of time to be careful."

Michael was not interested in a conversation, not while surrounded by a regiment of Romulan soldiers.

"Of course, it doesn't matter anymore," he said and glanced back at his padd. "Soon, nothing will matter anymore."

Michael didn't understand. The man had seemingly lost his mind. Being on the run for six years could do that to a person. Especially somebody who had been unstable from the start. He felt a new emotion overcome him. Pity. He fought it. He did not want that feeling clouding his judgment or distracting him from the gratification he would undoubtedly soon experience for bringing Frobisher finally to justice.

The accelerator that stood only a few feet to his left began to power up. The bright blue beam began to intensify and pulsate at a faster rate. It startled him but he didn't dare take his eyes off Frobisher.

"Doctor, what do you hope to achieve here?" DeMara said, her curiosity momentarily getting the better of her. "You can't possibly hope to recreate the experiment on Periphocles V."

Frobisher shot her a glance but he didn't reply. That irritating smile still on his lips.

"This's enough," Michael said. "We go, now."

"I never had a chance to tell you this," Frobisher said, speaking in a slow and even voice. "But your brother was a good man and a fine scientist. It was a shame that he perished the way he did."

*You bastard.*

All feelings of pity and indecisiveness were gone in an instant as resolve cemented itself once more. Michael took a few steps toward Frobisher who didn't even blink. Not even when he pushed his phaser hard into his stomach.

"Give me one good reason why I shouldn't just blast you to pieces right here?"

Frobisher met his fiery eyes. "I don't know. Why don't you?"

A soft hand touched his shoulder. "Michael, don't. It's just what he wants. Let's take him and get out of here."

Laas was watching the spectacle on the platform from a good fifty meters away.

She cursed herself that she had let the captain go to take Frobisher without her. She had known that it had been a bad idea from the start but there had been no arguing with him.

He hadn't said much but it had been obvious from the look in his eyes. What she had feared was coming true now. He was getting far too personal and was now within striking distance from the doctor, threatening to shoot him on the spot.

*Damn it then, just do it already so we can get out of here.*

It wasn't a noble thought but she was sure Frobisher deserved it.

DeMara stepped in to intervene. Something was terribly wrong with that picture. She felt that queasiness in her stomach again. And then she suddenly knew what it was.

Frobisher was running the show. He was playing with Owens. Neither DeMara nor the captain could see that the scientist was entering something into his padd, hidden behind his back.

She had to do something.

She gave up her position and headed for the platform only to stop short after a few steps. From the corner of her eye, she could see a figure emerging from the shadows.

A Romulan guard.

Impossible. Both Carlos and T’Nerr had already signaled her. Their targets had been neutralized.

They must have overlooked another guard on the perimeter.

The Romulan quietly brought his rifle to bear on Owens.

Laas reached for her phaser but the guard was partially hidden behind a few containers. No way to get a clean shot.

And then a sudden blast struck the guard and he collapsed. It had come from a high angle.

She turned around and could just spot McIntyre’s tiny figure far up the slope. She seemed to be raising her arm to indicate her position.

Laas nodded thankfully at her intervention and also at remembering to choose Skyler McIntyre, *Eagle*’s best marksman, to add to the away team.

She didn’t have much time to appreciate the young woman’s quick thinking. She whipped back around toward the platform, something was happening.

A few meters away from the large accelerator, connected to the main platform was another smaller dais with a large emitter hovering above it. The emitter had activated, creating a bright pillar of hard white light that beamed down onto the platform below.

The sound of the sniper shot had been subdued but had remained loud enough that it had startled both Michael and DeMara. As the captain turned to look at what had happened, Frobisher made his move.

He grabbed the padd with both hands and brought it down hard against Michael’s phaser, which went flying out of his grip.

Before he could even register the pain shooting through his hand the doctor pushed the now-broken device right into his midsection.

He stumbled backward and into DeMara who still stood right behind him.

Frobisher turned instantly and ran for the smaller platform.

Michael ignored the pain when he saw the doctor running. There was no way in hell he was going to allow him to escape. Not after coming this far and being so close.

He would chase him to the ends of the galaxy before giving him up. And perhaps not even then.

He was back on his feet in an instant, not even taking the time to check on DeMara, and sprinted after the fleeing scientist.

Frobisher reached the platform. He hesitated for just a moment and turned to see Owens approaching him fast. He took a single step forward and vanished into the light.

Moments later Michael followed.

DeMara hadn’t been injured but she had become momentarily disorientated when Michael had fallen toward her.

She reached for the weapon she had dropped and quickly brought it to bear only to find her line of fire blocked by the captain. She scrambled after him and at first, didn’t even realize where they were headed. And then Michael disappeared right in front of her eyes.

Her mind raced and yet it remained slower than her feet that carried her right after him and into a bright light of uncertainty.

\* \* \*

Laas gasped in horror when she saw Owens and then Deen disappear inside the beam.

Deen had told her earlier that Frobisher’s machine was supposed to be some sort of new and revolutionary transporter system but she had surmised from what both Deen and Owens had said since they had landed on this world that it wasn’t supposed to work here.

They had been mistaken.

Laas charged toward the small platform and the still pulsating beam. It didn’t matter where the transporter led, her mission was to protect the captain and she would go wherever he went.

She spotted Carlos who had stepped out of his hiding spot to check on the fallen Romulan guard. “José, stay here and provide cover as long as you can and then retreat to the ship,” she said and continued for the platform.

“Lieutenant?”

She turned her head to look up the slope when she heard McIntyre’s voice. She had instructed her people to keep radio silence and the fact

that she was breaking it now meant something bad was happening.

*“The other guards are closing on your position. You’ll have a whole lot of company in about a minute.”*

*Damn*, she thought. *They must have heard the sniper blast.*

*“Do I engage?”*

“Negative,” she said. She had almost reached the platform now. “You’ll only give away your location.”

Just a few more meters.

“Hold your position for now. If necessary, cover our exfil. Nora out.”

And then it was gone.

She stormed onto the platform but the bright white beam had vanished as suddenly as it had appeared. She stood right at the center of the dais where the others had disappeared but nothing happened. She looked up at the emitters above her but they showed no signs of activity.

“José, get over to that console. See if you can reactivate this device.”

Nora’s deputy didn’t hesitate and immediately made his way to a computer station that was attached to the accelerator. For a moment she thought he had figured it out but then his facial expression visibly dropped.

He looked up at her. “It requires some sort of code. I can’t get access to it.”

She sighed. She was out of options. She had no time to have Carlos or T’Nerr try to hack into the computer. The guards were going to reach them any second and once they got there and found the Starfleet officers, the whole base was going to be put on high alert.

She left the platform to approach Carlos. “Can you tell where they went?”

He shook his head. “To be honest I can’t make heads or tails out of any of this. It’s unlike any transporter I’ve ever seen.”

“All right, we need to regroup. She tapped her combadge three times, the signal for T’Nerr to retreat and for McIntyre to cover them. Then without any more hesitation, Nora and Carlos quickly withdrew from the site.

They had made it halfway back to the slope when McIntyre called in again.

*“Sir, a single Romulan has just appeared by the accelerator. Looks like he beamed in from somewhere. He’s ... stand by.”*

“What is it?”

*“Sir, he has just reactivated the device.”*

Laas stopped in her tracks almost causing Carlos to slam into her.

She looked back at the testing site which lay about fifty meters behind her now. She could not spot the man who had activated the accelerator or any of the guards.

Nora Laas knew she had to make a decision and she had to make it fast.



## Chapter Ten: Flux

Something was very wrong, that much was certain.

His vision was blurred and even though he couldn't immediately see his surroundings, the color spectrum seemed off.

The sounds he perceived didn't quite belong either, even though he was hard-pressed to explain exactly why that was. The taste in his mouth was completely wrong and so was the smell.

But the smell at least was familiar, pleasantly so, like a freshly mowed lawn on a sunny spring day. And there was something else in the air, something very distinct; something that he knew couldn't possibly have been there.

It was all reminding him of a faraway place he had once called home.

His vision cleared after what had seemed like hours but must have been mere seconds. And then he saw it.

The Running Fox Pond stretched out before him.

Named by a tribe of indigenous natives hundreds of years ago, he held many fond memories of that place. A smile came over his lips when he remembered all those childhood adventures that had taken place here. The calm water shimmered with an orange glow as a setting sun reflected from its surface.

The pond was located in the backyard of his home in the Wisconsin countryside. He could not possibly have been back here. He was either dreaming or his mind was playing a trick on him.

He didn't mind. It was a pleasant trick.

He breathed in a lung full of fresh evening air.

"These are beautiful. What are they called?"

Michael knew that voice. He turned around with a smile as he anticipated seeing her again.

He was not disappointed. Amaya Donners sat on a white wooden bench, contrasting alluringly with her dark skin and black hair. She was dressed in a colorful shirt and form-fitting black pants, with one foot on the grass and the other wedged underneath her thigh. Her wavy hair reached to her shoulders.

The sunset behind him threw just the right amount of light onto her face to emphasize her nose and her fine features. She was glancing away from him at a patch of flowers not far from the bench.

She was young, not a day over nineteen.

Michael turned back to look at the pond. He looked down and caught his reflection on the watery surface.

There, looking back at him was a much younger man. It took him a moment to realize that it was him. Had he really looked so handsome once?

"Michael?"

He turned again to find Amaya was now looking straight at him. Her eyes sparkled with energy and purpose. She was a beauty queen in every sense of the word and probably more.

He spotted his family's yellow three-story house behind her. For a dream, it looked surprisingly real. Everything did. And then it dawned on him.

This wasn't just a dream. This had really happened, seventeen years ago. The summer after his second year at the Academy. Amaya Donners had become one of his closest friends over the last two years and he had invited her to visit his home.

He looked at her exquisite brown eyes, looking back at him expectantly.

He had made a terrible mistake that very night, he recalled. Their relationship had developed into more than it should have been.

Oh, he liked Amaya Donners. But the truth was that there had been another woman in his life Amaya had not been aware of. Michael had met Jana four years earlier and without a doubt, his heart had belonged to her.

But that fateful evening, surrounded by all the pleasantries of a warm summer night, he had given in to his desires. He had not been able to tell Amaya that he loved another woman. His cowardliness had led to an awkward web of lies and deceit and when the painful truth had finally

come to light months later, Amaya had been deeply hurt and their friendship had been forever ruined.

“Stargazer Lilies.”

“Huh?”

He smiled and pointed at the purple orchids. They were indeed beautiful with their elegantly backward curved corollas and their long straight stamens that made it appear as if the delicate flowers were perpetually gazing at the stars.

“They were my mother’s favorite,” he said as he approached the bench. “These are the only kind that’ll grow outdoors.”

Maya nodded and turned to look at the flowers again.

He sat down next to her and stared at her profile intently. It wasn’t difficult to see why he had become so weak in her presence all that time ago. He could feel his passion take over even now as he caught the sweet fragrance of her hair.

Dream or not, he was not going to make the same mistake twice, he decided. Even if it had no consequence, he was going to do the right thing this time.

She looked back at him, her smile revealing her bright white teeth.

He diverted his eyes quickly.

Her expression turned into one of concern. “Are you all right?”

“Of course,” he said quickly. A little bit too quickly. “Why do you ask?”

She shrugged her shoulders. “I don’t know. You seem different today.”

“Do I?” he said with a smile.

She leaned back on the bench and brought both her knees up against her chest while she looked at the distant sunrise. “I can’t help wonder how many girls you’ve brought here.”

He looked at her with surprise but her eyes were fixed at the wide-open horizon. “Whatever do you mean?” he said with mock sincerity.

She laughed. “A warm summer night, a beautiful garden, and a sunset,” she said and smiled at him. “Could you be any more obvious?”

“And I didn’t even tell you about the candlelit dinner yet.”

She slid across the bench to shorten the distance between them. She softly leaned her head against his shoulder as she continued to watch the sunset. Michael could feel the warmth of her body against his.

This was not going the way he had intended.

He enjoyed the moment for a few more seconds before he carefully lifted her head and slid away. She looked up at him.

“There is something I have to tell you, Maya.”

She nodded.

He realized that even though he had wanted to move away from her, he found himself drawing closer. Right toward her full red lips.

And then he felt them make contact with his own.

His mind went blank; he could feel his heart pounding in his chest as his tongue slipped inside her mouth. All thoughts had seemingly vanished in the heat of the moment. His eyes had closed and his hands were reaching out for her face, slightly trembling in anticipation of touching her skin.

*This is all wrong.* The thought shot through his mind like lightning.

As quickly as it had begun, it was over.

Their lips parted and Michael saw her eyes open slowly. He could see the longing burning inside them. It took all his strength to ignore it.

Seventeen years ago, he would not have been able to. But he had grown into a man since then. A man who had left childish things behind a long time ago. A man who had learned the awesome burden or responsibility. After all, lives depended on the decisions he had to make, and, in some sense, this was true even for this moment.

“I’m sorry, Maya but I can’t do this.”

She didn’t speak, she just looked at him. Her eyes filled with uncertainty.

“I don’t know what came over me. I mean ... I do. You are one of the most beautiful women I’ve ever known and I’d be lying if I didn’t say that I found you attractive but the truth is that I value our friendship too much to be willing to endanger it in this manner.”

She slid away a bit. Her eyes cast downward; he could not tell what she was thinking.

“You have to believe me when I say that I’m sorry for having it let come to this. I did not mean for it to happen. If I gave you the wrong signals, I can only ask for your forgiveness for misleading you in such a dreadful way. Please ... I don’t want to lose you as a friend.”

Was this really the right decision? What had he done? This could have ruined everything. Perhaps things did happen for a reason, perhaps there was something like fate that guided everybody’s life and matters were entirely out of his hands. The past was the past and there was nothing he could do to change it.

She raised her head slightly to look at the horizon. Her face showed no emotion whatsoever as she watched the sun begin its final descent.

“I understand if you resent me for what I did,” he said in a last effort to save something he so desperately wanted to keep.

“You know,” she said and looked at him. “I’m glad that one of us was strong enough to stop this.”

“You’re not mad?”

She shook her head, a smile now forming on her lips. “No. You did the right thing and you stopped me from doing a foolish mistake. I hate to say it but you’re a good man, Michael.”

He smiled.

It was cut short, however, when she put on a mock frown and punched him hard in the arm, the surprisingly strong blow making him lose his balance for a moment.

“Don’t let that get to your head.”

He laughed. “Well, now that we have established who is stronger ...”

“Oh, yes? You didn’t look so strong to me in survival last month.”

He smiled when he remembered the Academy’s survival training, they had both taken part in a few weeks earlier.

It was true that she had shown incredible resilience during their excursion to the Mojave Desert. He like most of the other cadets had given up while she had un-determinably continued and completed the exhaustive exercise, winning a special citation in the process.

“Touché.”

“I hope that dinner is still on though. I’m starving,” she said as the sun was beginning to disappear below the horizon.

“Of course,” he said and stood. “But we’re all out of candles.”

Amaya followed suit.

He gestured toward the porch of the old antebellum-era house to allow her to go ahead first.

They climbed a few stairs and onto the wooden deck of the open portico. Before they reached the doors leading inside, Maya turned to him. “I don’t know how you got the crazy idea that I wouldn’t want to be your friend anymore,” she said with a smile and turned back to the door to walk inside. “Why on earth would I not want to be friends with the son of legendary Commander Owens? Mark my words; he’s going to go far.”

Unbeknownst to her, Michael froze for a moment watching her intently as she stepped into the house.

He quickly shook his head and then followed her inside.

\* \* \*

He was incredibly comfortable and therefore became immediately irritated when he perceived a faint voice calling out his name.

He couldn’t make out whom the voice belonged to but it was most definitely female.

Perhaps it was still part of the dream.

He rolled onto his side in his large, king-sized bed enjoying the feel of the satin sheets.

If it was truly part of the dream, he thought, then there was nothing he needed to do. He could simply remain where he was and patiently wait until his subconscious would reveal the source of the voice to him.

“*Michael,*” the woman whispered.

He opened his eyes and saw a silver picture frame, containing the image of himself along with his mother and father.

He knew that picture.

But it stood on his bookshelf now, not on a nightstand.

And then he remembered.

He was back on Earth. He had been with Amaya the night before. They had spent some time in the garden and then shared a satisfying dinner. And after talking for most of the rest of the evening he had gone to bed.

Alone.

*The female voice? Amaya's?*

*Oh no*, he thought and quickly turned to the other side of the bed, scared at what he would find. Scared that he had made the same mistake he had made seemingly a lifetime ago and that had haunted him for a very long time afterward.

But there was nobody else in the bed with him and no sign of anybody else having been there. A sigh of relief came over his lips.

*"Are you awake, Michael?"*

That voice. It had a somewhat artificial quality to it.

*"I'm sorry to wake you but there is an incoming transmission waiting for you."*

"Vicki?"

*"Yes, Michael."*

He smiled. Vicki was the house's internal computer interface. She possessed a unique personality her mother had programmed before she had died.

Michael had always liked Vicki, especially when he had been younger even though, or perhaps because, it had always driven his father crazy who had never been able to bring himself to reprogram Vicki after his wife had passed.

Michael yawned and sat up in his bed.

Rays of sunlight were streaming through the tall French doors of his room.

How was it possible that he was still in this dream? What was happening to him?

He had a perfectly good recollection of the last ten hours he had spent in his house, including a slowly fading memory of the dream he had just awoken from. A dream within a dream? Was that possible?

*"If you wish, I could inform the caller that you are unavailable and you could go back to sleep,"* Vicki said in her soft, slightly metallic voice.

He threw back the covers and stood. A computer who was willing to lie for him? No wonder he had liked Vicki so much. She had a real personality, something that Starfleet computers tragically lacked.

"That's all right. What time is it?"

*"It is six thirty-four AM. Curious, I cannot identify the caller."*

Michael walked over to his desk and opened up the folded computer screen that sat on top of it. He sat down in his chair and quickly tried to arrange his hair. "Put it through."

The person who appeared on the screen left him speechless with surprise.

She was a child. No older than about eight or nine years. And yet he knew right away that that cute blonde girl was much younger than that. Even at this young age, it was unmistakably clear who he was looking at.

Her shimmering purple eyes, her long golden hair, she even possessed the same fascinating aura that didn't even seem to be dampened by the artificiality created by the transmission.

"Dee?"

She nodded slowly, a smile on her lips.

"You look so young."

*"So do you, Michael. Or haven't you noticed?"* she said with a smirk.

It was DeMara Deen, the way she spoke and her smile were unmistakable. But her voice sounded different, less pronounced, and much more like that of a child. She was a child. Michael's mind had difficulties accepting that. And then another thought suddenly became more prominent.

"Where are you?"

*"In my home on Tenaria."*

"But this must be around 2354. The Federation has not yet made contact with Tenaria. How did you get in touch with me?"

That smile again. *“Let’s just say I made some creative use of a couple of our communications satellites. It took me eight hours to recalibrate them.”* Her expression grew more serious. *“I don’t have much time. I can’t risk anybody finding out about this.”*

He nodded even while his mind was still trying to put the puzzle pieces together. “What’s going on here? I thought I was dreaming or hallucinating, but now it’s almost as if…”

*“We have somehow traveled back into the past,”* she said, completing the thought Michael had been afraid to mention. *“I think Frobisher’s accelerator was not designed to transport him across space but across time. At least the version he built on Shakanara III. Don’t ask me how he did it. It’s the only explanation I can think of.”*

“Very well, let’s assume for a moment that’s true. From what I know about time travel, and admittedly that is not much, most time travelers journey back in time in their current bodies. Why have we reverted to our younger ones? And for that matter, if we are in our younger bodies again, why did we keep our memories from the future?” Michael was giving himself and headache just trying to think about these oddities. Like most starship captains, he had hoped never to have to face the bizarre paradoxes inevitably created by traveling backward in the time stream.

*“The short answer is, I don’t know. I’m no expert in temporal mechanics but I do know that it isn’t a precise science. There are no valid theories, that’s why it is so dangerous to experiment with it. The only person who might know what’s going on exactly is Doctor Frobisher.”*

Michael nodded. It made sense. After all, they had chased Frobisher into the transporter beam.

He remembered that the scientist had disappeared just a moment before he had followed him. It was only logical to assume that the doctor had set his machine to deposit him here. For what reason exactly he did not know.

And then there was something his brother had tried to tell him six years ago. Or was it twelve years from now? He couldn’t quite place what it was he had said but he suddenly felt that it was relevant to their current situation.

Dee looked over her shoulder. Something was catching her attention.

“What’s wrong?”

She turned back to the screen with a smile. *“I have to go … to lessons.”*

He laughed. “You seem to be enjoying reliving your past.”

*“It’s such a fascinating opportunity seeing these events firsthand again with my knowledge of the future,”* she said but then her expression hardened. *“But Michael, if we’re truly in the past, we have to be extremely mindful with everything we do. It will be very tempting to make different decisions now that we have the luxury of hindsight but we can’t allow ourselves to do that or we’ll risk causing serious damage to our timeline. We have to do the best that we can to take the same actions as we would have the first time around.”*

Michael sighed. Like all Starfleet officers, he had been instructed meticulously on something Starfleet called the Temporal Prime Directive. It stated that Starfleet personnel who found themselves traveling through time, for whatever reason, had to make the utmost effort to avoid contaminating the timeline by changing past events.

Amaya re-entered his thoughts.

He had already violated the directive by deciding not to go through with a mistake he had made in the past. He had felt very good about his resolve in the matter but now he realized that it was going to change their relationship.

But surely it was an infraction that was going to make the universe a better place. At least for him and Amaya.

