

Dark Territory Conspirata

By DarkKush

PART ONE: DEN OF LIONS

USS Renegade
Tigon Sector
Late 2364

"These bastards didn't get the memo the war's over," Commander Frederick Holmes grouched, standing at the prow of the bridge. The man was staring hard at the main viewer. The sleek, blood-red star ship filled the viewer. It was heavily streaming plasma.

"Lt. Neela, target their propulsion system," Lt. Commander Glover ordered. The man forced himself to remain seated. He felt he should be standing beside Holmes; actually he should be standing at the bridge's bow by himself.

"Aye sir," the Andorian tactical officer replied. Seconds later, two lances of phaser fire pierced the benighted ship with such force that it spun it around.

"The raider is powering forward disruptors," Glover announced. Holmes grunted.

"Make them regret it Neela," Holmes said, turning his back to the viewer.

"Yes sir," Neela promised. Glover didn't have to look at the woman to see that she was smiling; he could hear it in her voice. Two photon torpedoes later the *Renegade* flew through the atomized remnants of the raider.

"Bring us about," Holmes commanded. "And take us back to Tigon Outpost. We've still got some cleaning up to do."

Tigon Outpost
Tigon III

As soon as Commander Glover materialized on the station, he felt a strange sense of relief. It felt good to be free of the *Renegade*, if only for a moment. He breathed in the tang of fired circuits and spent ozone. The corridor was wrecked, with cut, sparking cables hanging from the bulkheads and wall consoles shattered.

"I love the smell of battle too," Neela said, brushing against him as she rushed forward, a phaser in one hand and an *ushaan-tor* in the other. Glover thought about calling the woman back. He liked taking lead on away missions, but then he shrugged. He glanced at the other members of the landing party.

"Let's go," he prodded. The Security Officers Diggs and Hallford both nodded curtly before falling behind Glover.

The away team didn't encounter much resistance as they made their way through the station. What they had encountered unfortunately was a lot of death and devastation.

"The kitties did quite a bit of damage," Hallford muttered.

"Yeah," Diggs replied.

Glover both gave them a hard look and both security officers immediately quieted and gripped their phaser rifles tighter. Terrence pointed to one of his ears. "If the Tzenkethi are lurking about, they can hear you," he whispered.

"They probably can smell us," Neela also whispered. "They have an excellent sense of smell," she added. Terrence nodded in agreement.

"But why did they do this?" Hallford prompted. Glover frowned at the woman's outburst, even though she whispered it.

"We don't know," Glover said. And that lack of knowledge was troubling. The ink probably hadn't even dried on the peace treaty ending the years long war with the Tzenkethi and now a force had attacked Tigon Station. Was it the start of renewed hostilities?

"And it doesn't really matter," Neela replied, with an eagerness that Glover also found troubling. Neela was one of the newer members of the crew, brought in by Commander Holmes and approved by Captain Scott. Her file noted her record fighting in some of the most heated battles of the wars with both the Cardassians and Tzenkethi. The woman had also fought against the Tholians. There was nothing in her psych profile that had caused Glover alarm, but maybe the shrinks missed something.

He resolved to keep his eye on Neela along with whatever Tzenkethi might be out there. To that, Glover flipped open his tricorder and waved it about.

"Any bio-signs sir?" Diggs asked. Holmes had decided to drop them in this section of the space station because it wasn't marred by venting radiation and electric and plasma fire, which interfered with *Renegade's* sensors.

Glover wanted to make it to the command center to check on the senior staff and also to secure the starbase's important systems. The ship's second officer, Lt. Commander Rocha was leading the engineering team to the station's reactor room.

Terrence wanted to make sure he could lend Rocha a hand if necessary. Beyond that he wanted to accomplish his task before the second officer did, to be on hand when or if Rocha called up to the command center. Glover wanted to show the man that he was on top of things and not someone to be trifled with.

Aleixo Rocha was also another one of Holmes's picks. When Holmes had become acting captain, and Glover had been bumped up to executive officer, that left a vacancy in both the second officer and operations officer slots. Rocha filled both.

The first officer had learned from service files, not from Holmes since the man didn't talk much about his personal life and certainly wouldn't with Glover, that Holmes had served with Rocha's mother years before on the *Calypso*. And the scuttlebutt was that Holmes and Rocha's mother had been more than colleagues and that the stern old sinoraptor actually looked upon Aleixo like the son he never had.

It made Terrence even more suspicious that Holmes was using Captain Scott's long convalescence after the neural parasite incident to solidify his grip on the ship. He was already remaking it in his image, replacing key personnel that had requested transfers, or in Mr. Gart's case, were court martialed.