*“I’ll attempt to contact you again soon.”*

“Very well. Try and keep a low profile,” he said to shift the focus away from himself.

She nodded and was about to end the conversation.

“And one more thing.”

She looked up at him with a quizzical expression.

“Don’t forget to brush your teeth.”

She put on a mock frown and her face disappeared from the view screen.

Michael smiled when he turned away from the monitor and looked out of the window, staring at the landscape he had grown up with.

He considered his next steps.

Now that he realized that he was in fact in the past, everything had changed. This was no longer a pleasant dream of distant memories but dead serious reality.

Everything he did was going to affect the future he already knew. It seemed impossible to avoid slight changes in the timeline and DeMara knew it too. She had already violated it by contacting him.

*Temporal Anomaly.*

That was the term his brother had used back on Periphocles V before he died. He had known that the dark anti-matter accelerator had the potential for time travel. He had tried to warn him about it and he had completely ignored it. But why did Frobisher want to travel back in time?

The answer was so apparent that it materialized in his mind even before he had finished formulating the question.

Frobisher had only one chance to make his life's work a successful reality. The device on Shakanara III had never been intended to duplicate his earlier experiment. Its only purpose had been so he could go back and see through the original experiment. Frobisher must have been convinced that this time around it would work.

Michael could not allow this. Even if it would work, he had a responsibility to maintain the timeline. He had to be stopped and he had to find a way to get DeMara, himself, and Frobisher back into their proper time.

His next step was suddenly crystal clear.

\* \* \*

The shuttle ride from Milwaukee, Wisconsin to Cambridge, England took just under one hour.

Michael was deep in thought while the public shuttle crossed the Atlantic Ocean. He felt bad for having left Amaya behind without saying a word.

He had found her still asleep and couldn't bring himself to wake her. Instead, he had prepared breakfast and written a small note in which he apologized for leaving and promised to be back before dinner.

He had not revealed where he was going or why. He was already doing significant damage to the timeline by following a course of action that he hadn't seventeen years ago. To bring Amaya into his confidence would have made things even worse.

His thoughts focused on the task ahead.

He was not sure if Frobisher knew that he had followed him into the past. But he was determined to force him to reestablish the original timeline by any means necessary. He did not look forward to the confrontation but he realized that it was unavoidable. He was possibly the only person who could undo the damage that had been done.

It was just after three o'clock in the afternoon, local time, when Michael arrived in the historic English town. He had little difficulty finding the renowned university campus.

It was a beautiful institution with buildings well over four hundred years old and reminiscent of a long-past Gothic style.

As he walked by the ivy-covered stone buildings, he noticed a few smiles from female college students aimed his way. It irritated him at first until he remembered that he was in a much younger body now. And he couldn't entirely deny that he enjoyed being his younger self again and would surely miss the sensation once he returned to his own time.

Like many men his age he had nothing but nostalgic feelings about his youth. Sacrificing the lure of a second life with the gift of foresight was a small price to pay to make things right again. It didn't stop him from wondering about all the things he would do differently this time around. He had many regrets, one of which he had already corrected.

He found the building that housed the department of physics, a hybrid structure of old masonry married with ultra-modern glass and aluminum towers.

He entered the impressive building and inquired at a computer terminal as to Doctor Frobisher's whereabouts. He felt a moment of panic when the computer showed no results. But he quickly discovered his mistake. Frobisher was not a doctor but merely a postgraduate student.

Fortune smiled at him when he discovered that the man was currently working at one of the many campus laboratories. He had guessed correctly when assuming that Frobisher was completely devoted to his research and was not on summer break like most other students.

He found the elevator leading deep below the university and on his way to the lab he passed through two security checkpoints at which his identity was verified and he was logged as a visitor. Clearly whatever Frobisher was working on was of a sensitive nature even this early in the research process.

He reached the doors to the lab and entered.

The large room was filled with computer consoles, data pads, papers, and devices of all sizes most of which looked completely alien to him. He spotted a figure standing close to a machine seemingly observing the content. The man was about his height and wore a white lab coat.

"Frobisher."

The man turned and Michael froze.

He was looking at his brother.

Just a few years older than himself he looked well and energetic. Much better than the last time he had seen him. Michael had not expected to

find his brother here. He had been too preoccupied with Frobisher that he had completely forgotten that the two had met at Cambridge and quickly become research partners.

“Mike?” he said and a wide smile came over his face. “What in the blazes are you doing here?”

He didn’t reply. He remained frozen as he watched his brother approach him. A long time ago he had finally come to terms with the fact that he was never going to see his brother again. That he was gone for good, betrayed, and killed by his closest friend. A few days earlier he had set out on a crusade to bring the man responsible for his death to justice or—and he had no illusions about that part—do to him what he had done to his brother.

The memory of Matthew had fueled his quest and given him the ironclad will to pursue the matter to the bitter end. And yet even after finding himself thrown back into the past, his mind had not allowed him to consider Matthew’s role in all of this. Now he suddenly faced the possibility to be able to do what he so desperately had wanted for such a long time.

He could prevent his death. His brother’s fate was now seemingly resting in his own hands. How could he possibly justify sentencing him to die a second time?

Matthew hugged his brother and Michael wrapped his arms around him only very hesitantly. It still felt wrong, as if this encounter was nothing more than some elaborate dream, fickle enough to dissipate at a moment’s notice.

“I didn’t expect a visit,” Matthew said after he had let go.

Michael had seen his brother very rarely during his time at the university. At the time he had felt bitter about him abandoning him when he felt that he had needed a bigger brother the most. Only years later had he started to understand that it had been his father and his relentless pressure that Matthew joined Starfleet that had driven him away.

Michael smiled. “I thought I’ll see how much trouble you’re causing on this side of the pond,” he said and began to laugh.

The older Owens joined in and Michael moved in closer to hug him again, this time with much more energy. “It’s so good to see you again. So good.”

“Yes, it’s been too long.”

Michael let go of his brother reluctantly this time. He noticed the sudden suspicious look he had in his eyes.

“You were looking for Wes. How do you know him?”

“I ... I’ve heard about him.”

His brother didn’t seem convinced and Michael quickly tried to distract him by changing the subject. He motioned to a table and a few chairs. “Let’s sit down; we have much to talk about.”

He nodded slowly and sat in a chair.

Michael took the seat opposite him. “So, what are you working on here?”

Matthew smiled. “A sudden interest in science?”

He shrugged his shoulders. “It might come in useful when I command a starship someday.”

“A starship, huh? Academy life sure has changed you.”

Michael realized his mistake and quickly regretted it. He had not shown much aspiration to become a starship captain when he had been younger. Only after completing a deep space assignment on the USS *Horatio*, during his third year at the Academy, had he begun to aspire for greater things. He had been a rather shy and modest young man when he had first entered the Academy. His brother was correct, however, that his experiences there had made him a different man.

“I fear you wouldn’t understand what I’m dreaming up right now,” his brother continued. He had a self-satisfying grin on his face. He had always enjoyed playing the smarter brother. It had never been a difficult game.

“Try me.”

“It has to do with dark anti-matter. It’s very unstable but if we can unlock its secrets there is no telling what we’ll be able to do with it. It’s a very tricky substance and we might never be able to get out of the conception phase.”

“Something tells me you will.”

Matthew smiled. “With the confidence of my little brother on my side what is there to stop me?”

Michael leaned back in his chair, his face taking on a much more serious expression.

“What’s wrong?”

He shook his head. “Nothing.”

“Come on. You really think I’ve forgotten how to read you? You’re like an open book to me, little brother.”

A sigh came over Michael's lips. "It's about Frobisher."

"What about Wes?"

Michael wasn't quite sure how to make his brother understand. He was already violating several Starfleet regulations just by coming to see him. "How well do you know him?"

Matthew seemed irritated by the question. "Quite well. I met him in my sophomore year and we've been working together ever since. I visit his family every other weekend. His aunt makes an incredible Shepherd's Pie. Why do you ask?"

"I just want you to be careful."

Matthew erupted with a loud belly laugh. "That's rich. Because you're a Starfleet cadet you think that you need to watch out over your bigger brother now?"

Michael ignored the outburst. "Has he been acting different lately?"

The older Owens quickly sobered up and carefully studied his brother. Then he broke eye contact. "He's been a little strange today but I don't think..."

Matthew interrupted himself when he spotted something behind him.

Michael turned to follow his brother's gaze and see Frobisher entering the lab. As expected, he was much younger but what surprised him the most was how much he had aged in the next seventeen years. He looked like a different person. Time had not been good to him.

"Wes, we were just talking about you. This is my younger brother Michael."

Michael stood to face Frobisher who clearly seemed surprised to see him here.

"Michael Owens," he said slowly and took a few steps toward him.

He simply nodded but Frobisher had already given himself away. He could see it in his eyes.

"It's very nice to meet you. I've heard much about you," the young scientist said rather hurriedly.

"No doubt."

"However, I'm afraid I must excuse myself. I have a very delicate experiment that I need to oversee. I'm certain we will meet again," he said and without another gesture turned back around and left the lab.

"See what I mean," said Matthew. "He's been like that all day."

Michael looked at his brother. "Listen, I can't tell you why but you need to stay away from him. You have to trust me on this. It's vital that you stop working with that man and that you not get involved with him in any capacity."

Matthew met his brother's determined glance. He stood up and looked at him as if he was trying to find something within his brother that he couldn't see. "You're serious about this, aren't you?"

Michael nodded and walked around the table to meet him. "I can't stress how important this is, Matt. Please you have to listen to me."

"You expect me to throw away my career as a scientist because of a hunch you're having?"

Michael sighed, realizing how crazy it sounded but he was out of options. "There is no reason why you couldn't come back with me. Do something else with your life. Remember how we always wanted to be oceanographers like Mom? Why not do that?" he said, fully aware that the suggestion was going to yet again significantly alter events that had already occurred. But he didn't care at that moment. His brother's life was at stake.

Matthew turned away from him. "Those were childhood dreams; Michael and you know it."

"You would have done it if Dad hadn't been so damn stubborn. But it's not too late. You don't have to do this."

Matthew whipped around, anger brimming in his eyes now. "Who are you to talk? You caved in under his pressure, didn't you? Join Starfleet, be a starship captain? All so you can please the old man."

It wasn't difficult to sense that Matthew still held a grudge against their father. He had blamed him for that once but no more. No, now he completely understood. He nodded. "Yes, I admit at first, I did it because that's what he wanted me to do. But I've come to realize that it was the best decision I've ever made. It's the right thing for me."

"Well congratulations, you found something that works for you," he said bitterly.

"But so could you."

He laughed. "You think this is not what I want? You think I only came here because I wanted to stick it to the old man? Believe it or not, Michael I love science, I love physics and I wouldn't want to give it up for anything else in the world."

Michael's mouth opened but he could no longer think of the right words. He had always assumed that his brother had chosen to be a scientist because it was the last thing that his father had wanted him to do. He had hated him for pushing Matt into a line of work he had no passion for.



But he had been mistaken all these years.

“You know what? You should leave. I don’t know if Dad put you up to this or not but I don’t care either way. You can’t just come in here and presume to tell me what to do with my life. I have work to do.” Matthew turned to the exit and walked away. “I’ll see you around,” he added without looking back.

“Matt, please.”

But it was no use. He left the lab and the doors hissed shut behind him.

Michael couldn’t quite believe his failure.

Not only had he been unsuccessful in convincing his brother to avoid Frobisher, he had also managed to alienate him at the same time. He had nothing but love for Matthew and all he wanted was to save his life and he had achieved the exact opposite. But how could he make him see the danger without giving up the truth? And what was there to say that would make Matthew believe? The truth sounded more like fantasy even to him.

\* \* \*

Michael had made his way back to the surface of the campus.

He was not willing to give up on his brother that easily. And if he could not find a way to return to his own time, he would have twelve years to watch out over him and keep him away from that fateful experiment.

Naturally, that was not an ideal plan at all. Remaining in the past would also mean altering the timeline, there was no real way around that. The original timeline had to be restored at all costs. Even if with a few minor alterations.

He had tracked his brother heading for what he believed to be the dorm buildings. He was halfway there when a voice startled him.

“Michael Owens.”

He stopped. There were several large trees to his side. It was a small park surrounded by tall hedges and brick walls. By one of the hedges, a few meters off the path, stood Westren Frobisher, seemingly having waited for him.

Michael quickly looked up and down the path and once he found that nobody was nearby, he crossed the grass and approached Frobisher.

“I must say that I’m surprised to see you here. But I guess I shouldn’t be, should I?”

Michael reacted quickly. He grabbed Frobisher by the collar of his shirt and pushed him hard into a brick wall next to the hedge. “What have you done?”

The scientist was momentarily stunned by the aggressive reaction. He tried to free himself but Michael held him firmly.

“I thought that would be obvious even to somebody with such a weak grasp of rudimentary science. I transported us into the past.”

“Why?”

Frobisher laughed. “You know why. To correct the injustice been done to me. To claim the achievements that are rightfully mine.”

Michael let go of the man. “The experiment was a failure. It didn’t work.”

Frobisher’s eyes grew wider. “It would have worked if you amateurs hadn’t interfered with it. And it will work again and this time, nobody will be able to stop me. Not even you.”

“What are you planning?”

“You will have a front-row seat to history in the making,” he said. “All you need is a little more patience.”

“You will not get another chance at your experiment. You’re going to get us back into our time and then answer for your crimes.”

Frobisher uttered a hollow laugh. “Crimes? You’re the criminal. And you will pay for what you’ve done to me, I’ll promise you that. Six years I was on the run, couldn’t show my face anywhere. My reputation dragged through the mud. Six years of my life destroyed by you.”

“And you deserved that and more,” he spat. “You killed my brother.”

“I was sorry that he died. He was—is—a competent scientist. But he betrayed me. His mind was too small to see the larger picture. Maybe this time will be different. Maybe this time he’ll be able to see what must be done.”

Michael Owens grabbed him again pushing him against the wall even harder. “There won’t be another experiment. Send us back. Now!”

Frobisher gasped in pain. “Or what? Face it, you have no options but to follow the rules that I have put in place. You’re nothing but a pawn in a much larger game.”

“I’ll do whatever it takes to correct these insane machinations you’ve started. I promise *you* that I will stop at nothing to see the timeline restored.”

The scientist stared right into Michael’s eyes, seemingly weighing his intentions. He found that his icy glance did leave little doubt as to his determination. “Even if I wanted to send us back, I would need the dark anti-matter accelerator.”

Michael took a step away from Frobisher.

“And there is not going to be one for at least another ten years.”

“You know how to build one, just do it.”

Frobisher straightened his shirt and stepped away from the wall. “Impossible. When building our first accelerator we depended on technology that will only become available years from now.”

“I’m not willing to wait that long.”

The scientist smiled with sudden delight and revealed a small device from his pocket. Michael jumped to alert when he thought it was a weapon but quickly realized that it was a chronometer of sorts.

“Good news for you, you won’t have to. And time’s already up,” he said and then quickly slipped through a gap between the wall and the hedge and disappeared.

The cryptic remark left Michael confused but he knew he had to follow Frobisher wherever he went, determined to force him to bring this insane trip through time to an end.

“And down the rabbit hole we go,” he heard Frobisher say from somewhere ahead.

Before he had made even one step, a sudden dizziness engulfed his mind. His vision began to blur drastically and within a heartbeat, Cambridge University was gone.

# Chapter Eleven: Breath

To say that Vice Admiral Jonathan Taylor Owens was upset was putting it mildly.

As soon as he had learned of the Romulan spy on *Eagle*, he had beamed back from the surface and headed immediately to see the ship's captain. It was only after finding out that the spy had escaped and that the captain was also no longer onboard that his mood had gone from plain angry to all-out furious.

He stormed into the observation lounge, *Eagle's* main briefing room on deck two where Commander Eugene Edison was already waiting for him.

"Where the hell is my son?" he said before the doors had even closed behind him.

Gene got out of his chair. "Sir, I'm afraid that the captain--"

"Don't you even try to sugarcoat it, Commander," the admiral interrupted before the first officer had a chance to explain the younger Owens' absence. "We both know that he went off to chase after Doctor Frobisher."

He nodded slowly. "He seemed confident that he would be able to locate him."

"He's a damned fool, that's what he is," he said while momentarily distracted with thoughts Gene could only guess at. He quickly snapped back to the here and now. He looked right at the other man. "How is Delegate K'tera?"

"She's still in critical condition," said the voice of another man also present in the room, standing by the far wall and hidden from the admiral's sight.

So'Dan Leva stood out of the shadows. He shook his head slowly. "The doctor did not sound optimistic," he said. The despondency in his voice was quite apparent and yet the admiral was too upset to pick up on it.

Instead, he regarded the first officer again. "I want to know exactly what happened."

"Mister Nakaar turned out to be a Romulan spy. He took Miss K'tera hostage and critically injured her during his escape. Over the last few days, he managed to reroute several secondary systems undetected, which helped him to beam aboard the *Agamemnon* even after we shut down *Eagle*. On the *Agamemnon* he obtained a shuttle and escaped," Gene said, doing his level best to stay calm under the admiral's insistent gaze. Inside he was furious at the event that had been allowed to happen on his ship.

"Yes, I know all that, Commander. What I want to know is," he said and turned back to look at the tactical officer, "why did you let him escape?"

"With all due respect, sir," Gene jumped in. "That's not exactly how it happened. The Commander--"

Owens cut him off. "The Commander had the opportunity to stop an enemy spy but instead decided to face him alone and risk his escape."

"Without the Commander, sir, we might never have learned about Nakaar's true identity in the first place," Gene said, determined to stand by his officer.

"Well, that seems pretty damned irrelevant now, doesn't it?" Owens shot back and glared at Leva who had remained quiet during the exchange. "What matters is that he's out there, on his way to Romulus no doubt; ready to pass on information vital to Federation security thanks to you, Commander. I was aware of your background before I came aboard but I chose to trust you because of your spotless service record and the fact that you were handpicked by my son. But now, I can't help but wonder where your loyalties truly lie."

Gene took a step forward to place himself between the admiral and Leva. "Sir, are you implying that the Commander purposefully helped Nakaar escape?" he said, anger now swelling up in his voice.

Admiral Owens did not take his eyes off Leva who didn't seem to make any effort to defend himself. "The thought had crossed my mind, yes. Give me one good reason why I shouldn't have you confined to the brig and investigated for treason?"

Now the eyes of both the admiral and Gene rested on the half-Romulan officer.

"Sir, I've been told once that a Romulan never gets himself into a potentially compromising situation without having a good contingency in place."

The admiral scowled at him. "What's your point, Commander?"

Leva motioned to the screen, embedded into the wall behind him. "May I?"

Gene gave him a nod.

Leva stepped next to the screen and entered a few commands into a control panel. The screen flared to live, displaying a galactic map of the sector. A small red blip appeared in the middle of the map.

“What’s that?” said Owens, the tone of voice leaving no doubt that his patience was being stretched increasingly thin.

“That, sir, is the exact location of Mister Nakaar or whatever his real name may be.”

Gene’s lips curled up into a small smile.

The admiral looked at the screen and then at Leva with a dumbfounded expression.

“Nakaar may have been able to shut down the shuttle’s transponder signal so that we cannot track it, but while I struggled with him, I managed to place a small, sub-space homing device directly on his body. Our sensors will be able to pick up his signal within eight light-years.”

Gene turned to the admiral. “A rather fortunate development, wouldn’t you say, Admiral?”

“A fortunate development would have been if you had managed to capture Nakaar before he escaped.”

“I disagree, sir,” said Leva.

The admiral pinned him with an icy stare.

“Nakaar will not dare to head directly to Romulus in a Starfleet shuttle and he won’t be able to use sub-space communications while in this sector, we control all relay stations and would be able to intercept it in time. However, as you’re probably aware, there are rumors of a clandestine Romulan base in this sector. I’m convinced that he will head there.”

Gene nodded. “And we’ll be able to not only catch the spy but also shut down that base for good.”

The admiral looked at the two officers for a moment, considering their words. “This mission is way too sensitive to play these kinds of games, gentlemen. But I assume we have no other choice now.”

“Sir, I guarantee that we will get Nakaar before he’ll be able to report any details of your secret conference on Farga,” said Leva.

“Secret conference?” said Gene.

Leva nodded. “That’s what I’m assuming it has to be. It certainly isn’t a negotiation for a vaccine that would be completely useless to the Fargans. Consider the evidence. We are located in a powder keg pocket of the Federation, wedged in between the Klingon and Romulan borders. The diplomatic delegation has been unwilling to provide any details on what is supposed to be a routine trade negotiation for a medical vaccine. Something Starfleet is known to provide with little to no conditions. Two starships have been brought in to protect Farga during the negotiations and all Starfleet personnel has been banned from the surface, an almost unheard-of level of security for these kinds of proceedings. And then of course there is the Romulan spy,” Leva said and looked directly at Owens. “Why would the Romulans go to such lengths to infiltrate medical negotiations?”

The admiral didn’t reply, barely even moved a muscle.

It was Gene who broke the silence. “Sir?”

Owens uttered a heavy sigh. “Very well but what I’m about to reveal is not to leave this room, understood?”

The two officers nodded.

“We’re holding secret reunification talks between Vulcan and Romulus. There are key members of the Romulan Senate involved in this who have to remain anonymous. Any kind of disclosure of this event taking place could set us back twenty years in attempting to reunify the two parties and bring a permanent end to hostilities between the Federation and the Romulan Star Empire.”

“That explains why the majority of the delegation is Vulcan,” said Gene. He looked at the admiral. “But talk about possible reunification has been around for years. Wouldn’t it make sense to address this issue more openly at this juncture? Show that the Federation is fully supporting it?”

“The last Federation/Romulan conference was bombed by the Dominion just a few months ago. Not to mention that the majority of the Romulan senate, as well as the praetor and the military, are extremely hostile toward any notion of reunification with the Vulcans. If Nakaar manages to report the dissenters to his superiors, all their lives, as well as those of their families, will be in grave danger.”

Gene nodded. “I understand the urgency, sir. We’ll make sure to stop him before it comes to that.”

“You damned well better. I’ll stay aboard and make sure of that,” he said and then shot Leva another glare. “And I will keep my eye on you as well.” He turned and quickly left the observation room.

Gene had anticipated the admiral’s decision to stay on board. He didn’t relish the thought of having him look over his shoulder and watch his every move, ready to take over command at a moment’s notice. The only Owens he wished was on *Eagle* right now was the captain.

Leva took a few steps toward the first officer. “Thank you for your support.”

Gene’s face tightened as he looked at the Romulan officer. “I will stand by you in this matter for as long as it takes. I have no doubts about your loyalty or your commitment to this ship and its crew. But you’ll be able to consider yourself lucky if you get out of this with just a

reprimand after the admiral is done with you.”

So'Dan Leva nodded. “Thank you, sir.”

“I'm not finished, Commander. You ever decide to take things into your own hands like that again, without reporting to me first, I will personally make certain they'll bust you all the way down to ensign and that you'll spend the rest of your career purifying waste recyclers. Do I make myself clear?”

The tactical officers fought an impulse to swallow. “As crystal.”

“Good. Now go and find me that spy.”

Leva gave the first officer a curt nod and then headed out of the room.

\* \* \*

The first clue as to where he was could have been his outmoded black and red one-piece uniform suit. It could have been his rank pips that identified him as a lieutenant, or perhaps the dense stubble around his chin and upper lip that was beginning to form a beard.

He knew immediately when and where he was and it was not because of any of the above.

He found himself in paradise. Or at least the closest to it he could have ever imagined.

He stood among a handful of other Starfleet officers, all of whom were immediately familiar to him, in a place that was supposed to be entirely unfamiliar. Of course, it wasn't. After all, he had been here before. He had called this place home for almost three years.

He was quite literally surrounded by clouds broken up by occasional mountain summits that peeked out from the brilliantly white and pink cloud formations, giving the surrounding skyscape the impression of a pasty sea dotted by many small islands.

The air was clear and fresh and even though the city was thousands of feet from the surface, oxygen was not in short supply. Light from three suns reflected in the white marble city structures, creating a pleasing glow. The temperature was perfect, warming his skin but allowing for a refreshing breeze that blew through his hair.

Michael had often compared the sky city with what he had read about Olympus, the mythical home of ancient gods, located among the peaks of the mountains of Greece.

A melody was playing somewhere within the tall towers of the city behind him. It was a soothing sound created by some form of vocal instrument none of the visitors had ever encountered before. It resembled the sound of a high-pitched woman's song but they had learned that the melodies were being created by a harmonic stone and not by the vocal chords of any living person.

Michael turned to look at the faces of the many Tenarians who stood with them on the large ledge by the outer rim of the marble city.

They all radiated a peacefulness that was difficult to put into words. They seemed to live in perfect harmony with their surroundings. No wonder, he thought, that these people had never known war or crime. In some ways, they were like children, innocent and pure, and yet he had discovered that they possessed a vast amount of knowledge as well as cuttingly sharp intellect.

The Tenarians had discovered warp drive at about the same time as humans had but they had found themselves in a rather isolated part of space and with no place to go, they had mostly decided to stay on their own world. And why would anybody want to leave paradise? Michael had been thankful for their isolation; it had allowed them to prosper in peace and had kept potentially hostile foreign powers away from this place.

He had been the helmsman of the *Fearless* when they had stumbled across Tenaria Prime by complete coincidence while on a deep space mission. It had been Michael who had found this place and it was probably one of the reasons why he would later be chosen to stay behind and learn from, as well as teach, the eager inhabitants of this world.

A few of the Tenarians stepped forward. Michael was less spellbound than the other members of the envoy and smiled at their startled faces.

The Tenarians were an extraordinarily beautiful race of people as if every single one of them had been painfully carved and modeled by a master artist. And yet it was much more than just physical splendor, it was the aura that surrounded them that was so mesmerizing. Some called their radiating appearance the Glow. Rumors of the Tenarians and their magic-like aura had been in circulation in the galaxy for decades but very few had ever attributed their existence to anything more than folklore and legend.

As the group of visitors was being led through the city, Michael began to realize for the first time what had happened.

The allure of his surroundings had made him momentarily forget that he had just jumped seven years into the future. Somehow it didn't feel as though he had, his mind and his memories tried to fool him into believing that he belonged in this moment in time and that he had arrived here by completely natural means. Like waking from a dream, it took him a little while to fully understand that this was not the case.

What was going on here? Why this place? Why this moment in time? What was Frobisher up to? He had many questions and not enough answers.

“May I introduce my daughter DeMara.”

Michael and the others had entered a large, magnificently decorated hall. The vaulted ceiling was so high that it made him dizzy just to look at it. Here, an even larger number of Tenarians had gathered to welcome their guests.

One of whom was a young woman that put a smile on his face when he spotted her. Even though just eleven years old, she was no longer a child. She wore a long featureless white dress and stepped confidently past her father—the senior member of Tenaria’s ruling council—to approach their guests. She looked every bit like a princess, a term he had teasingly given her during his stay on this world and one that she had come to dislike greatly.

He remembered his initial reaction to the young woman eleven years ago. He had been unable to speak to her for at least two days, so impressed and intimidated had he been by her exquisiteness. He could feel some of those emotions come back to him now.

“It is an extraordinary pleasure to welcome you to our world,” she said to all five of them. When her purple eyes met his, he thought he could see something on her face that hadn’t been there years ago. A flash of knowledge beyond her years.

DeVitus Deen smiled with delight as his daughter extended her welcome. Michael knew that he was immensely proud of his only child and that it was going to be with great difficulty that he would eventually agree to let her leave their home to join Starfleet.

“Perhaps now would be a good time to serve the meal that we have prepared in your honor,” DeVitus said. At the age of fifty-five, he was considered an elder on his world and even though not old by human standards, he carried an air of wisdom and knowledge with him that seemed to be more fitting of a man twice his age. And yet he also somehow possessed the same youthfulness and spirit that was common amongst all the Tenarians.

“Unless there are any objections,” said Michael and glanced at *Fearless*’ Vulcan first officer. “I would like to see more of this wonderful city first.”

The Vulcan man nodded. “If our hosts agree you may proceed,” he said dryly.

DeMar spoke without missing a beat. “I would be delighted to act as your guide.”

Her father smiled and nodded. “Then it is settled. You shall be in excellent hands.”

“Of that, I have no doubt.”

The older Deen turned to the other Starfleet officers. “If you would like to follow me?” he said and led the way.

Michael could spot a few jealous glances being thrown his way by his fellow shipmates. He could hardly blame them. When he had first met DeMara Deen and he had realized how interested she had been in him he had considered himself a very lucky man. But despite many rumors, an actual romance between them had never developed. Instead, their relationship had become more paternal, like that between a mentor and a student. As their bond strengthened over time, DeMara became his closest confidant and friend. He had never regretted that development.

He waited until her father and the other officer were out of earshot. “Dee.”

She shook her head. “Not here. We’ll go to the castle; there we can talk.”

He nodded and followed her out of the hall. He didn’t need to be shown the way. Tenaria’s capital had become as familiar as his own home to him over the three years he had served on the planet. The castle was what she called her residence, situated on one of the upper levels of the city. It was nothing like a castle. It reminded him of a Mediterranean-styled villa.

As they made their way through the streets of the city, he noticed the many faces brightening when they passed them by. It was not because of his presence but because of hers. DeMara Deen was a reluctant celebrity on Tenaria.

As the only daughter of a beloved and well-respected leader, she was as much of a public figure as her father. But she was also regarded as an inspiration to the youth of Tenaria. She didn’t like that role but she understood that she had to play it nevertheless. And she was good at it too. Always quick to offer a smile—a trait not very difficult for a Tenarian—and always happy to speak to the people, showing limitless patience and humility. Michael was not surprised that she had longed to join Starfleet and leave her home.

They reached the castle and she led him to his favorite spot, a large marble balcony that overlooked most of the city.

“No matter the circumstances it’s good to be back here,” he said as he stepped into the open and looked out onto the glistening city below.

He turned and looked at a grinning DeMara. “What?”

She gestured towards his face. “I’d almost forgotten.”

He touched his chin and growing beard and then smiled.

“It always looked good on you; I don’t understand why you didn’t keep it.”

She had been the only person who had found a liking to his rather feeble attempts to grow a beard. Tenarians didn’t grow facial hair so in her eyes it was an exotic feature. His friends and colleagues had not shared the sentiment and so he had decided to do away with his effort to

look more distinctive.

“Why, thank you. May I also say that you look quite stunning? Or should I say used to?” It was of course a lie. She had never ceased to look stunning.

“We should focus on what’s happening,” she said in a more serious tone. “I fear we don’t have much time.”

He nodded. “What is going on? Have you found out anything else?”

“I tried,” she said as she joined him, leaning against the large stone railing. “But it’s difficult without causing suspicions and altering the timeline.”

He nodded and began to consider if he should reveal the fact that he had already been responsible for some alterations himself.

“What seems clear now is that this is not just a straight replacement within the time stream. For whatever reason, we are jumping through the decades.”

“Is that on purpose? And if so, what could Frobisher want to achieve with this?”

“I’m not sure,” she said. “It could be a side effect over which he has no control. Or he may have found a way to target specific periods in the past that would be most useful to his final plan. But what that is—”

“He wants to recreate his experiment on Periphocles V,” he said.

She threw him a surprised glance. “Are you sure?”

“Pretty much. There seems to be no other reason for this. Remember, he only had one shot at it. The conditions on Periphocles V cannot be reproduced artificially and possibly will not occur again for hundreds of years. It’s his only chance to prove that his designs work.”

“If that’s true I fear we’re dealing with a madman.”

He could hardly argue with that. Not after having encountered Frobisher again at Cambridge. “We must find a way to stop him.”

She nodded. “Yes. I figure we have about twelve hours until the next jump. That is if they are consistent. We need to come up with a plan by then.”

“It shouldn’t be too difficult after all we were both there with him. We know about the future as much as he does.”

“Except for one thing.”

He offered her a quizzical look.

“He had six years to prepare for this moment.”

A young Tenarian woman stepped through the open doorway and onto the balcony. She was not much older than DeMara and Michael recognized her as what he liked to think of as her handmaid. She was more than that. Personal assistant was perhaps a better way to describe her duties.

“DeMara, I’m sorry to interrupt but there are a few people here who wish to speak to you,” she said and gave him a warm smile.

She stood up straighter and uttered a small almost inaudible sigh.

“I guess duty calls, princess,” said Michael and returned the assistant’s smile before she left again.

She turned to face him. “I didn’t like the name when I didn’t know what it meant back then. I definitely don’t care for it now.”

He shrugged his shoulders.

“I’ll try to deal with this as quickly as possible. I’ll meet you in the central archives later. I trust you remember the way.”

He nodded and watched her hurry away to fulfill her obligations.

Left by himself he began to think of ways he could explain his absence to his superiors for the next few hours. How much damage would he do to the future if he did not act the way he had before? If he didn’t show the same interest in this place, chances were he would not be selected to stay on Tenaria as a Federation representative. He turned to look down at the marble city again. He wished he had time to rediscover all the pleasures this world had to offer.

Alas, this was not a sightseeing tour.

The lives of millions were hanging in the balance if he couldn’t find a way to stop Frobisher from going through with his insane plans.

Foiling him had to be his one and only priority.

The operation had not been successful.

Doctor Wenera and Doctor Nelson had fought for hours, trying to repair the damage caused by Nakaar's weapon. But it had been of no use. Whenever they thought that they had one bleeding under control, another artery would burst and nullify any success they had made.

They had not given up easily and continued tirelessly to fight a battle they knew they had already lost the moment the weapon had been discharged.

Only once it had become painfully obvious that all they were really doing was delaying the inevitable, Wenera had made the difficult call to limit their efforts to try to stabilize her with the hope of giving her just a few more hours of life.

It was a cruel fate and it had not been easy for her to inform her patient of her imminent demise once the operation had been completed.

K'tera had displayed her emotionless Vulcan side, thanking the doctor for all she had done, before asking to spend the last few hours of her life in a secluded part of sickbay.

The doctor had made sure that she was as comfortable as possible for the time she had left and then excused herself to lock herself away in her office, only to be called in an emergency. No matter how well her patient had taken the grim news, it had ultimately taken quite a toll on the healer itself.

Xylion who was still officially K'tera's fiancé had been the second person who had been informed of her condition. He had wasted no time and hurried to sickbay where he found her in a bed in the intensive care unit.

K'tera noticed Xylion approach but did not speak. She remained silent as he stepped next to him and looked straight down into her eyes.

For a few moments, they communicated without the use of any words.

It was K'tera who finally broke away. "I am ... sorry."

"You have no reason to apologize."

A small smile came over her lips. "I did not realize that all it took for you to abandon your logic was for me to die."

"The past is no longer relevant."

"I don't have much of a future. What else do I have left?" she said, her voice was noticeably weaker than usual but some of her spark remained unmistakable.

"K'tera," began Xylion in an atypical soft tone. "I might not have agreed with the way you lived your life but it appears that it brought you satisfaction, even pleasure. In which case you must not regret any part of it."

"But I do have regrets."

Xylion considered her with an asking expression.

"Not listening to you sooner, unwilling to give into your logic. I should have married you, Xylion. It would have been the right thing to do. You'd have made a good husband."

Xylion couldn't deny that he felt a small amount of satisfaction upon hearing those words. Not because she finally saw it his way but because she had begun to realize that he had always acted only out of a sense of loyalty and admiration. But he was now also aware that perhaps that had not been enough.

"I do not believe that I could have been able to satisfy all your expectations."

"Xylion, I..."

The Vulcan took her hand and gently squeezed it. "You should preserve your strength."

She nodded slowly before her eyelids grew heavy. Just as Doctor Wenera had advised her, she could sense a wave of tiredness coming over her courtesy of the drugs in her system designed to numb the pain of her internal organs beginning to fail and allow her to drift into a peaceful sleep before she could go into painful shock. K'tera was well aware that there was no waking up from this sleep.

"Will you stay with me?"

"I shall not move from your side."

She opened her eyes and smiled. To her surprise she noticed Xylion's lips curl upward slightly, attempting to mirror the gesture.

The doors to the ICU section of sickbay opened and So'Dan Leva entered. He seemed unsure of himself as he made a few awkward steps into the room. As he spotted K'tera and Xylion he froze for a moment.

"Commander," said Xylion, the tone of his voice free of any emotion.



“I’m sorry I shouldn’t have come. It’s not appropriate.”

“So’Dan?” K’tera turned her head to try and see him after she had heard his voice. But her own voice was too weak to make herself heard.

As Leva didn’t hear her speak, he turned to leave.

“Why don’t you join us?” said Xylion.

He stopped and looked back. “Are you certain that is what you wish?”

Xylion glanced at K’tera, she didn’t speak but he could see the expectation in her eyes.

He looked back at his fellow officer. “It is.”

Leva carefully approached her. “K’tera, I don’t think I will ever be able to forgive myself for what happened. I should’ve been more careful, I should’ve...”

He stopped himself when she began to shake her head. “Don’t,” she said softly.

“I’ll promise you,” he said. “We’ll get him. We already know where he is. He will not get away. If it’s the last thing I do, I will not let him get away,” Leva said with iron-clad conviction in his voice. He looked up at Xylion who gave him a curt nod.

“I should leave you two alone,” he said. But as he was about to turn away, he felt K’tera’s hand reaching out for his, holding him back.

“I would like you to stay,” she said. “If you don’t mind. Both of you.”

“That is acceptable,” said Xylion, approving the gesture, his voice free of any resentment.

Leva nodded gently.

And then there were no more words. Just an unspoken understanding between all three of them. They had all made mistakes, they had all arrived at wrong conclusions or made bad decisions but now—together—they were all forgiven. But it was going to cost one of them their life.

Both men remained at K’tera’s side even once her eyes had closed one last time and she had stopped breathing. They kept watch over her body as her soul, her *katra* as the Vulcans called it, had started to leave it behind.

# Chapter Twelve: Infraction

“What becomes essential on a diplomatic mission such as this is to suspend all and any assumptions you might bring with you from your own backgrounds.

You will become involved with a culture that is going to be completely alien to you and your most basic expectations will often turn out to be the ones on which you cannot rely.

Free yourselves from anything you have learned in the past and be open to new ideas and new ways of thinking. Only once you have begun to understand the most basic modes of behavior can you begin to dwell on your own experiences and attempt to bring them into context with what you’ll find in this new place.

You will soon realize that many will be eager to learn what you know but never forget that you are there for two reasons.

One is to be an emissary and to represent your people and the Federation, to gain knowledge and to expand yours, and by definition all our horizons, by learning about their culture and their ways. And the second is to bring the knowledge that you possess, about the galaxy and the Federation to the people you will encounter.”

Lieutenant Commander Michael Owens paused as he looked into the attentive faces of the young men and women sitting in the classroom, listening to him. He didn’t need to be reminded where he was; he didn’t even have to look out of the large windows to be reminded where this building was located. But he did so anyway and his gaze fell upon the majestic Golden Gate Bridge that connected the San Francisco peninsula with adjacent Marin County. The four-hundred-year-old structure still shimmered in splendid crimson colors under the Northern California sun, as though it had been erected yesterday.

He wasn’t quite sure at what moment exactly he had arrived in this place but his lecture had not seemed affected by it. The words had easily poured out of his mouth like a well-rehearsed speech.

Michael turned from the window to once again address his class. “Of course, your experience will vary greatly depending on who you are going to meet out there. It might become a dangerous, life-threatening experience or it could become your greatest single adventure while serving in Starfleet.”

His eyes made contact with Cadet DeMara Deen who sat in the second row and smiled at him as he spoke. He had noticed her before, it was difficult not to. As an associate tutor at the Academy, he had served as her mentor, continuing her training he had begun back on her home world. At the same time, he had to remind himself to make sure she was treated no differently than any other student in the classroom.

“In my experience as a Federation liaison on Tenara, I was lucky enough for the latter to be true. Something you might have certainly guessed after meeting Cadet Deen.”

This provoked a few smiles in his audience and several students threw glances at the beautiful young woman who was partaking in the class.

DeMara kept her eyes on him. He noticed that she didn’t blush at all, something he had been sure she had done years earlier in the same situation. That had been before she had gotten used to all the attention that her extraordinary appearance had gathered her.

Michael glanced at a chronometer displayed on a monitor behind him. It was a Friday afternoon with fifteen minutes left until the end of class. He knew that for most students this was going to be the last lecture of the day.

“I think that’s enough for now,” he said with a smile. He had to admit he had always enjoyed the popularity his unconventional teaching style and his tendency to excuse classes early had brought him.

And his students turned out to be grateful yet again as most of them jumped to their feet, looking forward to enjoying the pleasant spring weather.

“Don’t forget to read chapter five in Archer and I’ll see you all next week. Have a great weekend.”

Already the first cadets were on their way to the door while a few others were heading his way, no doubt to inquire about class papers, exam dates, homework assignments, and all the other painful obligations that students at the Academy were required to fulfill.

As he began to answer the many questions, he spotted DeMara who had stayed near her chair. She was surrounded by several mostly male students but she didn’t seem to mind much. He recalled that the attention had become overwhelming for her at first and that she had seriously considered returning to Tenaria before even finishing a single semester at the Academy. It had taken some effort to convince her to stay and he was happy to know that she had not regretted her decision.

Michael finished up with his last student and as the room emptied, DeMara had managed to shake her entourage and approached his desk.

“Nice lecture, professor.”

He had forgotten all about the nickname. He didn't like it. It made him feel old and it reminded him of the uptight instructors he'd had while he'd been a student. He had desperately tried to set himself apart from them when he had started teaching. The nickname was clearly meant as payback. For all her charms and graciousness, there was little doubt that she had a bit of a dark side to her as well.

"It's astonishing," he said once making sure that the classroom was empty. "The words all came back to me instantly as if I was right back there in that moment. How is that possible?"

Michael could see now that Dee looked much more like the woman he served with on *Eagle*. Her face had fully matured, which for a human woman would have been surprising given her young age.

"I'm not sure but I don't like it. Our brain patterns are somehow reverting to a state in which our historic memories come to the foreground and our more recent ones might be pushed back. If this continues, we might be in danger of forgetting essential knowledge about our own time."

Michael nodded in agreement. It seemed to make sense. He already found it difficult to remember certain aspects of his life on *Eagle*. He had disregarded these memory lapses as a side effect of the stress he had been exposed to since jumping back in time. Now he was beginning to worry that he might become too comfortable with reliving the past.

He liked being back in San Francisco. Teaching at the Academy had been a great pleasure, not to mention an honor to him. It had not been the way he had envisioned his career, however. He had wanted to be an explorer and a starship captain. But after his assignment on Tenaria, Starfleet had practically poured citations and medals on him and the Academy had been quick to follow with an invitation to teach his experiences for a two-year term. He had been unsure about the request initially; he had never felt teaching to be one of his strengths even after he had started training DeMara to become a Starfleet officer on Tenaria.

The Academy, however, had seen much potential in him and once he learned that an assignment as an associate tutor would greatly improve his chances of receiving a posting as a command officer on a starship, he had been quick to agree to the summons.