Glover had tried to talk to Tryla about it, but she hadn't taken any of his calls. Things were still on the outs with them. Tryla had told him it was over after the parasites had been defeated, but Terrence hadn't accepted that, couldn't accept it. Tryla was his captain, and his mentor, but more importantly, she had been his lover and his friend.

He wanted to be there for her, somehow, but she had kept pushing him away. She had told him to leave, but all that had done was make him stay, in the hopes that they could patch things up. He owed her that much.

"Any lifesigns sir?" Diggs gingerly asked again. Glover blinked, squinted at the man, and then remembered the scanner in his hands. He glanced down at it.

"Around this corner, several signs...indistinct," he replied, frowning. "The radiation is still screwing with this thing. It can't tell whether the lifesigns are Tzenkethi or non-Tzenkethi."

"There's only one way to find out sir," Lt. Neela grinned. She took off around the corner before Glover could stop her.

Seconds later he heard a fearsome growl, a terrible crunch, a ghastly scream and then nothing. Glover stared hard at the two younger crewmen. He wanted to steel their spines and his own. He held up his phaser and nodded. "One three...." But Glover was already taking the corner before he got to two.

Tigon Outpost

Tigon III

Glover hesitated, momentarily overcome by horror. The three Tzenkethi warriors were crouching in the corridor, and still nearly reached the ceiling. He had never faced the Tzenkethi in hand-to-hand combat. His one tour of duty in the Tzenkethi war zone had been the crushing loss in the Rolor Nebula, and Terrence wasn't looking forward to the fight that was brewing, but he would do his best to

stand tall at the end of it. The biggest warrior held Neela's arm between his large jaws and was chewing slowly, the bones splintering with each bite.

The woman's blue blood was smeared across the felinoid's breastplate and ran down his chest. At his clawed feet Neela was crumbled, blood still gushing from the stump of her arm. Glover knew that the woman only had seconds, if that, before she bled to death. But her end might come even faster as the other two Tzenkethi hovered over her, both salivating, thick drops of saliva falling over the downed woman.

The three warriors turned at the arrival of the rest of the away team. "Fire," Glover found his voice. "Expanding energy pulse," he ordered. Both Hallford and Diggs swung up their phaser rifles and began pouring out phaser fire.

One of the Tzenkethi leering over Neela was felled instantly. The other moved with devilish quickness, jumping high in the air, issuing a harrowing roar. Glover took aim at the biggest Tzenkethi, but the creature beat him to the punch, throwing Neela's severed limb at him, smacking Glover's arm and making his shot go to the side. Before Glover could recover, the warrior was in the air.

Terrence tried to fire but the mass of brown fur and claws crashed into him, knocking him to the ground. Glover threw up his forearm underneath the warrior's chin, pushing into his throat to keep him from making Glover's face a meal. And the Tzenkethi was trying to do just that, striking down, with bloodied, flashing fangs, as he attempted to take a big chunk out of the first officer's face. And when he was diving in for dinner he was ripping and tearing into Glover with his claws, both on his hands and feet.

It was all Glover could do to keep the man's head back. He tried to wriggle free of the warrior, but even with the minimal armor he wore; it felt the Tzenkethi weighed a ton. The warrior kept him pinned and knew it was only a matter of time before Glover's resistance would wane and the Tzenkethi would have his supper.

Despite the mountain on him, with his free hand Glover was searching for his phaser. He shifted, jabbing his elbow into the big cat's throat, making the warrior squeal, and Glover took a bigger stab to find the phaser. But the Tzenkethi shifted to, stopping Terrence's momentum.

The creature hissed, thick spittle dropping on Glover's face, "You know not what you unearth," he said, "But your kind never does."

"What are you talking about?" He asked, but he was barely paying attention. Glover's fingers found purchase. Not on his small phaser. It was something cool, metallic, and sharp. It took him only a moment to grasp the treasure he had found: Neela's *ushaan-tor*!

As carefully as possible, to avoid lopping off his fingers, Glover maneuvered the serrated weapon around until he had it gripped into his hand. Terrence took one of the sharp ends of the weapon and pierced the warrior's side. But Glover didn't stop there; he tore across the man's side, splitting open the flesh, the creature's hot blood spewing out.

The warrior jerked back his head, and shrieked. Glover began furiously stabbing. The Tzenkethi writhed in agony and then began diving at Glover, his jaws snapping madly. Terrence dodged his head as best as possible, wincing as the warrior took a tip of his ear. He used the pain to fuel his attack.

Eventually it forced the warrior to push off Glover. He stumbled back, trying to clutch his torn side. He glared at Glover, his mouth opening into a wide grin. "You, your kind, your arrogance, we tried to warn you, tried to stop you, but now...there is nothing for you."

"Yeah, save it for the judge," Terrence said. While the Tzenkethi had been backing away, he had recovered his phaser. It took four shots to down the injured warrior.