Things had worked out pretty well for him when Captain Mendez of the *Columbia* had offered him a position as first officer immediately after his tour at the Academy.

"But why did we come here? I don't understand."

During their last time-traveling episode on Tenaria, they had both concluded that their next jump would take them directly to what they had begun calling the flashpoint, the time fraction at which Frobisher would attempt to change the past.

They were both convinced that the flashpoint was going to be the experiment on Periphocles V. They had jumped exactly as DeMara had projected, reaffirming her suspicion that each fraction was exactly fourteen hours in length. But now they found themselves in the year 2364, two full years from the predicted flashpoint.

"My guess is that Frobisher has something else he needs to prepare before he is ready for Periphocles V. But we don't know what that might be."

"The accelerator."

"What about it?"

"They just build their first working prototype of the dark anti-matter accelerator. No doubt Frobisher came here to make changes to it."

She looked skeptical. "How do you know that?"

"He told me after our first jump. He mentioned he would have a working accelerator in ten years' time."

She nodded. "That would be now. Wait," she said as she realized what he was saying. "You met Frobisher?"

Michael had decided to keep that information from her. There had been no point to worry her about changes to the timeline he might have caused. "Yes, I went to see them after you contacted me at my home."

"Michael, you realize what that—"

"Yes I do," he said, interrupting her. "And I'm afraid we have to go and risk more changes. We have to find Frobisher and force him to send us back into our own time before we jump to the flashpoint."

She didn't seem to like what he was saying but then again, she couldn't argue with his logic either. It had to be done to make things right again.

She followed him as he purposefully headed out of the classroom.

"And I think I know where we can find him."

\* \* \*

Starbase One, also known as Spacedock, was a gigantic, mushroom-shaped facility, easily over six kilometers in height, located in Earth's

orbit, it functioned as the major launching pad for all Starfleet operations in the sector. Most of the ships in the fleet called its massive space dock, able to house many dozen vessels, home.

But the starbase was not just a haven for starships; it also housed a great number of Starfleet offices and facilities. Even though not to be confused with Starfleet Headquarters in San Francisco, many of Starfleet's highest-ranking personnel occupied offices here. It headquartered several important departments and contained extensive science and research facilities.

Doctor Frobisher and Doctor Matthew Owens' project had by now attracted the attention of Starfleet and sensing the enormous potential of their research, they had been more than willing to supply them with the equipment and resources they required. Starfleet had dedicated a large laboratory complex to their team that extended over nearly half of level one hundred sixty-three in the lower stem of the base.

Michael had visited his brother only a handful of times while he had worked at the base but he remembered easily enough how to find his lab.

Michael and DeMara exited a turbolift and after a short walk down the hall, they reached a large observation window that allowed a view into a spacious laboratory.

Its walls were a sterile white and the ceiling was twice the usual height. At the center of the lab stood a nearly exact copy of the dark anti-matter accelerator albeit only half the size of Big Betty, the machine the scientists were going to use on Periphocles V. Only a small number of researchers were working in the lab, among them was Michael's brother and Frobisher himself. Nobody seemed to be aware of the two spectators.

Michael watched his brother through the transparent wall for a moment.

He had seen him just two days earlier and in that time, he had aged ten years. Slightly better than he had himself he had to admit. His face did not seem to reflect the stress of his work the same way it was so apparent on Frobisher. It was true, Michael thought, Matthew loved his work. It was a sad irony that the pursuit of his dream had led to his demise. Not this time, however. Not if he could help it.

"Are you sure about this?" said DeMara, standing next to him, also observing the scientists' work.

"I don't see how we have any other option. If we do nothing, Frobisher will affect the timeline in a much more damaging way than if we try to stop him now."

She pinned him with a sidelong look. "That's the trouble with time travel. There is no way to know that for certain."

"I'm willing to take that risk," he said as he watched Frobisher disappear through a door leading into an adjacent room.

He turned to her. "Go and talk to my brother. Try to learn as much as you can about the device. See if you can find out how it could be used to send us back into our time."

She nodded. "What are you going to do?"

"I'll talk to Frobisher again."

"I don't like that plan."

Michael offered her a cocky smile. "I promise I'll be civil," he said and turned to walk down the corridor to find the entrance to the lab.

DeMara frowned as she watched him slip through a door. "And what if he's not?"

Michael found Frobisher all by himself in a room, mostly illuminated by the screens of the many workstations inside. He was busily working at one of the consoles with his back toward him, completely oblivious to his surroundings.

Michael took a quiet step toward the scientist, not wishing to alarm him just yet.

"Michael Owens, I assume," Frobisher said without looking up from his work.

Michael froze.

"You are too predictable," Frobisher said as he turned around, smiling. It was the same grin he had worn on Shakanara III just before he had escaped into the past. A smile that seemed to telegraph that he knew something Michael did not.

Michael was momentarily startled by his apparent foresight but the surprise faded quickly. Frobisher knew that he was jumping through time with him and had obviously expected him to show up.

"You know why I'm here."

"Indeed," Frobisher said. "You're here because you have the same limited imagination as your brother. Because you cannot see more than what your eyes will show you. But I'll make you see. I'll make all of you see the truth."

"And what truth would that be? That you're a man so blinded by his need for success and veneration that you care nothing for the millions of lives you're putting in jeopardy?" Michael didn't approach Frobisher directly, instead, he began to move sideways, always keeping an eye on the scientist.

"How little you seem to understand. My research will pave the way for a new age. Do you think dark anti-matter transporters are the limit?"

The sky is the limit. From starship engines to the way we'll travel through space and live our lives, everything will change thanks to my research."

"Your research? Surely you mean my brother's and your research."

He shrugged.

"And what about all the people whose future you're about to change by altering the timeline? What about them?"

"Please spare me the antics of self-righteous Starfleet regulations. Who do you think you are? The protectors of time and space? If something great can be achieved by changing history itself, who are you to deny us the attempt? Why chain ourselves to frivolous rules and regulations thought up by paper pushing administrators lacking the spine to dream of a greater future?"

Michael stopped. "I'm willing to entertain the notion, Doctor, that you're no longer mentally stable. That instead of prison you might require physiological help. I promise I'll make sure that you get whatever help you need once we have returned to our time."

Frobisher laughed. It was a hollow and fake sound. "Mentally unstable? Whatever I am is what you made me, Owens. What you did to me by refusing me my destiny and reducing me to a hunted animal. But I'll reclaim what is mine."

Michael grew tired of these ravings. "Enough talk. You'll send us back now. You have the device," he said and stepped closer.

"I was wondering how far you'd go to convince me. Tell me, would you be willing to throw away your precious Starfleet morals for the sake of the timeline? Maybe for your brother? Would you torture me?"

Michael was now only a few inches from Frobisher. "You really want to find out how far I'd go?"

"Let me help you with this. Perhaps I can make this easier on you," he said. "I will not send you back anywhere; in fact, I will do nothing that'll endanger the success of my experiment. Instead, I will make sure that your brother is killed again and that you are forced to watch him die all over. How did it feel to be helpless as you watched his life slowly slipping away? How did it feel holding his lifeless body in your arms?"

Michael gritted his teeth.

He smiled in response. "And don't think I'll stop there this time. No, I'm going to enjoy seeing you in pain. After I'm done with your brother, I'll gut your pretty little friend as well. Right in front of your eyes. You'll be all alone just like I was alone after you turned me into an outcast. And then maybe, just maybe, when your anguish has begun to bore me, and only then, will I take care of you, and put you out of your misery for good."

Michael struck out. Reaching for the scientist's neck he pushed him violently into a shelf causing several tools and beakers to drop loudly to the floor.

Frobisher's smile didn't fade. "How far are you willing to go to stop me?"

In a fit of rage, Michael grabbed his shirt collar and threw him across the room. Frobisher hit a computer console, and rolled across it, smashing piles of pads to the floor in the process before he landed with a loud thud.

Michael allowed himself a deep breath. He had misjudged the strength of his younger body. He quickly understood that he couldn't allow himself to lose control like that again.

Frobisher moaned in pain as he tried to stand up. He steadied himself with one hand on the console and with his other he lifted a glass beaker into view. He smashed it on the hard surface of the console until he only had one large shard left in his now bleeding hand.

"I'm disappointed, Doctor. I didn't think a man of your intellect would resort to violence."

Frobisher looked up, an intense twinkle in his eyes. "You'd be surprised what I'm capable of when my destiny is at stake," he said and plunged the shard into his side, the sharp glass tearing through his clothes and into his flesh.

He screamed in pain.

"What the hell are you doing?" Michael yelled out and rushed the other man.

The doors to the lab opened to allow people from the adjacent labs to enter and investigate the agonizing scream they had heard.

"Stay away from me! Stay away from me!" Frobisher cried out even before Michael could get to him. When he did, his first instinct was to reach for the shard, to attempt to undo the damage that had already been done.

"My God, Michael!"

He turned. It was his brother who stood by the door aghast, looking upon the scene before him with utter shock.

Too late did he realize what Frobisher had done. He knew exactly what this looked like.

The room was demolished, Frobisher bruised and beaten with a large shard plunged into his body with Michael's own now bloody hand holding on to it. Like lightning, he withdrew the offensive hand.

"Get him off me! Get him off me!"

A couple of scientists rushed Michael, reached for his shoulders, and pulled him back. He tried to free himself from their grip but just moments later four burly security guards entered the room. Michael found it impossibly convenient that they had shown up this quickly.

The four men required just an instant to assess the situation and spring into action. They took over for the scientists who were struggling with Michael and two of the guards dragged him away without uttering a word.

“Matthew, I ...” Michael began but he couldn’t think of any words that could make this look right. The expression on his brother’s face made him feel sick. It wouldn’t have mattered what he had said at that moment, Matthew would not have taken notice. He was in shock, his eyes having trouble making his brain believe what he had witnessed.

Michael managed to throw one last glimpse at Frobisher just as he was being dragged out of the room.

For a heartbeat, their eyes met and that smile reappeared on his lips. It was gone instantly as the remaining scientists quickly surrounded him to tend to their injured colleague.

\* \* \*

“We are now entering the Shakanara planetary system,” said Ensign Lutira Rei was handling ops duties in DeMara Deen’s absence.

“Slow to half impulse,” said Gene Edison. He shot a glance to his side where Admiral Jonathan Owens had taken up a seat for the last hour or so. Gene could tell that he was a man comfortable on a starship bridge, not all admirals could say the same. He was relieved that so far he had shown no interest in interfering with his command.

Gene stood from the center chair and observed the view screen that currently displayed the system’s primary star and a few planets.

“What do we know about this place?”

Rei answered. “It’s uninhabited but it contains at least two class M planets.”

Lif Culsten turned from the helm. “Why are they uninhabited?” he said. Planets that could sustain life were always a precious commodity for settlers and colonists. There had never been a shortage of people who wished to start their lives over and find a new home for themselves.

“Not many dare to live so close to the Romulan and Klingon border,” said the first officer.

“There is an asteroid field in this system that contains high amounts of undetermined minerals,” Rei said. “I think it may be kelbonite but the radiation levels are too high to know for certain at this range.”

“It’s certainly playing havoc with our sensors,” said Culsten. “I can’t get any detailed readings from any of the planets in this system.”

The relief ops officer shot him a sidelong glance. “I was getting to that,” she said softly.

Culsten gave her a sweet smile in response.

Gene turned to the tactical station. “Commander, where’s our target?”

So’Dan Leva did not look happy as he worked his station. After a few seconds, he finally glanced up. “I lost the signal.”

Admiral Owens left his chair and looked at the half-Romulan. “You what?”

“It’s this interference from those asteroids. We know he entered the system approximately seven minutes ago but I cannot pinpoint his exact position,” he said and went back to work. “We may be able to find him again with a full sensor sweep but I doubt we have the time.”

The admiral’s skeptical eyes continued to bore holes into the tactical officer. Then he regarded *Eagle*’s acting captain. He didn’t speak but it was all too obvious what was on his mind. He did not trust the half-Romulan officer.

“Sir, I’m getting an interesting visual from the third planet,” said Rei who instantly wished that she had phrased that differently.

Gene was thankful for the interruption. “Define interesting, Ensign.”

“Uhm ... look for yourself, sir,” she said and hit a few panels.

Moments later the image of the yellow planet magnified until it showed a small gray device hanging in orbit.

“A satellite?” said Culsten. “I thought it was uninhabited.”

“According to our reports it is,” said the Trill.

Gene took a step toward the screen. The image was not clear, the radiation was causing distracting static on the view screen but it was unmistakable that the device was artificial, and not ancient either, which was usually a good indicator of a population on the surface.

“Sensors?”

Rei shook her head. “Still having trouble with that interference, sir.”

“Lieutenant, get us to that planet, full impulse,” he said. “Rei, we need those sensors.”

Both officers acknowledged and went to work.

*Eagle* made it halfway to Shakanara III when an insistent warning tone, emanating from the tactical station, startled the bridge crew.

“A Romulan vessel has just de-clocked off our starboard bow,” Leva said, his voice sounding appropriately urgent.

“Red Alert,” Gene barked without hesitation. “On screen.”

The alarm klaxons came to life all over the ship and the flashing red lights signaled that *Eagle* was getting battle-ready.

On the view screen, the image of a small green vessel appeared. It had a large, beak-shaped bow and a main hull consisting of two short, straight wings at which ends its warp nacelles were mounted. The ship was heading straight for *Eagle*.

“It’s a scout,” said Leva. “Its weapons are armed.”

“Evasive maneuvers,” said the first officer as he stepped back to the center chair to take a seat.

The admiral followed suit.

“They’re firing.”

Lances of green energy were slung toward the Starfleet vessel. The ship shuddered and heaved as the beams made contact with *Eagle*’s shields.

“The doctor is going to hate this,” said Culsten under his breath as he steered the ship out of the Romulan’s path.

As *Eagle* swerved, the scout continued on its course and shot past the Starfleet vessel.

“Shields holding at eighty-nine percent,” said Leva. “I do not think they’re coming back.”

Edison looked at the admiral by his side. “What’s their heading, Commander?”

It took Leva a second to answer. “Romulan space.”

“We have to stop them,” the admiral said immediately.

Gene nodded. “Helm, bring us about and adjust speed to catch up to that vessel.”

“Coming about now,” said Culsten.

*Eagle* turned until the view screen re-captured the image of a small fleeing vessel.

“Mister Leva, torpedoes. Target their engines.”

“Torpedoes away.”

Four dots of light shot out of *Eagle*’s torpedo launcher and made their way across space, arcing toward the Romulan scout. The high-speed projectiles covered the distance in mere seconds. Two bright flashes were evidence that some of the torpedoes had found their target.

“Direct hit, their shields are down to forty-six percent,” Leva said. “Sir, Nakaar is not on that vessel.”

Gene stood and turned to look at him. “Explain.”

“Considering that the scout has little chance to overpower or escape us, it had no reason to decloak as it did. I believe it’s supposed to draw us away from Shakanara III. Nakaar is either on that planet already or heading straight for it.”

Now Owens stood as well. “This vessel is on a direct course for Romulan space. No doubt to carry the information the spy has gained back to Romulus. It’s the greatest threat at the moment.”

Leva nodded. “I’m not implying that we shouldn’t stop it, all I’m saying is that we need to cover all possibilities. That satellite could be a subspace communications device for all we know. If Nakaar is on that planet, he might be able to use it to contact Romulus.”

“What do you suggest, Commander?” said the first officer.

“Let me take a shuttle to Shakanara III and stop Nakaar while you go after the scout.”

The admiral quickly shook his head. “Absolutely not. There is no proof that the spy is on that planet and I am not willing to have you leave your post.”

“The scout is tactically inferior to *Eagle*. You don’t need me to win this fight.”

“I’m not worried about winning the fight,” the admiral shot back.

Leva stared daggers at the older man but thought better of it than to comment on the admiral's not-so-hidden insinuation.

"Sir, the Romulans are engaging their warp drive," said Rei.

"We're out of time, sir," Leva said.

Gene nodded. "Take Lieutenant Culsten and get me that spy."

Leva gave him a curt nod and headed for the turbolift.

Without saying a word Culsten jumped out of his seat to follow the tactical officer.

"Commander, I just gave you explicit--"

"Sir," Gene cut off the admiral, "with all due respect, I'm in command of this vessel at the moment and to be honest, I do not have the time for an argument. So please, unless you wish to remove me from my position, I suggest you let me do my job," he said and didn't even wait for a reply. He turned back to face the operations console. "Ensign, keep a close eye on that warp trail."

"They won't get away, sir," she said.

Gene considered Culsten's replacement at the helm, Petty Officer Lloyd Waldorf, an enlisted Starfleet veteran of many years, next. "Mister Waldorf, lay in a pursuit course and engage at best speed as soon as the shuttle has cleared."

The petty officer acknowledged smartly before beginning to enter the necessary commands into his console.

Once all orders were given, Gene returned to his chair once again and slowly sat down. He did his level best to ignore Admiral Owens who had remained standing in the middle of the bridge, noticeably upset by his attitude and decision to ignore his wishes.

Gene did not make eye contact with Owens, knowing full well that the admiral had the authority to take over command of *Eagle*. He was anticipating the admiral to invoke his right at any moment.

But Owens remained silent.

He moved to the chair beside the center seat and sat down. "You better be right about this, Commander. I wouldn't want to be in your shoes if you're not."

"The *Osiris* has cleared the shuttle bay," said Ensign Rei.

Gene nodded. "That's your cue, Mister Waldorf."

"Engaging warp speed."

Gene felt the deck plates tingle as they adjusted to the jump to high warp.

He felt pretty confident that *Eagle* would have little trouble catching up with the much smaller scout vessel. What really troubled him was the fact that he had left Leva all on his own to deal with the Romulan spy.

He quietly wondered if the trust he had placed in him was truly justified. The admiral had made it unmistakably clear after all, it wouldn't just be Leva's head if this ad hoc plan fell apart now.

\* \* \*

Michael had a pretty good idea where the security guards were taking him and he cursed himself silently for having failed so miserably.

He should've seen what Frobisher had been up to the moment he had put on that knowing little smile of his. The man had been too sure of himself from the moment he had first confronted him. To frame him in that manner had not been a spur-of-the-moment decision but a well-laid-out trap and like a mouse looking for the cheese, he had walked right into it.

Crazy or not, Frobisher still possessed the mental faculties and guile to use all his resources against him. And now he had seemingly won. Michael could not forgive himself for this mistake.

The guards refused to speak even a single word to him and he didn't try to spark up a conversation either. Michael had started to cooperate as soon as they had dragged him out of the lab and he had offered no resistance when they had put restraints on his wrists. He knew it was standard procedure. After a short walk and a trip in the turbolift, they reached their destination. The main holding area.

They placed him in a brig, activated the force field barrier, and then left him to his own devices.

He didn't have to wait long for DeMara to find his cell. She seemed downtrodden and her head hung low. Michael could hardly remember a time when she had appeared that despondent.

"It wasn't me," he said the moment she had stepped up to his cell.



She looked up but didn't speak.

"Yes, I lost control for a few seconds. I pushed him around a little bit but that's it. I didn't stab him. You have to believe me."

She let out a small sigh but still couldn't bring herself to form words.

"Dee, I'm telling you, I did not stab him," he said with as much emphasis as he could muster. "He did it himself to frame me."

She shook her head. "It matters little now. Everybody will think you did."

"It matters to me. Tell me you believe me."

"Fine, I believe you. But how does that help? I don't know what they're going to do with you but your career is going to be over."

He sighed and sat down on the sole bench in his small cell. "I know. If they charge me with assault, I might end up spending the next three years in a rehabilitation colony. Maybe longer."

"We don't have that much time."

Michael looked up. "You have to stop him by yourself, Dee. You have to be there when he attempts his experiment and you have to stop him."

"How do you suppose I do that? Without you, Mendez is not going to pick me for *Columbia*."

He had forgotten. When Captain Mendez had requested him as a first officer, he had managed to convince him to bring the recently graduated ensign on board as well. But now he would spend the next few years in a prison and even if he were to be released in time, which captain would want a convicted criminal on his ship?

"I don't know but you have to try. Warn my brother; tell him about what's going to happen. I've already caused irreparable damage to the timeline what does a little more matter?"

But his words didn't appear to convince her. She slowly shook her head. "I don't know, Michael."

He stood up and walked to the force field until he was as close to her as the barrier between them would permit. "If nothing else, promise me that you'll warn my brother. You don't have to reveal anything. Just tell him to watch out for Frobisher. I'll be lucky if he'll ever speak to me again but he might listen to you. Please, Dee, promise me." Michael would have gone to his knees if he believed that it might sway her. He would have done anything to protect his brother.

She looked at him, his desolation mirrored in her own eyes. "I promise I'll do what I can."

He nodded. "That's all I ask."

An exceptionally large Andorian security officer approached the cell and Michael instinctively took a few steps away from the force field. DeMara did the same as he spotted his approach.

The man was easily the tallest of his species Michael had ever laid eyes upon. He guessed that with his two blue antennas sticking out from his bald head, he was well over two and a half meters tall. He was unarmed, carried no restraints, and seemed generally untroubled as he lowered the force field.

Michael noticed that two other security guards were watching them carefully from a few meters away. One of them carried a phaser.

"Follow me," said the Andorian with a voice lacking any kind of emotion, it could have rivaled a Vulcan's.

He decided it wise not to upset the giant man and did as he was told. But not before throwing DeMara one last look, hoping to emphasize his final request.

This time Michael was not put into restraints but it was impossible not to feel like a prisoner as he was escorted by three security guards.

He had no idea where they were taking him this time. As they stepped into a turbolift, the Andorian lieutenant asked for one of the upper decks of the starbase.