Once the first officer was confident the warrior was down for the count, he looked around for the rest of the away team. Thankfully both Diggs and Hallford had survived, though both had seen better days. The two security guards, Diggs on one knee and leaning against his rifle, and Hallford, sitting, a stunned expression on her face were beside the smoking body of the still Tzenkethi warrior. Glover could tell the man was taking a permanent nap.

"Are you two okay?" He asked as he rose on unsteady legs.

"Yes sir," they both said their voices as shaky as his legs.

"You did good work, the both of you," Glover said. "But Lt. Neela needs medical attention."

He walked stiffly over to the woman, his knees creaking as he leaned down. She was so still, so quiet, so pale, that he feared the worse. Terrence gingerly searched for the woman's pulse. It was weak, but thankfully still there.

He tapped his combadge. It took a moment to connect to the *Renegade*. He was surprised to hear Holmes voice, and not that of the communications officer. "Glover, what's going on down there?"

Terrence ignored him. "Sir, Lt. Neela has been critically injured. We need an emergency transport to sickbay."

It took Holmes a few seconds to respond. "Operations is telling me that section of the outpost is interfering with a transporter lock. Can Neela be moved to another part of the outpost?"

"Negative," Glover said before sighing. Did he have to tell Holmes and the ops guy who to do their jobs? "Have the transporter chief to boost the annular confinement beam," he said.

After a burst of static Holmes said, "That won't account for the interference."

"Hallford, Diggs, your compins," Terrence ordered. Diggs tossed the two delta-shaped devices over to Glover; he caught them and then detached his own. He placed them on gingerly on Neela's body. "I've just jury rigged a pattern enhancer. Have the chief lock on the four communicators."

"That might not be sufficient," Holmes said.

Glover swallowed his frustration. "It's the best we got sir, and Neela is fading."

"Understood," the acting captain said. "Chief, energize."

The first officer's heart caught in his throat as the whine of four transporter beams emerged from thin air and Neela's body began to dematerialize. There was a fluctuation and the woman resolved back on the ground.

"Again," Glover muttered, not realizing that Holmes and *Renegade* didn't hear him. Fortunately he didn't need to prod them, because the beam took hold again, this time successfully scooping up the Andorian. He just hoped that Neela rematerialized in one piece in Sickbay.

"We're on our own now," Glover said. He picked up the *ushaan-tor* he had dropped before checking on Neela.

"Has it ever been different?" Hallford asked, blowing a strand of hair from her smudged face.

"I like you," Glover grinned. "Let's get back to it."

Tigon Outpost

Tigon III

"How do I know who you say you are?" The man's voice was calm, but as hard as rodinium. The door to the commander's office was scarred by both disruptor and claw marks, however it had held. The rest of the operations center had been wrecked, with a few bodies strewn about, both Starfleet and Tzenkethi.

Glover had noted a stout woman, in security red, with her fingers dug into the throat of a dead-eyed Tzenkethi, the tip of a wicked blade poking up from her back, the two locked in a deathly embrace.

"Probably the security chief," Hallford had muttered to Diggs as they bypassed the woman. Once the control room had been swept to insure no Tzenkethi were lying in wait, Glover had moved to the door leading to the commander's office.

"Can't you perform a scan?" Glover asked.

"Scans can be falsified," the man replied.

The first officer glanced at both of his subordinates. He rolled his eyes, and then thought of another tactic. "I'll give you my serial number. Your computers can verify it."

"Proceed," the man said. Glover rattled off the long string of letters and numbers.

"Terrence Glover?" Another voice, another male, asked. The voice was unfamiliar to Glover, but it did sound like the man knew him, or of him.

"Yes," Glover said slowly, a question underlining the answer.

"Sheldon's nephew?" The man ventured.

"Yes," Terrence said with more authority, but even more questions. How did this man know his Uncle Sheldon. Unlike Terrence, his father, or a long line of Glovers, Sheldon had eschewed joining Starfleet to pursue a career in archeology.

"Open the door Varok," the man now said; in a tone that Glover knew only came from those used to giving orders.

The door slowly slid open. Glover's eyes widened as an older Vulcan man stood in the doorway, a phaser pointed right at Terrence's nose. Behind him, he heard both Hallford and Diggs going for their weapons.

Before he could stop them, the other man inside the room spoke again. "Put that away Commander Varok." The Vulcan hesitated, and Glover's eyes nearly crossed as they focused on the depthless blackness of the emitter cone. "These are obviously not Tzenkethi. I am assuming that that threat has been neutralized."

The Vulcan slowly withdrew the weapon. He placed it on a holster at his hip, and Terrence saw that the man was wearing a utility coverall, sciences blue. Glover's eyes refocused and he shifted his gaze to the tall, brown-skinned man smiling at him, beneath a thick grayish mustache. The man wore command red, the four pips on his collar revealing his rank. Terrence stood at attention.

"Sir," he addressed the superior officer.

The man continued smiling. He said, "At ease Mr. Glover. I'm Captain Donald Varley," he said. He glanced at the Vulcan. "And this is Lt. Commander Varok of the *Starship Indefatigable*, but on loan from the Vulcan Science Academy."

Varley asked, "How bad is our situation?"

"Not good," Glover said. He paused to send Diggs and Hallford over to the center's communication console to contact both Commander Rocha and the *Renegade*. The first officer continued. "We haven't encountered any other survivors amongst the outpost's personnel," he sadly informed them. Varok remained stoic while Varley's face contorted with grief.

"And the science colony?" The captain asked.

"We had initially thought our shielding was sufficient against the assault," The Vulcan added. "Once the shield deflectors were rendered inoperable, we alerted the colony's residents to seek refuge in emergency shelters."

Glover frowned. "To be honest, we haven't checked on the status of the scientists," he admitted. "It appears the attack was centered on the outpost, and that *Renegade* arrived in just enough time to chase the Tzenkethi raider away and prevent them from sending down more soldiers or causing more damage to the colony."

"That is a relief at least," Varley said.

"If, I may ask," Terrence ventured, with uncustomary reluctance, "Why did the Tzenkethi attack this outpost? Doing so, shortly after the conclusion of the war, it could render the peace treaty void. Is this a resuscitation of hostilities?"

Varley looked at Varok, as if seeking permission. The Vulcan replied. "Do the Tzenkethi need a reason? They are a most illogical species." The answer was too coy for Glover and he was about to say so, but Varley spoke instead.

"Come with us Mr. Glover," the captain said. Varok raised a protest, but Varley dismissed it.

"If Mr. Glover is anything like his uncle I am sure he will appreciate what we have found here. And he is a good officer, he will keep this information to himself," the man paused and looked at Glover, waiting until the younger man nodded in agreement. Once that was secured, Varley led him into the office. Varok stood watch by the door.

On a room's conference table sat a device Terrence never thought he would see again. It was a darkened box with alien metallic script spread across it. He had seen such a box light up before and he had barely survived that encounter, and Glover definitely didn't want a repeat of that experience.

Varley grunted, in obvious surprise. "So I see we're not the only ones who harbor secrets, eh Mr. Glover?"

"I-I suppose not sir," he admitted.

"I'm dying to ask you what you know about this thing," Varley said, "But I got the inkling you've been sworn to secrecy about it."

"That would be correct sir," Glover replied. He leaned close to the man and lowered his voice, "If...it talks to you, don't listen."

"Talks?" Varley was skeptical.

"Not literally *talks*...it's more like, just a voice, a thought, thoughts, invades your mind, like tendrils," Glover intimated. "I suggest that you lock this somewhere in a deep hold and don't do any more investigations or scans until you've reached your destination."

"I see," the captain rubbed his chin, his skepticism giving way to a concerned scowl. "Is this artifact dangerous?"

"You have no idea," Glover said, "and thankfully I don't either, I don't think any of us know the level of power or devastation contained in these artifacts," he replied, "I've said too much."

"Can you at least tell me if it is Iconian in origin?" Varley asked. "I've already ruled out the Tzenkethi, Vhorani, Promellians, Hur'q, Preservers, Menthar, Progenitors, and Hyterians." Recognition dawned in Glover's eyes.

"You're Donnie?"

Varley's eyes twinkled. "I haven't been called that in a long time. But yes, I used to go by that name."

"Uncle Sheldon did mention you," Terrence said. "You were one of his classmates in Professor Galen's class."

"Yes," the captain said.

"He had said you had a bee in your bonnet about the ancient Iconians," Glover continued. "I'm, uh, sorry sir."

"No need to apologize," Varley chuckled. "Never much for tact either and he was correct then and now still. I've been working with the Daystrom Institute on a joint project with the Science Academy. I believe that if we can discover Iconia and recover its ancient technology it will provide a great cultural and technological boon, and a boost to our own knowledge of the galaxy and even, quite possibly,

revolutionize how we travel from planet to planet, and beyond. Imagine no more starships," he marveled.

"Actually sir, I rather like starship travel," Terrence admitted.

Varley merely laughed. "You know Mr. Glover, when I was a boy I read everything I could about Dr. Emory Erickson, inventor of the transporter, and fell in love with the idea of sub-quantum teleportation. However I never had much skill with engineering, but still that idea of traveling from planet to planet without starships stuck with me. And later on, when I learned of the Iconians, and their fabled gateways, it became a passion to find Iconia, and bring their gateway technology to our times."