He began to slowly understand. He was to be presented to a senior officer who would with no doubt inform him of the charges that were to be put forth against him.

He figured this was going to be his last chance to get out of this situation. Once he'd be handed over to a court-martial, his future would be pretty much sealed. The case after all was airtight with plenty of eye witnesses. If he could not convince the senior officers of the starbase that he was innocent, it'd all be over.

But what could he tell them? That Frobisher inflicted the wounds upon himself so he could go on with his plan to change the timeline? It was incredibly implausible and not to mention in violation of the Temporal Prime Directive.

His only consolation now was the fact that in a few hours, he would jump two years into the future and never have to live through the entirety of his prison term. But this too would come at a price. It would mean that his brother's life as well as all the lives of all the people threatened by Frobisher's experiment were up for grabs.

As Michael had predicted, his escort led him into a nicely decorated part of the base that contained the offices of high-ranking Starfleet

officers. Moments later they entered the waiting room of Rear Admiral Thomas J. Carter, Commanding Officer, Starbase One. The assistant outside waved them right through the antechamber and they entered his spacious office.

The room had been darkened and only a small desk lamp as well as the majestic blue planet, visible through a large viewport at the back wall, lit the office.

Michel needed a few seconds to adjust to the darkness and then he spotted Carter, standing straight as a beam behind his desk.

“That would be all, Lieutenant, thank you.”

The Andorian nodded and left the office with his two guards.

“Lieutenant Commander Michael Timothy Owens?”

He snapped to attention. “Yes, sir.”

With a loud, startling noise a padd clattered onto the admiral’s desk. In the dark, he had not realized that he had been holding it in his hand.

“You realize that you’ll be charged with aggravated assault with a deadly weapon and that you’ll be facing a minimal term at a rehabilitation facility of two and half years?”

He swallowed. “Yes, sir.”

“You will be glad to hear that your victim will make a full recovery,” he stated dryly. “By sheer miracle, no vital organs were damaged.”

*No, not at all*, he thought. *I wish the bastard had miscalculated and killed himself.* It was not a thought to be proud of but it would have solved at least half of his problems.

“Extraordinarily so, sir.”

Sudden movement in the back startled Michael. There was a shadow by the far wall of the large office. Another person was standing there but only his silhouette was visible to him. Apparently, the mystery person had no intention to make their presence formally known.

“Commander.”

Carter’s voice was so firm that it forced Michael to immediately redirect his glance.

“I understand that you have shown hostility toward Doctor Frobisher before. Ten years ago, while you were a cadet.”

He couldn’t believe it. Frobisher had wasted no time to make mention of the incident at Cambridge, which to them had transpired just two days ago. He could not think of an appropriate answer.

This seemed to annoy Admiral Carter. “You’re a Starfleet officer. How do you explain these unprovoked and unacceptable actions on your part?”

He took a deep breath. “Sir, I cannot,” he said and it pained him to do so.

“Unacceptable.”

The admiral waited for a response that didn’t seem to come.

There was slight movement again behind Carter. It was definitely a man; he simply stood there without drawing any further attention to his presence, happy for now to simply observe.

Michael looked back at the admiral. It seemed Carter was willing to wait as long as it took. “Sir, all I can say is that my actions were not unprovoked. I admit that I might have overreacted but I did not intend to kill or injure Doctor Frobisher at any point,” he said with as firm a voice as he could muster. The last part was if not a lie at least an exaggeration. “What I have done, sir, I have done for a very good and perfectly clear reason that I am unable to reveal to you. I’m willing to face any consequence that my actions have caused.”

The shadow moved once more. This time the man had turned away and for a moment his profile was clearly outlined against the bright blue planet in the window behind him. Michael thought he recognized those features. After all, they were similar to his own.

“Do you really expect me to be satisfied with that answer?”

Michael looked Carter right in the eye. “No, sir. But I’m afraid we both have to accept it.”

Carter frowned at Michael’s attitude but didn’t seem willing to reprimand him over it. He showed more displeasure at being distracted by the man behind him.

“I want you to listen to me very carefully, Commander,” he said in a sharp tone.

Michael wanted to sigh, to tell him to just get it over with and spare them all the trouble but he didn’t dare. Instead, he stood perfectly still and focused on the admiral’s next words.

“Any record of this incident having ever taken place will be expunged. You’ll return to your regular duties at Starfleet Academy immediately and you will not speak about this matter to anyone.”

Michael opened his mouth but the words were stuck in the back of his throat. It took him a few seconds to utter just a single word. "Sir?"

"But make no mistake, Lieutenant Commander. For the next two and half years you may consider yourself on probation. There will be no mention of this in your personnel file but I will be watching you. You so much as look at a superior officer the wrong way and I will dig up a very convincing reason to have you put away for a long time."

Michael forced himself to wash that incredulous look off his face. He heard the hiss of a door opening somewhere behind the admiral. The shadow moved and seconds later the doors hissed shut again.

"Now get the hell out of my office," said the admiral and sat down behind his desk, clearly indicating that he had no interest in speaking with him any further.

Michael needed a second to gather himself before he spun around on his heels and did as the admiral had suggested. He rushed out of the antechamber and once he reached the corridor he leaned against the bulkhead and took a deep breath of air.

He had just averted his worst nightmare. The end of his career, the helplessness of knowing that his brother was going to die and a drastic change to the timeline had all been fears that had been wiped away by the decision made by one Starfleet admiral. And Michael knew perfectly well it hadn't been Carter's.

It wouldn't have taken a Betazoid to tell that Admiral Carter had despised the notion to have him get away scot-free after what he had done.

Somebody else had influenced his ruling on this matter. The very person that had also been present in the office. The very person from which Michael had never wanted any help and who had now most likely just saved his future and perhaps even his sanity.

\* \* \*

Lif Culsten watched closely as *Eagle* disappeared in front of his eyes, jumping to warp in an instant. A few days earlier he had asked for adventure. Fate had certainly delivered.

He turned to look at So'Dan Leva who sat next to him in the co-pilot seat and was the only other occupant of the shuttlecraft *Osiris*.

"I guess it's just the two of us now."

"It would appear that way," said the half-Romulan. His attention, however, was focused on his console at which he worked diligently.

"Did you pick up his trace again?"

He shook his head. "*Eagle*'s sensors might have been able to compensate with time but the shuttle's scanners are not powerful enough."

"I guess I'll set a course for Shakanara III then," said Lif and entered his new destination into the flight control panel.

The shuttle changed direction until the yellow planet was dead-centered before them and Lif throttled up to maximum impulse speed.

"What do you think we can expect there?"

"Worst case scenario?" Leva said, still working, "A fully-fledged Romulan outpost with a complete garrison of soldiers."

"I'm sorry, I asked," he said. In the back of his mind, a small voice began to question his foolish desire for adventure. Staying on *Eagle* would have given him plenty of that, hunting down a Romulan ship with the reassuring knowledge that the odds were stacked squarely in their favor.

"ETA to the planet: six minutes, thirty-five seconds," he said in an effort to ban those second thoughts from his mind.

"Something's wrong."

Lif threw the tactical officer a quizzical look.

"We were just a few minutes behind Nakaar when we entered the system. If he were headed straight to Shakanara III we would have spotted him the moment we arrived."

Lif nodded. "You think he's hiding somewhere?"

Leva whipped his head toward the lieutenant. "That's exactly what I'm thinking," he said and looked back at his console. "Change your heading to two-eight-eight mark four-seven."

Lif entered the new course.

The *Osiris*' bow readjusted once more.

The helmsman knew immediately where they were headed. "The asteroid field?"

Leva nodded.

"Good place to hide."

It took the small vessel less than two minutes to reach the asteroid field.

Lif had little trouble maneuvering the shuttle in between the large rock fragments. However, another problem soon became obvious. If sensors had been unreliable before, they seemed to become completely useless once they had entered the field. It was going to be impossible to detect another vessel within the radiation field and a visual survey would have consumed hours. And of course, the radiation itself would become lethal long before that.

"Lieutenant, activate the warp drive, full power."

"Warp drive?" Lif said confused. "Where are we going?"

"Nowhere."

The helmsman didn't follow.

"If you can't find the enemy you make the enemy find you. A sudden high energy spike should be sufficient to register even within all this radiation."

Lif quickly nodded with understanding. A small smile crept onto his lips. Leva's reputation as an extraordinary tactician was indeed well deserved.

Moments later the two nacelles of the shuttle erupted with a bright, blinding blue flash that lasted for just a mere second but consumed nearly a third of all of the vessel's power. The shuttle itself did not move at all.

Leva and Lif did not have to wait long for a response. They received a literal one just a few short moments after the energy surge.

*"It is you, Mister Leva, isn't it?"*

The voice that came over the speakers was unquestionably Nakaar's.

Lif looked at Leva and was about to reply when the tactical officer gestured for him to remain quiet. Then he turned back to his console, his fingers dancing over the controls.

*"You continue to surprise me. I had a feeling that I was being followed but now I understand that this was part of your plan all along. You would make a most excellent operative."*

Leva entered a few commands into his console and sent the message to Lif's station.

*Change course as follows, raise shields and activate weapons.*

He didn't waste time to follow the instructions.

"Why don't you come out in the open so we can discuss your proposition?" Leva said.

*"An intriguing idea but there is just one problem."*

"And what would that be?" said Leva as he looked up. The shuttle was approaching a large asteroid and beginning to move around it.

*"You're being less than honest with your intentions."*

"I guess you would now, wouldn't you? Being an expert on deceit." Leva's eyes remained focused on the viewport. The far side of the asteroid was slowly coming into view. His hands moved over the tactical controls.

*"The irony is that we both know that you secretly desire to return to Romulus. You were raised as a Romulan and that is not something easily forgotten. Of course, you do not speak of this to your friends or colleagues but I know how you truly feel. I can see past your denial, So'Dan."*

Lif turned to look at the man sitting next to him. He could see the muscles in his face tightening and his eyes narrowing. He suddenly found himself wishing he were not the only other person in this with him. For a fleeting moment, he questioned the true motives of a man he had never had any reason to doubt.

"Hard starboard, now," said Leva.

Lif practically punched the controls and yet it was still not fast enough.

A second shuttle, almost identical to the *Osiris* appeared, approaching fast from their blindside; phasers blasting away.

The two occupants of the *Osiris* held on to their consoles as the ship shuddered under the impacts. The *Achilles*, stolen from *Agamemnon*, screamed passed *Eagle's* shuttle with less than a handful of meters to spare.

Lif instinctively ducked as the hull of the *Achilles* shot by the viewport.

*Osiris*' phasers lashed out at the fleeing shuttle but did not slow it down.

"Stay with him," said Leva.

The helmsman nodded and engaged the impulse engines.

"Is this the famed Romulan way you keep touting about, Nakaar?" Leva said angrily as he focused on the *Achilles*. "Is this all you've got? Your only strategy? Running away?"

But his taunts remained unanswered.

Moments later the *Achilles* shot out of the asteroid field, now heading straight for Shakanara III. The *Osiris* was just a few short kilometers behind.

Lif shook his head. "We won't be able to catch up with him before he reaches the planet."

Leva stood up from his chair and moved to the back of the shuttle.

The Krellonian turned around to look at him. "Where are you going?"

"Just stay with him. I'll follow him down to the planet if I have to."

"That's suicide. You said it yourself, there are bound to be dozens of soldiers down there."

Leva grabbed a handheld phaser from the equipment locker and then turned to prepare the shuttle's transporter. "I don't care if I have to follow him into the depth of Romulan purgatory. I will not lose that man."

# Chapter Thirteen: Chances

There it was.

Periphocles V in all its infamous glory.

It was a world for which Michael had no feelings but pain and bitterness. There it was again just like it had been six years ago. He stood in the same shuttle, looking through the same viewport and onto the very same planet.

Just as before, there was the satellite, hanging in a low orbit, engaged and powered up by the bright blue energy beam that connected the device to the dark anti-matter accelerator on the surface.

But something was very wrong. Michael had expected to find himself here but it wasn't the way he had planned it. He turned away from the viewport to spot Ensign DeMara Deen. She wore the same uniform he did with the exception that hers was blue, not red.

“What's going on?”

She shook her head. “Something didn't go according to the plan,” she said. She stepped past him to make her way to the empty seat next to the Andorian pilot.

The man shot her a puzzled look and then turned to him. “Is there something the matter, sir?”

Before Michael and DeMara had made the last jump they had come up with a plan to attempt to stop Frobisher from going through with his experiment. They had decided to take every precaution including an armed security detail to detain the scientist before he could start the experiment. But besides DeMara, Michael, and the pilot, the shuttle was empty. Just the way it had been six years ago.

She sat down and turned her attention to the computer console. “We are one hour and seven minutes from the event threshold.”

Michael ignored the confused pilot and stepped behind her. The other part of their plan had been to arrive at the test site at least four hours before the electromagnetic storm would hit the accelerator and create the optimal testing conditions.

“That gives us even less time than we had six years ago. We won't be able to return to *Columbia*, will we?”

“Sir?”

Again, the pilot was ignored.

She shook her head. “I don't think that we can risk it.”

He uttered a heavy sigh. This would certainly complicate matters. Frobisher had somehow foreseen the actions he and DeMara would attempt to stop him and then found a way to counteract them. A few fragmented memories were beginning to form in his mind. Memories he knew he had never consciously lived through and yet they were undeniably his.

He thought to remember an argument with Captain Mendez that had almost ended with him being replaced as the supervising officer on this mission. At the time he had seen no other option but to stand down from his request. The details of the argument he could not recall.

He could sense that a lot of things had happened differently in this timeline—perhaps nothing that was consequential—but no matter how much he focused, he found it extremely difficult to sort out all the different memories in his head.

DeMara looked over her shoulder. “What do we do?”

“There is nothing we can do but to continue and do our best to stop him once we get there.”

The Andorian ensign had no idea what his two passengers were talking about. They had been perfectly normal—perhaps a bit too quiet—after boarding the *Erickson* but then all of a sudden, they had jumped into action and began discussing matters that seemed to have come from nowhere.

“Ensign, is there any way you could expedite our journey?” Michael said.

“It would make it a bumpy ride, sir.”

He smirked at that, recalling what the trip had been like years before. “Bumpy is an understatement, Ensign. But I don't care how uncomfortable we're going to be. Just get us there in one piece and do it fast.”

The Andorian's antennas twitched slightly but then a smile formed on his lips. Most pilots loved to push their vessels to the limit. He had just received permission to do just that. “You better hang on to something,” he said and turned back to the controls.

DeMara left the seat and followed Michael to the back of the craft and out of earshot of the pilot. "Frobisher is going to be prepared for us."

He found a place to sit down. "I'll find a way to stop him."

She sat opposite him. "Michael, I don't have to tell you how delicate this is going to be. We cannot afford to make any more drastic changes to the timeline," she said. It was quite clear as to what she was alluding to. She hadn't said much about the incident on the starbase after Michael's surprising release. But they both knew that the damage had been done and even though it appeared as though the whole thing had magically gone away, in reality, it hadn't. It was still there, idling under the surface just waiting to find the opportune moment to strike.

Michael realized that. After all, it was he who had to live with what had happened. But all that mattered little to him now. His one and only thought was to apprehend Frobisher before he could do any more damage.

He reached for an equipment bay and removed two hand phasers. He gave one to her and then checked the settings on his own weapon.

*The timeline be damned*, Michael thought. As far as he was concerned there was no way in hell he would allow Frobisher to kill his brother a second time.

\* \* \*

Michael didn't remember much about the way his day had started but he knew that he had skipped breakfast and he was mightily happy about that fact now.

The ride into Periphocles' lower atmosphere easily ranked amongst the worst trips he had ever taken in any vehicle. Both he and DeMara had to fight to stay in their seats as the shuttle lurched from side to side. It became so bad that for a while he lost all sense of up or down. His knuckles turned white and throbbed with pain as he dug his hands into his seat.

He tried to remain calm and control his breathing even when the shuttle violently banked to the left and Michael could swear that he heard part of the hull rip away from the ship.

And then it was all over.

Just as quickly as the rollercoaster ride had begun, it had ended as the shuttle shot out of the dense cloud formations and approached the landing pad on the surface. Michael was surprised how—after all that—the shuttle set down so softly, it felt as if they had landed on clouds.

"Destination achieved, sir," the pilot said dutifully as though he had done the trip a million times.

Michael took a deep breath before risking standing up again. He turned to the Andorian. "That was some damn fine piloting, Ensign."

The blue-skinned officer nodded curtly.

He could not, however, convince him to remain on the surface. The pilot had received strict orders to return to the *Columbia* at once. No doubt another condition Frobisher had placed on Starfleet to keep them from interfering.

Michael and DeMara watched the *Erickson* disappear and head back into the yellow and white clouds above.

Circular lightning bolts shot through the skies, unwinding toward the surface. But all was quiet for now. The proper storm was not going to hit their location for at least another hour.

Michael knew he had no time to waste. He clenched his phaser tightly and jogged toward the testing site. DeMara followed him closely.

The layout of the facility as well as the machinery, including the accelerator and the support systems were nearly identical to the way they had found them years earlier. The few changes seemed mostly superficial.

The first difference he spotted was the fact that the accelerator was connected by just two large conduits to the surrounding machinery even though he distinctly recalled that there had been several smaller connections before.

He remembered this quite vividly because disconnecting the conduits had been the way he had shut down the accelerator six years ago. He also found that there were three additional emitters all pointed at the smaller transport platform. He had no way of knowing if these changes had been made by Frobisher to improve his design or to prevent him from interfering.

As they stepped onto the main platform they were greeted by *Columbia's* chief engineer.

Amaya Donners smiled when she saw the two officers approach the platform in a hurry. "I had no idea you were this anxious about this experiment."

Michael slowed as he spotted the engineer. He had not seen her—properly seen her—since his first time jump and he had not considered the fact that he was bound to run into her again before all this was over.

He marveled once more how well she had aged over what had been twelve years. He was certain that she wore her hair differently than she had

the first time this had happened. It looked much more the way it had when she was younger. Trimmed down to her chin but with the same natural locks he had always admired. It took him a few moments to notice that her reaction to seeing him was not the way he had remembered it either.

“You think supervising an experiment that will make history is going to get you those captain’s stripes before me?” she said still flashing those brilliantly white teeth at him.

“That was the idea,” he said without missing a beat.

Her smile faded when she spotted the phaser in his hand. “Where’s the fire?”

Michael wasn’t paying attention. He was too focused on trying to figure out what exactly had changed between them. Making the decision not to repeat the same mistake twelve years earlier had significantly altered his relationship with Amaya Donners but he wasn’t sure by how much. Any change was good, he quickly decided.

He holstered his weapon. “Just being careful,” he said and then turned to look at DeMara. Only now did he notice her insistent stare. She was immediately aware that he was somehow responsible for Amaya Donner’s much warmer disposition.

“Well, we’re about ready here,” said the engineer. “We have fifty-three minutes until the event threshold. Everything looks good.”

Michael nodded slowly. The new Amaya Donners had distracted him for a moment but he quickly managed to refocus on what had to be done. “I’m afraid there has been a change of plans.”

She shot him a quizzical look.

Michael took a deep breath. He wondered if it was going to be wise to let Amaya in on their plan to stop Frobisher. He had no choice. If he wanted to succeed, he needed her help. “We have reason to believe that the experiment will seriously endanger Sentaka XII.”

The chief engineer looked at DeMara who confirmed this with a simple nod.

“We need to shut this experiment down ASAP,” he said.

Amaya didn’t reply immediately. Instead, she turned to look at the bulky accelerator behind her only then did she return to face her commanding officer. “Are you sure about this, Michael? You know how hard your brother and Doctor Frobisher have worked on this. You know that this might be the only chance they’ll ever get at doing this.”

He nodded. “Yes, I’m aware of all that and I wish there was another way but there simply isn’t. You’ve got to trust me on this one.”

She considered him with those brilliant eyes of hers and for just a moment Michael had absolutely no idea how where she would come down on this. Would she be an enemy or an ally in his desperate attempt to shut down Frobisher before he could even get started? Six years ago he knew she wouldn’t have hesitated to make his life as difficult as possible but a lot of things had changed.

He suppressed a sigh of relief when she finally nodded. “I never had any reason not to trust you,” she said. “But just so we’re clear, this is going to be on your head. I just put in for a first officer billet on the *Bellerophon* and I’ll be damned if I lose it because you have a bad hunch.”

“If this goes sideways you can tell them that I forced you at gunpoint,” he said with a boyish grin.

“Oh, I will.”

“Ensign Deen will give you a hand here while I’ll go and find the scientists.”

“Your brother is in the mission ops tent, I’m not sure where Doctor Frobisher is,” she said and turned to tend to the auxiliary control panel. It was the only device that allowed any control over the accelerator and even those functions were extremely limited. Both DeMara and Michael knew that they had to find another way to stop this experiment from taking place.

As he watched Amaya go to work at the controls, he took DeMara by the arm and led her away and out of the chief engineer’s earshot. “If you can’t shut down the accelerator, see if you can find out how to use it to get us back into our own time. I have no intention of reliving the next six years.”

“I’ll do what I can,” she said. “What exactly are you going to do?”

His reply was to unholster his phaser.

“We haven’t talked about this and I hate to be the one to bring it up but your brother ...” she could not get herself to say it.

He looked right into her eyes. For a moment he didn’t speak and he almost appeared as if he was reconsidering the things he had decided to do. But the look in his eyes quickly changed to an expression of complete determination. DeMara knew that he had come here with more than just a plan to stop Frobisher from destroying a world light-years away. He was here for a much more personal reason.