"Sir, I don't think this...container...is of Iconian design," Glover revealed. "It could be much, much older."

"I see," the captain's expression was a mix of fascination and disappointment.

"Beyond leaving it closed, I'm sorry sir but I can't say more."

"No, no, I understand. At least we have found something of some value, obviously it drew the Tzenkethi here and made them risk restarting a war," Varley surmised. "I just hope that this device was worth all the people who have died for it."

Glover wanted to tell the man that it wasn't, that in fact it cause carnage on a much larger scale. All he would give is, "Time will tell sir."

"I suppose," Varley said. He clapped his hands, letting it go. "Something tells me that this find is out of our hands now. Commander Varok will not be pleased," he nodded the Vulcan's direction.

"Do you think he ever is?" Terrence smiled.

The captain laughed. "I didn't think humor was part of the Glover makeup," he said. Terrence understood. Uncle Sheldon could be intense.

"We're full of surprises sir," Glover replied.

"Is that so?" Varley said, clapping Terrence on the back. "Well, then always remain so. Always keep them guessing."

"I'll keep that in mind sir," Glover nodded.

"Time to attend to our real duties, eh?" Varley said. He led Terrence back out into the operations center. Commander Rocha and his team were in the room and the second officer was directing efforts. He was bent over the chair where the assistant chief engineer was sitting.

"What's our status Mr. Rocha?" Glover asked. The blond man looked up, his handsome face wreathed with concern.

"The fusion reactors that power the outpost and the colony, they were destabilized during the attack, and since have ruptured," Rocha said. "The reactors have gone into meltdown. We only have ten minutes. Chief Tog is trying to get us more time, but still, this outpost is done." Glover glanced at the querulous Tellarite, another Holmes's pick, who was rattling off a string of curses while she pounded out calculations on the console.

"The colonists," Varok said, with a hitch in his voice that belied his cool exterior.

"I'm already ahead of you," Glover said, racing to the communications terminal. Hallford was at the station.

"Get Captain Holmes on the horn," Glover said.

"Holmes here," the man's voice crackled over the comm. Terrence told him about the reactor.

"I've already sent shuttles down to help in the evacuation, and I've moved the ship closer to the planet to boost transporter strength if we have to do emergency beam outs." Holmes said.

"I-I wasn't aware you were abreast of the situation sir," Glover said tightly.

"Commander Rocha informed me," Holmes said. Glover's jaw shifted, but he tamped down on his anger. Why hadn't the second officer informed him as well?

"I...see...sir," Glover said.

"I want you to work with Commander Rocha to get as many survivors as possible out of there, to the shuttles," Holmes ordered.

"Aye sir," Terrence said crisply. He put his annoyance to the side. He had a job to do, and he would settle up with Rocha after.

USS Renegade **Phaser Range**

Terrence really didn't give a damn about decorum, but he asked anyway, "Care if I join in?"

Lt. Commander Rocha got off another shot before shrugging, "Sure, why not? That is...if you're up to it sir?"

Glover stepped into the circular stage, taking place on the blue portion. Rocha remained on the golden side of the illuminated stage. Terrence stared out into the darkness. He rolled his shoulders, the soreness from the fight with the Tzenkethi hadn't completely receded, neither had the scratches, but none of it had been debilitating. Terrence had looked forward to getting back to work, but even more to after his shift was over so he could have words with the ship's second officer.

"I'm fine," Glover said, quickly nailing a blue sphere of light with his phaser.

"Good shot," Rocha replied. "How is Lt. Neela by the way?"

Terrence had checked on the woman before he began his shift. "Dr. Izaro said she's resting. In addition to her arm, she suffered some massive internal bleeding."

"Damn shame," The second officer dipped his head for just a moment, but popping it back up to tag a fast moving green burst.

"Why didn't you inform me about the fusion reactors first?" Glover asked, not wanting to prolong the issue.

"It was a time issue sir," The Portuguese man smoothly replied while hitting another photonic ball. This one had been even faster.

"Enough so to forgo protocol?" Glover asked. He aimed at a yellow sphere, missing it by a hair. "Damn it."

Rocha looked at him and smiled, "Sir, I know you're quite the pilot. I heard about that Nova Squad from '54 when I was at the Academy, so I know you're great at the helm, but I'm an excellent shot."

"Is that so?" Terrence frowned. To prove his point, Rocha aimed while still looking at Glover and found the silver sphere streaking by.

"Yes, high marksman grades," Rocha said. "Won highest honors at the last palio on Coridan. Probably could've been of some use there against those Tzenkethi soldiers you encountered in the corridor."

Glover shifted his jaw, his anger rising to the fore. Had the subordinate just questioned Terrence's ability to perform his duties?

"I suppose you want to add another Karagite medal to your collection?" Glover quipped, keeping his frustration below the surface.

Rocha shrugged. "It was a great honor, for sure sir. But I left that thing with my mother; didn't feel like lugging it around." Shortly after graduating from the Academy, Rocha had been awarded the prestigious Karagite Order of Heroism for saving the lives of both his crew and a Tholian warship, after both ships gotten caught in a distortion ring. In addition to the award, Command had promoted the man up two ranks. And Rocha had achieved the lieutenant commander rank before Glover did, and at the rate he was going, Rocha would be sitting in a captain's chair long before Terrence, and that rankled.

"Nothing to hold down your career huh?"

"Exactly," The man said, pausing to look at Glover. "I knew you would understand."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I wasn't kidding when I said I heard about your exploits at the Academy," Rocha said. "Quite impressive, the career path you set out for yourself. When I got to the Academy I was looking at the notable graduates, role models, and I looked at you, among others."

Terrence was taken aback by that, not quite sure what to say. He didn't know how to feel about, a mix of pride and disbelief.

"I can tell you weren't expecting that sir," Rocha laughed.

"No," Glover said, hitting another sphere. "I didn't."

"We don't have to be at loggerheads," Rocha offered. "I get the sense that you and Captain Holmes don't see eye-to-eye, and I can understand your trepidation that you're looking at all the crew changes lately and perhaps feeling encircled."

Is that a wrong assumption? Glover thought, but kept it to himself.

"I did my research before taking this posting," Rocha continued. "The captain of the *Atlantis* had invited me to join her crew, but my mom and the captain leaned hard on me to join the *Renegade* crew."

Aren't we so lucky? Terrence also kept that quip to himself. The revelation about the *Atlantis* did miff him a little though; *Atlantis* was one of the new *Galaxy*-class ships, and senior officer postings aboard any of them were premium choices. Glover had been offered a posting aboard the *Galaxy*-class *Tshwane*, but Terrence had decided to hitch his wagon to Tryla Scott's star. Glover tried not to even consider regret in his life, but the mention of the *Atlantis* lifted the rock on all the little doubts wriggling underneath.

"And I think *Renegade's* a good fit," Rocha nodded, taking out another ball. "I mean there will be more opportunities here."

"How so?" Glover finally spoke. He also hit his sphere.

"You're pretty good at this sir," Rocha didn't hide his surprise. "How about we up it a level?"

Glover grinned. "I was waiting for you to ask." The second officer increased the difficulty level. The spheres started zipping by faster. "So, Mr. Rocha, you were saying?"

"I assume you'll be leaving along with Captain Scott, leaving the executive officer slot here open."

"What?" Terrence sputtered, missing the ball, in more ways than one.

Rocha looked at him askance, his confusion evident. "Well, I thought you knew."

"Knew what?" Glover demanded, the game now forgotten. Rocha hesitated. "Out with it Commander!" Terrence ordered.

"I...well, I don't know if it's my place to say sir," Rocha dodged.

"You don't seem to have an issue respecting boundaries otherwise, why start now?" Terrence said.

"That's not fair sir."

"I ask you, no I order you to answer my question," Glover said, drawing to his full height.

"Alright sir," Rocha slumped his shoulders. "End game." The balls disappeared and the room slowly illuminated. The man placed his phaser into a holster. "Listen, I didn't mean to intrude, or overstep."

"Fine," Glover said curtly, "Now what's this about Captain Scott?"

"Captain Holmes has been a friend of my family for a long time. He served with my mother aboard the *Calypso*, an old *Merced*-class ..."

"I didn't ask you for your life story!"

"Yeah, okay, I'm sorry," Rocha placed up both hands in a placating gesture. "I just wanted you to understand that my relationship with Captain Holmes goes beyond the professional. He's like an uncle."

"So?"

"Well, we talk... like family, and he told me he had spoken to Captain Scott and that she had given him permission to rebuild the crew to his liking, the captain had

intimated that she was pondering transferring full command to him once her convalescence had ended."

"I see," Glover said quietly, though things had never been as opaque.

"Captain Holmes had told me, knowing Captain Scott as well as he did, that she was already out the door, but just hadn't come to the realization herself. He said that Captain Scott was supremely confident and the hesitation she was displaying now was a sign that she had made a decision, a decision to leave that she was struggling with."

"I...I don't believe it," Glover muttered.

"That's was Captain Holmes's judgment," Rocha said, a bit defensive.

"No," Terrence shook his head, "Not that, not that at all. I'm not talking about Holmes. I don't care about Holmes."

"Sir, I don't think that's appropriate to talk about the captain in that tone," Rocha said.