He steered his gaze past her and toward Amaya Donners. “I already changed the timeline, Dee, and from where I’m standing, it looks as if I’ve done more good than bad.” His eyes met her again. “Saving an innocent life is worth a small inconvenience to the damned timeline, don’t you think?”

“Michael, the question you have to ask yourself is: Would you do this if he was not a person you love?”

Somewhere in the back of his mind, a series of doubts and questions began to form. They were no match, however, for the promise he had



made to himself not too long ago. A promise he intended to keep no matter what.

“We have no time to philosophize over this. Stay here and keep an eye out for Frobisher. Contact me at once if you see him. Do not try to stop him by yourself,” he said and then quickly ran off toward the research camp, unwilling to delay one second more.

She looked after him for a moment before she turned to join Donners by the auxiliary console.

“Why do I get a distinct impression more is going on here than you guys are telling me,” she said and glanced at the young science officer.

But DeMara did not reply, didn't even look up from the console she had started to work on. For what could she possibly say without lying to her?

Donners took her silence as an answer.

\* \* \*

The mission ops tent was just a short walk from the testing site. The makeshift facility served as the principal research center for the project and it was spacious enough to house the numerous computer workstations required to support a scientific undertaking of this scale.

Michael entered the tent to find himself surrounded by countless screens most of which displayed technical schematics of the accelerator or monitored the dark anti-matter reactions.

He instinctively drew his weapon.

The tent seemed empty.

Michael made his way to the center of the tent and to the master operations display, a large table-shaped computer console that held the most vital information about the experiment.

He activated one of the embedded consoles to access additional information and perhaps discover a clue as to how to deactivate the accelerator. He was not surprised to find that numerous security barriers had been added to the computer, denying him access to any useful information.

“You shouldn't be in here.”

Michael spun around.

His brother stood by the entrance and now slowly stepped into the tent. “We set up clear guidelines for Starfleet not to interfere with our work,” he said coldly, and without giving his brother another look. He walked across the tent to a different computer station.

Michael remembered that those restrictions had been put in place by his brother and Frobisher to protect their work from Starfleet, fearing that the organization might use their research for military purposes. Those restrictions had been agreed upon by Starfleet and had been in place even during the first time he had supervised the experiment. But he knew that Frobisher had extended those restrictions this time around.

“I need to speak to you,” Michael said.

Matthew did not turn. “I have nothing to say to you. You should return to the testing site and wait for our arrival.”

Michael sighed. After his brother had witnessed the incident between him and Frobisher on the starbase two years earlier, their relationship had soured to a point of hostility. He had no clear memory of what exactly had transpired between them but he doubted very much that they had talked much since then.

“Listen, I have to find Frobisher. Where is he?”

Matthew didn't reply. But he did stop working at the console. Then he turned around and for the first time noticed the weapon in his brother's hand. “When I heard that you were going to observe our experiment here, I did what I could to convince Starfleet what a terrible mistake that would be. I was not wrong. Have you come to finish what you started two years ago?”

Michael noticed his brother's eyes on the phaser and he quickly holstered it. “I do not have time to argue with you. I need to find him.”

“Why do you think I'd help you? You've tried to destroy my work since that day you came to me at Cambridge. You almost killed Wes the last time we met and for some reason, I'll never understand, they just let you get away without any punishment. I guess it helps to be the favorite son of a Starfleet admiral.”

Those last words stung, especially because he was convinced that they were true. For a moment he considered what he could possibly say to make sense of all the things that had happened over the years. Could he tell him the truth? Would he believe him?

He glanced at the far wall. There, one of the larger monitors displayed the countdown to the event threshold. To the moment the massive

atmospheric storm would have moved right on top of them and the experiment would commence. He had less than fifty minutes left to avert a catastrophe. He had no more time for subtleties.

He took a decisive step toward his brother. "You're worrying about this experiment, about Frobisher."

Matthew looked at him quizzically. "Pardon me?"

"For a while now, you've been worried about this moment. Frobisher has been acting strangely lately, more reclusive than usual. He might have made some unusual changes to Big Betty that did not make much sense to you."

"Big Betty? How do you—"

But Michael did not let him speak. "You're concerned that you didn't sufficiently stress the risks to Sentaka XII if there were to be any mistake in your calculations."

Matthew looked at him as though he was a perfect stranger and not the brother he had known all his life. His lucid mind could not find a way to rationalize how Michael Owens, a Starfleet officer with no scientific background, could possibly know all these things.

Michael couldn't wait for him to find the words to speak. "I'm here to tell you that all your concerns are justified. I'm here to tell you that if we do not stop this experiment now, millions of people will die."

For a moment nobody spoke. Matthew simply stared at his brother, perhaps wondering if he had gone mad. Then as if an important thought had shot through his mind, he broke eye contact. "Temporal anomalies," he said absently. "That's the only way to explain this," he continued, speaking to himself. He looked at his brother. "I found out about these abnormalities about a year ago. I realized the dark anti-matter accelerator design we've built has the potential of creating unstable distortions in the space-time continuum. You found out about it, didn't you? You've been here before and now you've come back. How?"

"I can't explain it. All I know is that Frobisher must have managed to stabilize those anomalies at some point in the future and used them to travel back in time. I followed him."

Matthew nodded slowly as he began to understand. His brother's strange behavior suddenly began to make sense to him.

"This means that all the work I've done was for nothing. All these years I've spent to try and bring this dream to life and for what?"

Michael shot another glance at the countdown and then looked back at his brother who seemed deep in thought now, contemplating wasting half a lifetime on an utterly futile pursuit. He stepped in front of him and gently reached out for his upper arms. "I can understand how you must feel, Matt, but you have to help me shut this thing down before it's too late."

Matthew's head rose slowly until his eyes found his brother's. A small smile came onto his lips. "I'm sorry," he said quietly. "I'm sorry for doubting you."

He nodded. "Don't be. I know what all this must've looked like to you. I would have acted the same way if I had been in your shoes, trust me."

Michael removed his hands and Matt went to work at the master operations console. "It shouldn't be too difficult to shut down Big Betty from here."

"I'm not so sure," said Michael and joined him. "Frobisher had six years to plan this trip and so far, it seems as if he has prepared for every eventuality."

Matthew frowned when the computer console did not yield the results that he had hoped for. "You're right. He transferred all the higher command controls to the remote. I can't gain access from here," he said and looked at Michael. "I do not understand. Why's he doing this? He must know that the experiment won't work."

"He is convinced that it will this time around and he's willing to risk everything to prove his point. Where is the remote?"

"Wes has it. He's been in his cabin all day but he will need to come out to commence the final stage of the matter transport. Even with the remote he needs to be within twenty meters of Big Betty. We can just wait for him to come to us."

Michael shook his head. "I'm not willing to risk that. I have to apprehend him before he has a chance to start the final stage," he said and reached for his phaser. "Where's his cabin?"

"I'll show you," said Matthew and began to head toward the exit.

But Michael reached out for his arm and held him back.

Matthew looked at the firm grasp with surprise and then gave his brother a puzzled expression.

"I need you to stay here. Whatever happens, promise me that you'll not leave this tent."

"Why? What's going on?"

"I just ... I just think that Frobisher has become dangerous. He might resolve to violence if he thinks he's cornered."

"Wes? I don't think so."

“He’s changed, Matt. He has become a criminal, he’s about to kill millions of innocent people. I think it is best if you waited here.”

Matthew didn’t reply.

“I’ll be back as soon as I have him in custody,” said Michael and headed for the exit.

“Mike?”

He stopped and turned.

“What happens to me in the future?”

Michael was about to speak when Matthew cut him off. “No, I don’t need to know this. Just go and stop him. I’ll wait for you here. His cabin is about fifty meters west of here. It’s inside building oh-three.”

Michael nodded and looked at his brother for another few moments. He didn’t want to take his eyes off him for even a second. But he knew he had no choice, not if he wanted to stop Frobisher.

He turned and briskly left the tent.

\* \* \*

As Michael stepped outside he was greeted by a mighty roar of thunder, ripping through the skies above. A pulsating cloud of yellow and white was heading his way. It was visibly packed with atmospheric energy and ready to burst at any moment. He knew it wouldn’t until it was right above his head. Lightning shot out of the cloud and circled toward the surface until it hit the ground just a few hundred meters away

Michael quickly proceeded westward and tapped his combadge. “Dee, report.”

*“We haven’t had much luck here yet, I’m afraid,”* she said. *“Frobisher has made sure that we can’t gain direct access.”*

“I shut down the accelerator before.”

*“In a rather unconventional manner.”*

“Dee, I don’t care if we have to blow that damn thing to smithereens to stop it.”

There was a short pause. When she spoke again, she nearly whispered. *“It wouldn’t work. From what I can tell the doctor added some form of failsafe device to prevent any external tempering. If we try as much as disconnecting the main power supply we might trigger a massive energy feedback and risk blowing half the planet to smithereens.”*

He sighed. “What about the other thing?”

She didn’t need to be told what he was referring to. *“I think we might be able to use the conditions of the event threshold to our advantage. Our timing has to be precise though and we need direct access to the main interface. The biggest problem is going to control the exact point of reemergence in the timeline.”*

“Understood, keep working on it,” he said. “I’ve almost reached Frobisher’s cabin. Stay alert,” he added and tapped his combadge to close the link.

More thunder roared across the skies above. He could feel the earth tremble slightly as a lightning bolt hit one of the outlying rods.

It didn’t distract him from what he had to do. As soon as he spotted the building that housed Frobisher’s living quarters, he began to sneak toward it. He made sure that the air was clear before stepping out into the open.

The entire research complex was like a ghost town. The facility held enough room for thirty researchers to work and live in but now, on the eve of the culmination of all their efforts, just two had remained.

He double-checked his phaser, making sure it was set to heavy stun before he stepped to the entrance of the building. He activated the door release and quickly stepped inside with his weapon at the ready.

He found a simple room with a workstation, a small table, a few chairs, two bookshelves, and a bed. No sign of Frobisher. There was another door at the opposite side of the room and he quickly made it across. It let outside.

Not a moment after having stepped across the threshold he could hear a faint electric humming coming from somewhere close by.

Behind him.

He whipped around but it was already too late.

Something struck him in the side and he felt a powerful surge gripping his body. The blow pushed him back. For a moment he was stunned. He lost all motor control and his phaser simply fell out of his hand before he hit the ground.

“I’ve been expecting you.”

Michael made it to his hands and knees as his muscles slowly began to relax from the sudden assault.

He could still feel the tingle of electricity that had shot through his entire body. He tried to stand but failed miserably and fell back down onto his knees. As he looked up, he saw Frobisher standing tall above him, smiling haughtily. To his surprise, he didn’t seem armed.

Frobisher picked up the phaser Michael had dropped and inspected it for a moment. He changed the setting and then pointed it at Michael’s head. “You will find that there is nothing you can come up with that I haven’t thought of already. I waited years for this moment. I’ve made dead sure that this time everything will be perfect.”

Michael found it difficult to speak. “What if ... what if it won’t be perfect? Have you thought of that? Have you thought of the ... the millions of lives you’re gambling with?” he said, his voice sounding weak and not like his own at all. He didn’t bank much success on talking Frobisher out of his plans but perhaps he could buy himself some time.

“My calculations were always perfect. If you hadn’t stopped me—”

“Your calculations were wrong. Everybody could see that. You made a mistake.”

“You speak of things you couldn’t possibly understand. No matter. You’ll see,” he said and threw the phaser away and out of Michael’s reach. “I will not kill you yet. I’ve got other plans for you.” Frobisher turned his back to the Starfleet officer.

Michael saw his chance. He had gathered enough strength to attack Frobisher bare-handed if he had to. The scientist wore a heavy silver belt and attached to it was a small padd. He figured that it was the remote his brother had mentioned. If he could just get to it, he could stop the experiment before it ever got started.

His body tensed as he readied himself. Just as Frobisher was about to turn again, he jumped and launched himself at the scientist. He knew he had the strength and the momentum to knock him down.

He reached out expecting to feel a living body but instead, he ran right into a brick wall.

At least that’s what it felt like.

There was a bright flash and he simply bounced off Frobisher and was pushed backward again only to land painfully in the dirt once more. He felt the same power surge gripping his body. His arms and legs flopped uncontrollably for a few seconds, reacting to the intensity of the electric current. His head lay twisted in the dirt and as much as he tried to move, his body would not comply. His eyes, however, were wide open and he watched helplessly as Frobisher knelt next to him.

“Surprised?” he said with a smile. His hand moved to his belt buckle. A round metallic device with a few small controls attached, hinting at some sort of mechanism. He slightly adjusted the buckle and a blue force field flared up for an instant. It completely covered him from head to toe.

“Personal repellant field. My own design. I knew it would come in handy,” he said and stood up again. He reached for the padd and removed it from his belt. He entered something into the remote and then looked back down at the immobilized officer. “Now I really do have to go and catch up to my destiny. But don’t worry, I’ll make sure you’ll be around to see the final act,” he said and then walked off without giving the other man as much as a second glance.

Michael was desperate to get up or at the very least shout at Frobisher as he walked away, taunt him, anything to delay him from carrying out his plans.

But he couldn’t. His body had become utterly useless, ignoring any command that his brain demanded. He had no means of stopping the scientist and watched impotently as he disappeared from his limited field of vision.

Rage began to fill him once more. Rage at having been neutralized so easily and rage at the man who had done this to him and who was planning to do so much more. He was not going to allow it. He would find a way. But not in his present state. Michael knew he had to concentrate if he wanted any hope of denying Frobisher what he had called his destiny.

He focused on his unmoving hand that lay just a few inches from his face. He focused all his thoughts and all his will to make just one finger move. Just one. It was the simplest of tasks and yet it was a monumental effort. The electric charge had stunned if not seriously damaged his neuro-pathways. His mind could think of what to do but his body had no means of transporting that information to the necessary muscles. Michael didn’t try to think of how much damage had been done. His only thought was to move a finger. Just one small finger.

The sky began to fill with the sound of thunder again. Two roars in quick succession. He heard the sound of lightning hitting a nearby deflector pole. But what was truly important was the fact that he could feel the vibrations shooting through the ground. He could feel again.

And then it moved. First his index, then the middle finger then his thumb, and eventually his entire hand. He felt an almost intolerable pain when he tried to prop himself up, putting all his weight on that one hand. But somehow, he managed and a couple of minutes later he was on his knees.

He looked up at the sky above. The thunder had become almost constant now and the clouds pulsating steadily. It was almost time. He tried to stand but his knees buckled. His trembling hand found his combadge.

“Dee ...”

*“Michael, are you all right?”*

“Been better,” he said with obvious difficulty. His voice sounded uneven to his ears as though spoken by somebody far away. “Frobisher is coming your way. Stop him any way you can.”

*“Do you need help?”*

Michael managed to get onto his feet but keeping his balance turned out to require his entire attention. “No. Just look out for Frobisher. He’s got some form of personal force field that he can use as a weapon. Don’t ... don’t attack him head-on. I’ll be there in a minute. How much time?”

*“Not much. Less than fifteen minutes.”*

“Understood, out.”

Only now did he realize how long it had taken him to gain back control of his body. It hadn’t seemed like much but in reality, he had spent long agonizing minutes lying on the ground. He took a careful step and then another and another. He couldn’t shake that crawling sensation all over his skin but he managed to ignore it and walked faster and faster back toward the main testing site.

It took him four minutes to finally get to a position from where he could see Big Betty again.

DeMara and Amaya were still at work at the auxiliary console. The accelerator itself was still powered up, the blue beam seemingly becoming stronger by the second. But Frobisher was nowhere in sight.

“Michael?”

The voice came from behind him. He turned to see his brother approach. He held the phaser Frobisher had taken from him.

“What are you doing here? I told you to stay in the tent.”

“Listen, I don’t know what happens to me in the future you have seen and I don’t want to know. The fact is that this is my responsibility too. I helped build that thing so I’ll help you stop him.”

Michael shook his head. “We cannot risk it.”

“We have no time to argue about this.”

He knew he was right. The sound of thunder filled the air all around him now. One lightning bolt after the other was being unleashed. The storm was here.

“All right you know this thing as well as Frobisher does. How do we stop it?”

“I’ve been thinking about that,” Matthew said. “There is another control console directly below Big Betty?”

“Below?”

He nodded. “Yes, it used to be right on the main platform but Wes decided to conceal it. There should be a manual override to raise the console.”

*“Michael, ten minutes to event threshold. Still no sign of Doctor Frobisher,”* said DeMara over a comlink. Michael had difficulty making out her voice. The thunderstorm above him was beginning to drown out all other sounds.

“Understood,” he said and then looked at his brother. “Let’s get to the override.”

Matthew held up the phaser he was still holding. “I found this when I was looking for you.”

“Keep it,” Michael said.

Matthew nodded and began sprinting toward the platform.

Michael tried to follow as rapidly as he could but his legs wouldn’t carry him as fast. He ground his teeth as he felt pain shooting through his entire body. His legs felt as if they were on fire.

Matthew turned to look at his brother. He could tell that he was in pain. “What’s wrong?”

“Never mind me,” he said. “Get to that release; I’ll be right behind you.”

Matthew nodded and continued. He reached the main platform soon after. He dropped to his knees, sliding across the smooth surface, and opened a small hidden hatch in the ground. He reached inside and pulled a lever. Not a moment later a small section in the floor on the platform opened up and an additional console started to rise.

When Michael finally reached the platform, the console was fully extended and Matthew had already started to work on it.

Michael stopped at the edge of the platform and took a deep breath, hoping to ease the intolerable pain he still felt. He knew he couldn’t afford the time to take a break but there wasn’t much he could do now in any case. Instead, he looked around carefully, trying to spot

Frobisher. He could not find the scientist but something else caught his eye. Something had started to move. They looked like emitters and they were attached directly to the dark anti-matter accelerator. And then he saw another one also changing its orientation. He turned his head. One of the emitters was bearing down on DeMara and Donners while the other was taking aim at Matthew.

He hit his combadge. "Both of you get away from that console now!" he yelled as loudly as he could. But the noise of the thunder drowned him out. He could hardly hear his own words anymore.

"Get away from there!" Michael shouted at his brother and ran toward him.

Matthew didn't understand until Michael pointed at the emitter. He quickly stepped away from the console.

Michael was still running when he caught another glimpse at the device. It had readjusted again. A red beam shot out and it was coming straight for him.

"Michael!"

He jumped out of the way and landed painfully on the hard floor of the platform. It seemed the beam had missed him. But he couldn't move. Something was holding him in place. He looked down the length of his body. The red beam had caught his right leg; half of it was now stuck in some sort of confinement field.

Matthew hurried to his brother. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine but I can't move."

"It's a restraining field. Harmless but powerful," he said and looked at the auxiliary station on the opposite side of the platform. DeMara and Donners had been hit with the full brunt of the beam. They were both frozen in place. "You might be able to force your way out but your people were not so lucky."

Michael turned to look at the others. They looked like salt statues, surrounded by intense red light. He diverted his glance at the emitters. "Can you shoot them out?"

Matthew shook his head. "We can't risk it. It might cause a feedback loop that could ignite the dark anti-matter."

Michael knew what that meant. "Don't worry about me, go and shut off this damn machine."

Matthew nodded and jumped back to his feet. Just as he headed back for the console it began to retract. A flash of panic crossed his face. For a moment he tried to hold on to the disappearing device but it was no use. He raced back to the manual release, reached into the hatch, and pumped the lever. With no results. The console had completely retracted and was not coming back.

Matthew looked at his brother, answering his quizzical expression. "It's Wes. I need that remote."

Michael just stared back at his brother. It took Matthew a few seconds to realize that he was not staring at him but past him and at something immediately behind his back. He instantly whipped around.

Westren Frobisher had stepped onto the platform. He held the remote and slowly attached it to his belt.

"Stop this Wes. This is insane," shouted Matthew.

"What are you talking about?" the other scientist shot back. "This is what we dreamed about. Can't you see? Our time has finally come. We've waited so long. Now is our turn to make history."

"Not if it means risking the lives of so many people."

"Is that what your brother has told you? His mind is small, Matt. He doesn't understand the way we do. He couldn't possibly grasp what I ... what we're trying to accomplish," he said as he slowly stepped sideways.

Matthew brought the phaser to bear. "I can't let you do this."

"So I see," Frobisher said. "You have no idea how much your decision saddens me."

Michael could no longer stand watching this unfold helplessly. He redoubled his efforts to free himself from the confinement beam. A couple of centimeters was all he could manage. "We're out of time. Shoot him!"

"I don't want to do this, Wes. Hand over the remote," Matthew said.

"I'm afraid I've made up my mind," Frobisher said with a self-assured smile. "I've waited too long for this. Much longer than you have."

"Shoot him!" Michael yelled again.

"I'm sorry, Wes," said Matthew and raised the phaser higher.

"Yes, I think you will be," Frobisher replied. His hand moved to his belt buckle and twisted it slightly.

Michael felt a sudden sickness in his stomach. Something was not right and he instantly knew what it was. "No, Matt! Stop!" he yelled and put all his force into one last pull. He didn't know where the burst of strength had come from exactly but suddenly he was free from his constraint. He ignored the agonizing pain shooting through his limbs and got to his feet.

“Wait!”

Too late, Matthew fired.

The discharge hit Frobisher straight in the chest but it never connected. Instead, it bounced straight back into the direction it had come from.

Matthew’s eyes opened wide when he saw the crimson beam being slung back toward him. He wanted to jump out of its path but he couldn’t move faster than a phaser beam. The powerful discharge gripped his body, lifted him off the ground, and pushed him off the platform. His body landed a few meters away and it remained there, unmoving.