"*Your* captain!" Glover flared. "And right now I'm going to talk to the real captain."

USS Renegade

Executive Officer's Quarters

Glover's emotions roiled when Tryla Scott appeared on the small desktop monitor screen. It was great to see his lover again, but he was concerned by her drawn face, sunken cheeks, and the dark circles around her eyes.

"Terrence," she said, her voice emotionless. A lump formed in Glover's throat. There was no expression on her face, no sign that she was happy to see him. It had been several months since they had seen each other. During their last tortured conversation, Terrence had tried to convince himself that it was over between them, that he could exit her private life, but the woman still held a magnetic pull on him.

"Is it true?" He asked. The captain merely looked at him. "Is it?" Glover pressed.

"Yes," she answered, her voice quiet.

"Why?" Glover asked.

"I just, I just can't do it anymore Terrence," Scott looked away from the monitor before facing him again. "I can't look you or any of the crew in the eye after betraying them."

"That wasn't you," Glover pleaded, though he really wanted to shout. He wanted to roar the truth into the woman. "That was the neural parasite."

"It was my voice, my body," Scott said. "I betrayed the uniform, everything it stands for."

"But you were not in control," Terrence countered.

"That doesn't erase my guilt," Tryla intoned. "It's my burden to carry, not yours. I told you to move on Terrence, but yet you stay."

"I want to be here for you, I wasn't lying about that," Glover said.
Now the woman smiled, but it was a sad, pitying expression. "My dear Terrence, so young," she said.
"You're not much older than me."
"Age wise, perhaps not, but living," the woman's expression grew dour. "It's been lifetimes now." She sighed. "That thing being inside my body, invading my mind, I saw things, worlds, species on the far side of the galaxy, and I saw glimmers of the destruction those things have wrought, a bloody pathway cut through the stars."
"We stopped them," Glover said. "We're safe now."
The pitying smile returned. "You have no clue what's out there, dangers even greater than the parasites."
"We'll face them together," Terrence declared.
"We won't," Scott shook her head. "I only accepted this call because I knew why you were calling, and I owed you that much, but my feelings about us hasn't changed. It's over for us Terrence, move on and be the great captain I know you will be."
"And what about you?" His eyes began to water. "What about you?!"
"I'm no longer your concern," she said, her smile dying like sunlight right before night. "Goodbye Terrence."

USS Renegade

Executive Officer's Quarters

"Lucky you that we're patrolling the Temecklia system," Lt. Pell Ojana said. The auburn-haired Bajoran was one of his closest friends and he was heartened to see her. It was good fortune indeed that the *Serapis* had been assigned to patrol the Federation-Tzenkethi border.
Glover held up the bottle of Trakian ale and took a swig. "We're practically neighbors," he said after wincing at the burn. The fair-skinned woman rolled her eyes.
"We were reassigned, due to the heightened tensions with the Tzenkethi Coalition," the Bajoran woman added. "If not for the attack on the science colony we would be heading out to the Molari Badlands."
"You're welcome," Terrence jauntily held up the bottle.
Pell pursed her lips. "Captain Sorak isn't as sanguine as you are."
"Is he ever?" Glover thought. "When isn't he saturnine?"
The woman chuckled. "He would call it acting logically."
"Yeah, I'm sure he would," Terrence agreed.
"So, how are you doing?" Pell shifted her eyes at the ale and frowned. "I guess you're floating right now."

"Don't be that way," Glover took another drink. "I need some distraction right now."

"So that's why you called?"

"Nah, oh come on Ojana," Terrence said.

"You've talked to Tryla, haven't you?"

"What is it with everyone being a mind reader these days?" Glover asked, thinking of Rocha, Tryla, and now Pell.

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing," he shrugged. "I-I guess I just needed to talk to someone."

"Okay," Pell said, still with a concerned expression. "So, spill."

Terrence sighed. "Oh, well, nothing."

"Come on Terrence," the Bajoran said, "You didn't call me to talk and then say nothing. I know whatever it is it's got to be hard for you. I can't think of anything that drove you to drink before."

The woman's words made him look at the bottle of ale, and he saw it for the first time for the crutch that it was. He capped the bottle and tossed it into the trash receptacle.

"It's over Ojana," Glover admitted, the reality cutting through the alcoholic haze. "It's really over."

"I'm sorry Terrence," Pell touched the screen. "I know how much you care about her."

"Yeah," was all Glover could muster. The two fell into an unsettling quiet, Pell knowing him well enough to give him the necessary space.

"I just, I don't know what to do," Glover admitted, the words feeling alien even to him. He had always known what to do, where he was going, but now...

"This is a time of transition for you, and it will be arduous," Pell said, not sugarcoating it. "You're still in the process of becoming, and if I might be frank..."