Michael reached his body not two seconds after he had hit the ground. He quickly turned him over. The front of his shirt was completely burned and Michael was forced to relive one of the most painful experiences of his life. Tears shot into his eyes. He had failed him. He had failed him again.

Matthew coughed.

“Matt.”

The older brother slowly opened his eyes. “I shouldn’t have done that.”

“Matt, you’re going to be all right,” he said and a large smile came over his face. It vanished quickly. “I’m sorry, I’m so sorry.”

Matthew slowly shook his head. “Don’t worry about it,” he said weakly.

“No, no, no, no!”

Michael turned. Frobisher was beginning to panic but he didn’t understand why.

“Not now, not now you fool!” shouted Frobisher and headed away from the accelerator.

Michael found the cause of the scientist’s excitement quickly. The smaller transporter platform had come to life with a bright white pillar of light. But the event threshold had not been reached yet, Michael was sure of that.

“What’s happening?” Matthew said.

Michael could hardly hear his brother’s weak voice “I’m not sure.”

As Frobisher hurried toward the transporter a figure appeared inside the bright light and stepped out of it. The tall man looked familiar but Michael couldn’t quite place him. He looked Vulcan.

“Somebody has just been transported through the accelerator,” he said and looked down at his brother. “How is that possible?”

Matthew shook his head slightly. “It isn’t. Unless…”

The Vulcan took in his surroundings with apparent confusion. He seemed utterly perplexed as to where he was. Then anger came over his face when he spotted Frobisher approaching him. “Doctor, what is going on here? This is not Rexnar?”

The planet Rexnar was deep inside Romulan territory, Michael thought. It was well over fifty light-years away from Periphocles and not even the accelerator would have been able to transport a person that far.

And then it dawned on him. The man had not just come here from a different place but also from a different time.

He looked down at his brother. “I think he’s from the future. My future.”

“Yes,” said Matthew and began to cough again. “That would make sense. Michael, this is your way out. By coming here, he established a direct link to your time. But you need to get Frobisher’s remote and reverse the—” the worsening cough forced him to stop.

“I have to get you back to *Columbia*, you need help.”

Matthew vehemently shook his head. “No, there is no time. Listen to me, you have to get to that control console, reverse the anti-matter flow and overload the transporter emitter. It’s the only way now.”

“What about you? What about the experiment?”

“Forget about me. The accelerator will shut down once it has registered the overload. I’m sure of it. But it will give you enough time to get you back to the future.”

Now it was Michael who shook his head. “I’m not leaving you here to die, not again.”

“What choice do you have?” he said with all his remaining strength. “I’m sorry, Michael,” he said. “It is the only way and you know it.”

Michael looked at his brother. He could see the life slowly draining out of his eyes. He was dying and there was nothing he could do to prevent it. For a second time in his life, he had to watch his brother die and he was not sure if he could handle the dread this caused him.

When Matthew spoke again it was not much more than a whisper. “Michael, I do not regret my life or the choices that I’ve made. Don’t regret yours.”

Michael nodded slowly. He had no words to speak anymore. There was nothing that could be said that would do justice to this moment.

“Take care of yourself,” Matthew said as his eyes started to close.

Michael slowly tore himself away. He didn't want to but now that he had failed his brother, he had to make sure that he would not fail those millions of people that would die if he didn't act quickly.

It was perhaps one of the most difficult moments in his entire life as he forced himself to ignore the immense personal anguish that was washing over him. He began to focus on the responsibilities that were now solely on his shoulders. He had to be a Starfleet captain again.

He jumped to his feet and knew instantly what to do.

“Frobisher!”

The scientist was desperately arguing with the man who had arrived from the future and who had drawn a weapon on him now, threatening to kill him.

He turned when he heard his name.

Michael hurried to the accelerator and to the same spot he had gone to six years earlier when he had successfully stopped the machine. Instead of the many different conduits he had found there late time, now there was only one attached to Big Betty.

“I will stop you and I don't care anymore how I'll do it!” he shouted and reached for the conduit.

Frobisher's eyes opened wide. “Don't touch that! You'll kill us all!”

But Michel ignored the warning and began to pull the conduit out of the accelerator. He could feel a powerful electric current zapping through his hands and arms but he forced himself to go on.

Frobisher ignored the man threatening him and sprinted toward Michael while at the same time adjusting his belt buckle.

Michael saw the scientist approach from the corner of his eye. Just as Frobisher was about to strike him, he jumped back. He wasn't quite fast enough and he felt the charge of Frobisher's repellent field impact his shoulder. The entire side of his body went numb instantaneously and he stumbled to the ground.

Frobisher gave Michael no further attention. The conduit had been halfway removed and a powerful feedback loop was starting to build up between the loose connections, threatening to evaporate the accelerator.

Without thinking, Frobisher pushed his entire weight into the conduit to reattach it. It slipped back into place but the surge of the ungrounded electricity shot out at Frobisher and immediately reacted with his force field. The sheer force of the surge caused his highly charged belt to explode into a million pieces while his body was catapulted into the air.

Michael tried to get back on his feet but half his body would not respond. He could see the remote lying on the ground a few feet away but out of his reach. He stretched out with his good arm, dug his fingers into the ground, and pushed himself toward it. He reached the remote and found the control to raise the console again. Then when he saw it fully revealed once more, he smashed the padd hard against a rock. The device splintered to pieces.

He took two deep breaths and then looked around. Frobisher was lying about ten meters away. He wasn't moving but he was still breathing.

With nothing but sheer willpower, he forced himself onto his legs and began limping toward the console. He was halfway there when Frobisher came back around.

The scientist too stumbled back onto his feet. It took him a few moments to realize what had happened and that both his personal force field and the remote were gone. Then he spotted Michael near the raised control console. He started after him but he knew he would not make it in time. He turned to the only other ally he had.

“Shoot that man! Shoot him and I can send you where you need to go!”

The man nodded and brought his disruptor to bear.

Michael had reached the console but was suddenly aware that the Vulcan was trying to get a bead on him. He had just enough time to find the controls that deactivated the confinement beams before he had to duck for cover behind the console.

A green energy discharge whizzed through the air where his head had been only a second before.

DeMara Deen and Amaya Donners had watched the entire scenario play out in front of their eyes helplessly. They had tried to move or speak but the paralyzing energy field around them had not allowed them to do either. When it suddenly disappeared, DeMara immediately reached for her phaser.

The Vulcan circled the console until his line of fire was clear.

It was only now that Michael recognized his attacker. It was Delegate Nakaar. He had no time to wonder what he was doing here or why he was trying to kill him while he looked right down the muzzle of his disruptor. There was nothing else he could do.

DeMara fired but her shot was slightly off-line. It hit Nakaar in the right shoulder. It was enough to make him drop his weapon and lose his balance.



Michael jumped back up and turned to the console.

“Event threshold in forty-five seconds!” Amaya shouted from the top of her lungs.

The sky was now filled with a continuous barrage of thunder and lightning. The pulsating clouds had begun forming a pitch-black rupture in the fabric of space that was steadily increasing in size.

Without a second thought, Michael pushed all the power regulators to maximum, ignoring the bright red warnings that announced an overload in progress.

Michael was about to turn to DeMara and warn her about what he hoped was going to happen when something struck him hard. Frobisher had come out of nowhere and thrown himself against him. They both stumbled to the ground. Michael hit his head hard against the floor of the platform and was momentarily dazed.

Frobisher tried to stand and inspect what kind of damage had been done but he didn't get very far. He froze as his eyes caught a glimpse of the console. His gaze slowly wandered upward until he saw the transporter emitter that was still emanating the white pillar of light. But the device was now breaking up, buckling under the immense pressures caused by the overload.

When Michael came around a few seconds later the first thing he saw was Frobisher's blank face staring off into the distance.

The emitter, unable to contain the massive amounts of power being pumped through it, buckled under the pressure and then exploded and so did the bright light as it shot out in every direction, sucking up everything and everyone in its path.

# Chapter Fourteen: Future

Nora Laas had decided to return to the testing site. If there was even the slightest chance to follow the captain she would take it.

José Carlos and T’Nerr were hot on her heels as she ran back toward the accelerator device. Even before she had reached it, she could see that the bright white pillar of light into which the captain and Deen had disappeared had returned.

She tapped her combadge. “Skyler, what’s the status of those guards?” she said as she kept pace.

*“I count eight of them now. You’re about to run into them at any second.”*

She nodded even though she was sure that McIntyre would not be able to notice. “I’ll make a run for the platform. Cover me.”

*“Understood.”*

She tapped the badge again. “You too,” she said without turning. “Retreat as soon as I’m through or in case I don’t make it.”

At that moment two Romulan soldiers stepped out in the open, slowly approaching the accelerator. They both spotted the charging Bajoran immediately. The first guard didn’t even get the chance to bring up his weapon. McIntyre’s aim was spot on and he was ripped off his feet by a well-placed sniper blast.

The second guard had slightly more time but it was still not enough to give him an advantage. He was struck down by Carlos’ phaser seconds after his comrade had hit the ground.

Laas continued across the testing site to get to the transporter pad at the opposite end. She heard more firing but it was coming from behind her now.

Then one of the guards stepped right into her path. She jumped aside just in time to avoid the disruptor charge he had unleashed. She found a few barrels to use for cover and when she heard a loud blast, she quickly ventured a look. McIntyre had been on target again. The Romulan soldier was already lying motionless on the ground.

Just as she tried to get up, she was forced back down by a barrage of incoming fire. Two Romulans had taken cover behind a crate directly across from her and had her pinned now.

Leaning with her back against the barrels she hit her combadge. “Skyler, I could use your help here.”

*“Sorry Lieutenant, I don’t have a shot.”*

She turned to see if Carlos or T’Nerr could intervene but they had been forced back by another group of Romulans and she was effectively cut off from them.

Just then she was blinded by an intense bright light. It lasted just a few seconds but when she could see again she found that both Owens and Deen had reappeared on the platform. Frobisher had also returned and another man, a Vulcan, was with them as well.

The Romulan guards ceased firing for the moment as they found themselves surprised by the sudden appearance. They quickly decided to take aim at the new targets of opportunity. Nora reacted instinctively and jumped out from behind the barrels and opened fire at the distracted Romulans. She connected with one of them but the other had managed to shift position in time and return fire, hitting her in the shoulder.

The adrenaline coursing through her made Laas hardly even register the pain but the force of the impact spun her backward and she lost her footing. She thought she heard another sniper blast before she hit the ground.

\* \* \*

The first thing Michael realized when he opened his eyes was that he was back on Shakanara III in his own time. It had been days since he had last seen this place and yet everything seemed instantly familiar.

He wore his black special operations uniform again and most amazing of all he could sense no traces of the battering his body had received minutes earlier. It was as though he had swapped bodies. His mind, however, was not as fast to recover. Even though the physical pain was gone, it was still all too real in his mind.

Around him, the world seemed at war.

The Romulans and his people were engaged in a firefight and he became quickly concerned as to what might happen if a stray beam would hit the anti-matter accelerator that stood just a few paces from the battle.

He didn't get much of a chance to worry about that when he spotted Frobisher. He had returned from the past as well but he had adapted to the sudden change much better than the others. He had jumped on his feet and was quickly attempting to put some distance to the battlefield by running toward one of the surrounding mountain ranges.

Michael turned to pursue the scientist. He was determined that after all he had been through, after all, that Frobisher had done, he would not allow him to escape a second time. He would make damned sure that this place would see the end of the chase that had begun what now seemed like a lifetime ago.

He didn't get far. Nakaar who had just recovered from his involuntary trip through time stepped into the captain's path, his disruptor pistol pointed at his chest.

"You're not going anywhere. I need answers and somebody will talk," he said through clenched teeth. "I want to know what exactly just happened."

Michael was about to reply when somebody else beat him to it.

"We're way past talking, Nakaar."

Michael and Nakaar turned to see So'Dan Leva who had seemingly appeared out of thin air. He held a phaser and pointed it at the Romulan spy. He didn't wait for a reply and squeezed the trigger.

Nakaar jumped just in time, avoiding the incoming discharge by a hair's length.

"Are you all right, Commander?" he said.

Leva offered a serious nod. "I've got this, sir," he said and under any other circumstances, Michael would have been concerned about the look of murder in the other man's eyes.

He could relate.

He decided that he didn't have the time to get involved. He had his own battle to fight.

Without any more delay, he took off after Frobisher who had disappeared behind a few large boulders up the mountain slope ahead. His mind was set on a single task: Stop Frobisher, no matter what.

\* \* \*

So'Dan uttered a nasty Romulan curse when he realized that he had missed Nakaar.

He'd had a clear shot and he could have ended it right then and there. It hadn't felt right to shoot Nakaar in the back, however. Even though he was convinced that he deserved little better. It would have been poetic justice.

He found cover behind a large, black processing unit. "This ends here, Nakaar," he said as he fired his weapon. "There's nowhere else you can run to."

The disguised Vulcan responded in kind but only managed to connect with the sturdy computing device. "I admit you have turned out to be a formidable opponent. But you have always been a step behind. Half measures, So'Dan. Half measures from a half-Romulan. It's the best you can do. Don't blame yourself, it's in your DNA."

So'Dan fired a few covering shots and jumped out from behind the processing unit to head for the accelerator.

Nakaar returned fire but So'Dan turned out to be an elusive target.

The Romulan spy jerked around with alarm when a powerful high-angle blast impacted just a few centimeters from him, hitting the ground and blowing up dust and dirt.

Nakaar quickly ascertained that a sniper had taken up position somewhere on the surrounding mountain range. He fired a couple of blasts in that general direction and then left his cover to go after Leva. But instead of following the path the half-Romulan Starfleet officer had taken, he circled the accelerator the other way. He found no sign of Leva. Too late did he think of looking in the one place he would have chosen to hide.

So'Dan leapt from the accelerator and landed right on top of Nakaar pulling him to the ground. Nakaar hit the solid floor plates of the platform hardest. He lost hold of his disruptor, which fell into a depression and out of reach. Dazed he tried to get back up but a square kick to

his midsection stopped him short. He flopped onto his back seeing Leva towering over him through half-closed eyes. He managed a small smile.

“You’re a warrior after all,” he said. “Maybe there is more Romulan in you than I gave you credit for.”

There was unadulterated hate mirrored in So’Dan’s eyes now and his boot connected with his defenseless opponent’s head, slamming it to one side and knocking free teeth and blood.

He simply laughed. “It may not be too late for you, after all. We both know that Starfleet is not your true home. I can see it in your eyes. You long to be with your people.”

So’Dan felt nothing but pity for his enemy. He had been defeated and was now reduced to fighting with his only remaining weapon. His pathetic attempts at subversion.

Nakaar shifted slightly and began to sit up against the accelerator. “Look inside you and you’ll know I speak the truth. You have felt lost all your life. You never really fit in, did you? Did you?”

As much as he hated it, he could not deny some truth to what Nakaar said. He had always been an outsider, nearly unique in his origins he had never been able to feel the same way many of his fellow officers and friends did. He had no place to call home, no people to call his countrymen. It was true that he had made friends. Nora, Deen, Culsten, and even though they were, like him, minorities in an organization dominated by humans and other races, at least they all had a place to go to where they could be with their own kind. He did not.

Nakaar could sense that he was getting somewhere. “You’ve doubted your place in Starfleet, I know. It’s not where you belong. Come with me and return to your home which is yours by birthright.”

So’Dan let his gaze slip for just a few moments. His home? *Eagle* was his home now. And suddenly it was all perfectly clear. Home was not some physical place on some planet. It was wherever it felt right. Wherever he felt accepted and respected. For now, that place was *Eagle*. He did not doubt that on Romulus he would be even more an outsider than he had been on Earth. He had been a child when he had grown up in a Romulan colony where he had been teased and ridiculed for his appearance.

Nakaar found what he had been looking for. His hand had moved behind his back and into the depression in which his weapon had disappeared earlier. His fingers gripped the handle and when he noticed Leva’s momentary distraction, he sprang into action. Fast as lightning, his arm swung around, disruptor at the ready.

Not fast enough.

So’Dan spotted the movement and brought up his leg to kick the weapon out of his hand. His boot connected and the disruptor went flying out of Nakaar’s hand again.

Nakaar seized his opportunity and promptly kicked out his other leg from underneath him and So’Dan went down hard. He managed to soften his fall somewhat and roll to his side. Nakaar had jumped to his feet to make a run for it, quickly disappearing behind the accelerator.

So’Dan found the disruptor, got up, and raced after Nakaar. Once he had made it around the large machine, he spotted the spy running across open space, away from him and the accelerator.

So’Dan stopped in his tracks.

A group of at least two dozen Romulan soldiers had made their way from the base and Nakaar was running right toward them. He reached the soldiers and turned around, backed by a small army. A triumphant, toothless smile on his bloodied lips now. “A shame, really,” he said, sounding almost disappointed. “Kill him.”

The soldiers collectively raised their rifles.

So’Dan had no cover left but the accelerator itself. He had been too preoccupied to wonder about the large machine that emitted a powerful energy beam high into orbit. For now, it seemed like his only chance, and without a second thought, he ran for his life to get back behind it.

A barrage of emerald energy beams followed in his wake and by some sort of miracle none of them connected before he could dive behind that machine. They did however find the accelerator, piercing the black outer casing of the device.

“Cease fire, you idiots!” shouted Nakaar over the thunderous noise of the weapon discharges.

The soldiers quickly complied.

An eerie silence followed.

Nakaar took a few careful steps toward the device, now covered with dark scorch marks. He stood there, a few meters from the accelerator, and watched it intently.

Nothing happened.

He turned to look at the soldiers who had followed him. “Do not fire at the device it can be extremely unstable and—” he stopped himself when he noticed the worried expressions on the soldier’s faces.

Slowly he turned back around.

As he looked up, he realized that the energy beam was beginning to fluctuate noticeably. He took a step backward. Bright light began to pierce the small cracks that had been ripped into the accelerator's outer casing.

Within seconds the cracks began to expand into fissures. Nakaar took another step away from the machine. It was too late.

The beam had collapsed entirely and the resulting feedback shot out through the fissures in the casing. The bright light had transformed into uncontrolled bursts of cobalt-colored energy that sliced through everything and anyone they came into contact with.

Nakaar and his soldiers were dead in seconds.

\* \* \*

As soon as the firing had stopped, SoDan had made a run for it, deciding that it be best to put as much distance between him and Nakaar as possible.

He had put no twenty meters between him and the accelerator when he heard a low rumble followed by a choir of screams. He forced himself not to look back as he picked up the pace.

Not a moment later, he was gripped by a shockwave.

He was lifted off the ground and catapulted forward through the air. It was the rough landing that was the painful part.

He remained motionless in the dirt.

“So’?”

The voice sounded familiar. He looked up and spotted a female figure approaching him. She was clad completely in black. She knelt next to him to help him back onto his feet. It was only then that he recognized her. “Laas?”

“What’re you doing here?” she said once he was back on unsteady legs.

“Long story,” he said and noticed that her shirt had been ripped at the shoulder, a makeshift white bandage covering what appeared to be a disruptor burn. “You’re injured.”

She shook her head. “I’ve had worse. We need to get out of here, now,” she said and gestured toward the accelerator. It was beginning to fall apart as the fissures ripped open the outer casing. “That thing uses anti-matter as a power source. Once the containment field collapses, there’ll be nothing left but a crater.”

He nodded and then spotted three other figures wearing black outfits coming into view.

“Where’s the Captain?” she said.

He turned back but couldn’t spot him anywhere. He regretted that he hadn’t kept his eye on him now. He had been too preoccupied with Nakaar.

“I think he followed somebody up that mountain over there.”

Laas quickly set out in the direction Leva had pointed toward the platform with the accelerator. “We have to get him,” she said but didn’t get far when Leva’s firm grasp reached out for her arm.

“We’ll never reach him in time. If you’re right about that machine, we need to get as far away from it as possible right now.”

“We can’t just leave him.”

“We have no choice. With any luck, he’s already out of the blast radius.”

She tried to free herself unsuccessfully. “I don’t believe in luck.”

“Laas, we need to get you and your people out of here now. That’s an order.”

She shot her friend an icy stare. It had been the first time since they had worked together on *Eagle* that he had pulled rank on her.

She looked back at the device. A powerful discharge had erupted from its main body, obliterating the far side of the testing facility. Now the fissures were slowly creeping around the bulb-shaped casing, unleashing deadly energy as the device was slowly slicing itself open. She hated leaving anybody behind but that she would have to give up on the captain was her worst nightmare come true.

She couldn’t argue with Leva. Any attempt to get to Owens now would be suicide. She stopped resisting his hold on her and he let go.

“Let’s get out of here.”

Catching up with Frobisher didn't prove to be difficult for him. The Starfleet captain was clearly in much better shape than the older scientist.

It was on a flat plateau not halfway up the mountain where Michael found Frobisher out of breath and leaning against a flat rock. He did not look surprised when he spotted the black-clad Starfleet officer approach.

"I assume you have come to kill me."

He approached the man slowly, carefully taking in his surroundings, making sure that no surprises were waiting for him this time. If he had learned one thing over the last few days, it was not to underestimate Frobisher.

"It's over," he said. "You have not changed history. Your machine did not work."

"It worked," Frobisher shot back with such furious indignation, spittle flew from his mouth. "It worked flawlessly. You have no idea what you've done. There is no limit to your ignorance. I could have changed the entire galaxy for the better."

"By killing millions?"

"It would have been a small price to pay," said Frobisher. His voice had grown significantly smaller, much less sure of himself. "A small price," he added in a whisper.

Michael shook his head. The man had lost his mind, he was sure of that now. Somewhere along the way he had stopped caring about anything that was not related to himself and his ego. He wasn't sure if it had happened before or after Michael had stopped him the first time around but it most certainly had happened. He almost felt pity for the man. Almost. If there hadn't been one thing that refused his mind to feel anything but scorn.

"Westren Jarett Frobisher, I'm taking you into custody for the willful attempt to change the timeline, for the reckless endangerment of countless lives, and for the murder of Matthew Owens," he said and took another step forward.

At the mention of Frobisher's former colleague, the scientist raised his head to look straight at him. "I'm not the only one who failed, am I?" he said, a vicious smile forming on his lips. "You might have stopped me from fulfilling my rightful destiny but at what price?"

Michael took another step forward and Frobisher took a step back. Neither of them was aware of the fact that they were just a few meters away from the edge of the plateau that ended abruptly to open up to a steep ledge to the valley below.

"I set out to do one thing if you remember," Frobisher continued. "To kill your brother in front of you. I can live with the knowledge that I have fulfilled that. Can you?"

Michael froze. He had since promised himself to apprehend Frobisher alive. To handle the matter professionally and emotionally detached. But it was so much easier to give in to the anger that had festered inside of him.

"I delivered on that promise I made you. How does it feel? Tell me, how does it feel to lose somebody you love twice?"

Michael took another wordless step toward the scientist.

"You have nobody but yourself to blame," Frobisher said calmly as he tried to maintain his distance from the approaching man. "You killed him. You had a choice and you decided to doom your own brother."

Michael knew exactly what Frobisher was doing. He had done it before and quite successfully so. This time he would not give him the satisfaction of losing control, he vowed. This time would be different. Yet he couldn't ignore the pain the words caused. On some level, he knew they were true. He had made a decision. It had been a necessary one.

He finally noticed that Frobisher was backing up straight toward the precipice. A few more steps and the ground would disappear and Frobisher would fall. All he had to do was continue toward him. Just a few more steps.

Michael didn't stop and neither did Frobisher as they approached the ledge of the plateau. Frobisher would die and Michael didn't have to do anything. It wasn't murder, he convinced himself. It would be nothing more than an accident. He would walk away from his death innocently, without any blame. In return, he would see the man that had brought him so much pain die right in front of his eyes. He'd finally get the satisfaction he so desperately yearned for.

"Michael."

Startled he whipped around at the sound of the voice calling out for him.

It was DeMara, climbing onto the plateau. He had been too preoccupied earlier to notice that she had taken after him. She was still too far out to notice the cliff; she had no idea of what was about to happen here.

He considered her for a moment. She looked worried but that wasn't what disturbed him. It was something else, something more elementary.

*This is not me. I'm better than this.*

He whipped back around to spot Frobisher just one step away from certain doom.

“Watch out!” he shouted.

An ear-shattering noise ripped through the sky and the ground underneath his feet began to tremble. Michael had no time to wonder what had happened.

The quake caused Frobisher to lose his footing. He looked around, his eyes opened wide when he saw the gaping emptiness behind him. His foot slipped and he cried out as gravity reached out for him and pulled him back.

Michael leapt toward the other man but he was not fast enough to reach the falling Frobisher in time.

Miraculously, the scientist managed to hold on to the ledge, momentarily suspended in the air about four hundred meters or above the ground. Just as his grip slipped off the rock, Michael caught one of his hands.

Frobisher looked up at his would-be savior. For a few moments, they both stared at each other in utter silence. Both of them unable to believe that their day's long chase had come down to this.

Frobisher began to frantically whisk his legs around, causing Michael who was spread out on the plateau to slip slowly toward the ledge.

“Stay still or we'll both fall.”

Frobisher looked up again and Michael realized his mistake.

“My life is over, you saw to that,” Frobisher said with spite.

Before he could let go, Frobisher reached out to grip Michael's wrist firmly, clearly determined not to let go. Instead, he began to try and pull himself up, causing Michael to slip even faster. With his other hand, Frobisher reached out and around Michael's neck to pull himself up until his head was right next to the captain's ear.

“I'll drag you down to hell with me.”

Michael fought but the pull of gravity was stronger.

The weight of the scientist caused the muscles in his arms to burn painfully and they felt ready to tear away.

He forced all his willpower into blocking the pain as he drove his forehead hard into Frobisher's.

The scientist let go of his neck but kept his grip on his wrist. Michael knew it was going to be over soon when his shoulders were threatening to go over the edge. He had no more leverage that he could use to keep his body from slipping. He decided that if he had to die, he was not going to do so with Frobisher dragging him all the way into his own grave. He brought down his other hand and punched Frobisher hard in his face.

Westren Frobisher cried out in pain and lost his grip on Michael's wrist. He fell. His screams echoed throughout the valley as he plunged toward his inevitable demise.

Michael tried to dig in with the tips of his boots but it wasn't enough to stop his momentum as he slipped head-first toward the chasm.

He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and prepared himself for what was to come. And then, all of a sudden, his forward movement came to a stop.

Somebody grabbed his ankles and began to pull him away from the edge. Michael opened his eyes just in time to lose sight of Frobisher's deadly impact with the ground below.

Clear of the ridge Michael turned over finding that he had never been happier to see the angelic face of DeMara Deen smiling at him.

“Your timing is impeccable,” he said and returned her smile.

“Had to allow for some dramatic effect.”

The captain sat up. “Next time, don't.” He had an urge to look over the edge again but he knew exactly what he was going to find. He decided against it. It wasn't worth it.

She dropped down next to him. “I think the accelerator just exploded.”

He nodded slowly and stared into nothingness.

“Are you all right?”

He glanced into her purple eyes for a moment. “If you hadn't shown up earlier, I don't know what I would have done. Or not done.”

She didn't reply.

“I'm thankful that you did, Dee. I really am.”

“He’s dead now,” she said. “It does no longer matter what you may or may not have done.”

“I think it does.”

She put a hand on his shoulder. “Michael, you’ve been through a lot these last few days. More than can be expected of most people. Given the circumstances you—” she stopped herself when she heard the sound of approaching footsteps. They both jumped onto their feet.

“I’ve got a bad feeling this isn’t over yet,” Michael said.

Seconds later his fears were confirmed when a dozen heavily armed Romulan soldiers climbed onto the plateau. They immediately brought their weapons to bear.

They never got a chance to fire. Instead, they watched helplessly as the two black-clad figures vanished into thin air right in front of their very eyes.



# Chapter Fifteen: Beginnings

Captain Michael T. Owens was back in his proper uniform for the first time in a week.

But that was not the change that concerned him most. It wasn't his clothes that felt different, it was his body.

He was still in pain with several sore muscles that remained as a reminder of his brush with death when attempting to save Frobisher. He had noticed that his body had bruised much easier than it had only moments before the incident when it had been six years younger. Over just a few days he had witnessed his body age at rapid speeds and it had left him weak and mentally exhausted. Michael had always considered himself to be a man in very good physical condition but now he felt old. While it seemed to have little to do with physical reality it wasn't exactly something that was just in his head either.

He stood in his ready room by the viewport, looking down at the planet below. It had been extraordinarily lucky that *Eagle* had returned when it had, saving him and DeMara as well as the rest of the away team including Commander Leva by beaming them off the planet just in time.

His mission was over. He had been successful in achieving what he had set out to do. Frobisher was no more. It had taken a while and a bizarre trip through his past, but he had stopped him for good. And yet Frobisher had been right in pointing out that the price for his success had been a high one. He dreaded the prospect of writing a report on the incident. He wasn't sure how Starfleet would react to any of it, from his initial act of insubordination that had launched this strange quest to how he had handled himself in the past.

"The *Kitty Hawk* has just arrived and the *Cherokee* will be here within the hour. They will assist us in dealing with the Romulans that remain on the surface."

Michael nodded and turned away from the window to face his first officer. Commander Edison had entered the ready room a few minutes earlier to fill him in on the events that had transpired in his absence.

"As for the Romulan ship," he said. "We managed to intercept it. It was a short battle, we took out their weapons and engines but they self-destructed before we could take any prisoners."

"Did they send off any messages?" Michael said. Edison had already brought him up to speed on the Romulan spy affair and Nakaar's attempt to pass along vital information to his government. He had, however, honored his word to the admiral and not revealed what that information was. Michael hadn't asked.

"They did not have the chance."

He nodded and sat behind his desk. He looked up at his first officer, a smile forming on his face. "You did a great job, Gene," he said. "I hope having my father along wasn't too much trouble. I know he can be stubborn from time to time."

Eugene Edison mirrored the smile. "I believe it runs in the family."

The door chime sounded, announcing another visitor.

"Enter."

The doors slid open and DeMara stepped into the room. She carried a large white box.

"What do you have there?" Edison asked.

"This," she said and placed the box carefully on the desk, "is a present."

"A present?" said the first officer intrigued and moved toward the box.

"For the captain," she said quickly causing Edison to stop short. He nodded and looked at Michael who gave him a shrug.

"The *Kitty Hawk* delivered it. They stopped by Farga on the way over here and picked it up from the *Agamemnon*."

"Open it," Michael said, his excitement building over the mysterious box.

She pulled a string and the panels of the box fell away instantly to reveal a silver flower pot containing several long-stemmed, large-petalled, and purple blooms.

All three of them looked at the pot with surprise. Michael recognized them immediately. They were all too familiar to him, after all, they had been his mother's favorites.

"Flowers?" Edison said without hiding his surprise. "Captain, you wouldn't happen to have a secret admirer, would you?" he said with a wide grin on his face.

He shot the other man an icy glare. "Commander, isn't there something important you need to be doing someplace else?"

Edison shook his head as he focused on the vase again. "No, not really."

Michael cleared his throat causing Edison to look up. He noticed the insistent expression on the captain's face. He got the hint. "Actually, there was something I should be doing... someplace else," he said quickly. He didn't manage to wipe off his sheepish smile, however. He exchanged another glance with DeMara and then quickly headed for the exit. He left the ready room but not before shooting one last glance at the flowers on the desk.

DeMara watched the first officer leave and then turned back to Michael. "Stargazer lilies?"

He regarded her with a surprised look.

"I'm well versed in botany," she said. "Besides, I've been to your home on numerous occasions," she added, glancing at the painting that hung on the wall of the office, depicting the old antebellum-style house Michael had grown up in.

"They're from Amaya," he said and leaned forward to inspect the delicate flowers more closely.

She didn't speak. Her smile was gone, replaced by concern.

He sighed. "Please don't give me another lecture on the Temporal Prime Directive. I think we're way past that."

"I was just wondering how you're going to explain all this to Temporal Investigations."

Michael leaned back. He hadn't given that much thought. But the time travel investigators were quite insistent and precise in their interviews, that much he knew. They wouldn't let this matter just slide. Michael had no idea if they would conclude that his actions had been necessary or at least incidental and unintentional. A negative review by the investigators could have severe repercussions. Perhaps he would have to tweak the truth slightly. After all, he and DeMara were the only people who knew about the changes that had taken place in the timeline.

The Tenarian seemed to be able to read her friend's mind. "Whatever you decide, Michael, I'll back you."

He nodded.

She looked back at the lilies. "As far as Captain Donners is concerned, you're all on your own."

A smile crept onto his lips. He had many regrets about what had transpired over the last few days. But the way he had dealt with Amaya Donners was certainly not one of them. However, having to tell her that unbeknownst to her there had been a time when he had hurt her badly and she had grown to resent him would take some finesse.

"That's going to be a challenge of an entirely different caliber."

\* \* \*

The mood at the table Leva, Nora, Wenera, and Culsten had gathered in the lower level of the Nest was noticeably dour. All four officers sat quietly over their drinks each of them making an effort not to look directly at each other.

It was the doctor who finally broke the silence. "I feel awful. We should've reported our suspicions much earlier. Perhaps that way..." she did not finish her sentence.

Everybody present knew what she was going to say. Culsten nodded slowly, agreeing to the sentiment.

"You can't blame yourself for what happened," Nora said. "From what I've heard so far, you didn't have anything conclusive. I don't think the outcome would've been much different if you had acted sooner."

Wenera glanced at the Bajoran security chief. The doctor had confessed her story to her earlier when she had come to sickbay to be treated for a disruptor burn to her shoulder. With Culsten's help, she had also filed a complete report to the first officer but neither she nor the helmsman had yet to hear back from Edison or the captain. They did expect some reprimand to come their way. She had not counted on the sympathy of the usually rather unforgiving security chief, however. Wenera managed a weak smile.

"I'm not so sure," said Culsten who felt equally upset about the recent events. "I think we went too far. If we had informed Commander Edison earlier, we might have been able to take steps to apprehend Nakaar."

Leva shook his head. "Nakaar was well aware of your suspicions. If you had acted any sooner, he would have escaped and returned to Romulus with information that would have endangered a large number of Federation sympathizers."

Culsten looked up at the half-Romulan officer. He couldn't quite make out what Leva was thinking. His words seemed clear enough but his eyes appeared to speak a different language altogether. He had lost a person he had cared for deeply and no matter what Leva said, Culsten

could not shake the feeling that he was partly to blame.

Nora glanced at her long-time friend. She could sense his apprehensions as well. "Are you all right, So'?"

But *Eagle's* tactical officer was not paying her any attention. His eyes were unfocused as he glanced into deep space, beyond the large windows of the Nest.

Nora softly touched his arm. "So'?"

He turned to the Bajoran as if waking from a deep trance. Then a smile came over his lips. "I'm fine," he said and looked at the faces of the people surrounding him. "I'm home."

Wenera nodded. "There are a couple of newborns in my sickbay who can make that same claim now as well. They're incredible little critters."

"The turtles?" Culsten said.

The doctor nodded.

"You know what? I wouldn't mind having a look at them now," the young helmsman said.

Wenera considered him suspiciously. "Are you quite sure that wouldn't be too insipid for your adventurous nature?"

"Doc, I believe having a look at your animals is just about all the excitement I can handle for now."

"I'll join you if you don't mind," Nora said.

Wenera stood up. "Not in the least. You'll love those little creatures. They're adorable."

Culsten and Nora followed suit, leaving their seats. Leva remained where he was.

"Are you coming?" said the Bajoran.

Leva looked up. "You go ahead, I'll join you later."

Her face still mirrored concern.

"Don't worry, Laas. I'm fine, really."

She nodded and then left the table, following Wenera and Culsten toward the exit.

So'Dan had spotted a more infrequent visitor to the Nest enter a few moments earlier. The Vulcan science officer had found an empty table at the far corner, had sat, and was now staring into the emptiness of space.

So'Dan stood up and walked over to him.

"It's soothing, isn't it?"

Xylion turned to look at the Romulan who had stepped up behind him. If he was surprised to see him, he didn't show it. "I beg your pardon?"

So'Dan gestured at the windows. "To look down into the great void of space, trying to find answers among the stars."

Xylion turned back. "It does help me to meditate."

He nodded. "You mind if I join you?"

"I do not."

So'Dan sat opposite the science officer. They hadn't spoken since the day K'tera had died. They had stood together at her side, patiently waiting for her to draw her last breath. It had been painful for So'Dan to watch but in the end, she had died calmly in her sleep. After that they had left sickbay, going their separate ways.

"Commander, I feel that I owe you an apology."

Xylion's expression remained almost entirely neutral. It was only his eyes that gave him away.

"I had no right to come between you and your fiancée."

"You acted in accordance with the traditions and manners of your own culture, and K'tera openly embraced those influences. Regardless of how illogical and inappropriate those influences were they nevertheless served a very specific purpose, Commander. This purpose might have brought satisfaction to both of you."

So'Dan wasn't quite sure what Xylion was saying. He listened intently to his words but somehow, he couldn't be certain if they were an absolution or an accusation. He decided to leave the matter be.

"I may not have been the most cooperative colleague over the last year. I hope that we will be able to work together more harmoniously in the future."

Xylion raised an eyebrow. "That, Commander, will be entirely up to you."

So Dan nodded.

They both remained quietly in their seats, their gazes drifting off into infinity.

\* \* \*

A wave of new memories had overcome him. He was certain that he had not experienced them and yet they seemed to be as clear as any other memory he had ever had. And they were becoming clearer by the moment. Some of the memories were contradicting each other and fighting for dominance, trying to assert themselves as the one and only truth. And yet he knew that each and every version contained a little bit of the truth. Even though confusing, all of them were real and he feared that eventually one side of the truth would be lost forever.

Doctor Wenera had informed both him and DeMara upon their return that they had shown signs of new memory imprints forming in their hippocampi. They would suffer from slight headaches for a while but there was no physical damage and no way of stopping the brain from doing what it had to do. She had suggested that they both take some time to speak to Counselor Trenira. Michael figured that that was probably a good idea even if he had never felt entirely comfortable talking to psychoanalysts. He had a desperate urge to speak to somebody but at the moment there was only one person on board he needed to face.

“Enter.”

Michael stepped into the V.I.P. quarters still being occupied by his father. He found him in the bedroom over a small suitcase, packing together the few belongings he had brought. His back was turned to him and he didn't show any sign of acknowledging his presence.

“You're leaving?”

“I need to get back to Farga. I'll take the *Cherokee* once she arrives,” he said still packing.

Michael took a few steps into the bedroom. “We could take you.”

The admiral shook his head. “You're going to be tied up here for the next few days cleaning up what remains of that Romulan base.”

Michael watched silently as his father walked between a dresser and his suitcase, finishing up his luggage.

“Do you have any idea what kind of fall-out I can expect?”

The admiral stopped and turned to face his son. “What do you think? You violated a direct order from your superior. Insubordination is a serious charge,” he said, anger shimmering in his eyes.

“I stopped Frobisher. I stopped him from committing an act that would have seriously changed the timeline. That must count for something.”

“Yes, I'm sure it will. But the ends do not always justify the means. You'd do well in learning that someday.”

“I can't believe this,” Michael said to himself. “I didn't expect to get a medal for what I did but perhaps some form of acknowledgment \_\_\_”

“You want praise for defying orders? Son, who do you think you work for? You do what you're told nothing more and nothing less. That is your job description. You have no idea what kind of danger you brought upon the Federation and my mission on Farga.”

“Your mission? That's it, isn't it? It's not about the Federation or Starfleet. It's that I didn't do what *you* wanted me to do. That I endangered *your* plans. If I hadn't done what I did your mission might never have happened in the first place.”

“That is complete conjecture and you know it.” The admiral barked, his voice raised a few octaves. “Be assured that I will review your reports with great scrutiny.”

Michael remained silent for a few moments. “Dad, I didn't come here to fight with you.”

He closed his suitcase. “In that case, you're not doing a very good job,” he said, picked up his luggage, and moved into the living area.

Michael followed. “Things happened when I went after Frobisher that I didn't intend for.”

That got his attention. He put the suitcase by the table and turned to face his son, a look of expectation on his face. It was almost fatherly.

“I ... I'm not sure how to explain it. I haven't decided if I should even put it into my report.”

Jon Owens took a small step toward him. “You must,” he said firmly. “If you did any damage to the timeline it has to be recorded. All of it.”

Michael nodded slowly. “I've blamed you a long time for what you did to Matthew and what you did to me.”

He abruptly turned away. “I don’t have time for this. We have—”

“Please, dad, just let me say this.”

The admiral stepped to the large window, he didn’t continue but he didn’t turn around either.

“I might never understand you completely and why you always felt that your work was more important than your family. But I’m not going to judge you for that. I do understand one thing. You wanted me to succeed and to be good at what I do. There was a time when I thought all you wanted was to mold me in your image and make me more like you. I don’t know, maybe that is partly true. The complete truth is that I’m happy with where I am and what I do.”

Jonathan Owens turned.

“You did something. I guess you will read it in the report but I need to tell you now. A few years ago, you believed in me even though you had no idea what had happened. You stood by me even though you had any reason not to. Without what you did then I wouldn’t be standing here today and for that, I thank you from the bottom of my heart.”

The admiral just looked at his son for a moment. There were no words spoken between them but Michael felt an immense relief at that moment. He had decided to make an effort to forgive his father. It had been a difficult choice, especially after seeing his brother killed for a second time. It had been something Matthew had told him that had changed his mind.

*Michael, I do not regret my life or the choices that I made. Don’t regret yours.*

He was not going to disappoint his brother. He couldn’t even bear the thought of it. It was not going to happen overnight, he knew that. After all, he had allowed his anger to simmer over years. But he had taken the first step.

“Admiral Owens, the Cherokee has arrived and is now ready to receive you.” It was Commander Edison’s voice, coming over the intercom that interrupted the silence between father and son.

The admiral nodded curtly, picked up his suitcase, and walked to the doors. They slid apart and he stopped in the doorframe and turned around.

Michael noticed a frailty he had never spotted in his father before. Michael had always prided himself that he had a strong and resilient man as a father and that he had inherited that same sturdiness. But it seemed all but gone now. He didn’t know what exactly his mission to Farga had entailed but he was certain that it had not been a success. His father had never handled failure very well. But what he saw now was not just a fleeting weakness. Jonathan Taylor Owens was getting old. Perhaps too old for the demanding life he led.

“As for your question about the consequences of your actions,” he finally said. “I don’t think you’ll have to worry a great deal. Take care, son,” he added then turned and walked away.

Michael remained where he was, staring at the now-closed doors. As he stood there, he knew that he was mainly to blame for widening the rift between him and his father. It was he who had thrown accusations at him, some of which he knew now had been unfounded. God knew, Jon Owens was, and never had been a saint but he had caused the man pain that he had not deserved. It would take time to heal the wounds of the past, that much was certain.

When Michael finally turned away from the doors he stepped to the windows and spotted a starship peak into view. It stayed there for a few moments and then it streaked away and vanished in a bright flash of light.

“Goodbye, Dad.”

**The adventures will continue ...**

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