"Of course," Glover said.

"You've spent too much time aboard the *Renegade*. It was a great posting, you've done good work there, but the Terrence I know wants the big missions, the opportunities to really make an impact, to add to the Glover legacy."

"It's not easy being a Glover," Terrence admitted. "My family's Starfleet service record predates the Federation."

"I also know a thing or two about family legacies, and obligations, and the shadows they cast," Pell said quietly. Glover nodded in understanding, and the two let the matter lie.

"I...think Tryla is doing you a favor," Pell said after another period of silence, wincing afterward, in anticipation of an outburst.

"Why would you say that?" Glover didn't erupt. He was too stung by Pell's statement to be angered by it.

"She's dealing with a lot," Pell said. "She was violated in a way only those who have suffered similar horrors can relate to. I remember the comfort women I tried to help on Valo II," she shook her head, a shadow crossing her expression.

"Valo II," Glover replied, "Where I contracted Orkett's Disease."

"Yes," Pell said, "How we met."

"You saved my life," Terrence said.

"The best thing I was able to accomplish on Valo II," Pell replied. "There was just so much suffering; I struggled not to get lost in the tide."

"You rode the waves," Glover said.

"I'm still making amends," Pell confessed.

"None of it was your fault," Terrence said, the conversation's turn reminding him of his recent talk with Tryla.

"And this thing with Tryla, is not *your* fault," Pell said. "It's a fork in the road now, for both of you."

"Are you going to tell me this is the Will of the Prophets?"

"I hope you're not disparaging my peoples' faith," Pell admonished, though her chiding was belied by an askew smile.

"You know I would never do that," Glover said.

The Bajoran nodded, "I know, and it wouldn't matter anyway. Your *pagh* is strong, regardless whether you believe or not. And because your *pagh* is strong you will endure this and you will thrive."

"Thank you Ojana, I really needed to hear it."

"Here's something else you need to hear," Pell prefaced her words, "You've got to get off that ship."

"I'm XO here," Glover said.

"Yeah, but under a captain you don't like," Pell said bluntly.

"Holmes has been in the Fleet a long time," Terrence said defensively.

"And he's been a Number One for quite some time, and even now is still an *acting* captain," the Bajoran shot back. "I know you well enough to know how much you admire and respect ambition. You don't respect Holmes, do you?"

It took him a moment to admit it. "See?" Pell said. "You can't serve under someone you don't respect, and to be honest, you've outgrown the *Renegade*. You need to be on a *Nebula* or *Galaxy* class, absent that taking command of one of the older ships."

"Captain Kincaid, from the *Solstice*, has made an offer," Glover intimated.

"*Solstice* is a good ship, *Ambassador*-class," Pell pointed out. "I've heard that Captain Kincaid is a taskmaster."

"Which isn't a problem," Terrence stated. "But the *Ambassador*-class," he shook his head, "My mother served on the *Adelphi*, and serving on the same class, it's illogical, but it just doesn't feel right."

"I understand," Pell replied sympathetically.

"There had been another opening, this time on the *Righteous*."

The Bajoran raised both eyebrows, "That name is telling isn't it?"

"Very funny," Terrence didn't hide his drollness. "But Captain Andropov went with Ben Walker."

"Andropov's another hard ass," Pell laughed, "You seem to have a type."

"You're a regular Stano Riga today," Glover joked. Pell looked lost, her eyes crinkling, her nose ridges bunching up on a scrunched face.

"Riga was a 23rd century comedian," Terrence explained.

"I see," Ojana said, "Humans and your ideas of humor. It is something I still don't comprehend fully."

"It's okay, give it a few more decades," the man laughed. "Though I think you get the gist of human comedy just fine." The Bajoran chuckled.

"Seriously though, I've heard of Walker, from the *Triton*," Pell said, her brow furrowing. "That ship was one of the vessels destroyed during the last great battle in the Beloti Sector, from what I heard. A lot of good people were lost." The woman shook her head, her expression sad. "A pure baptism of fire," she added.

"So you're saying Walker is a better choice than me?" Glover decided to bring the conversation back on the lighter side.

Pell chuckled. "Of course not," she batted her eyes. "I could never conceive such a thing."

Terrence laughed. "Well, there are two offers hanging out there. One from Captain Reynolds. He's taking command of the *Narcissus*, a *Galaxy*-class, as soon as it comes off the line."

"Another telling choice," Pell laughed. Terrence rolled his eyes and blew through his teeth.

"So when will the *Narcissus* be ready?" The Bajoran asked.

"That's the rub," Glover grimaced. "It will be another six months."

"Lots of time being idle," Pell said, "And you don't do idle well."

"You're right about that," Terrence replied.

"So, what's the second option?" Pell asked.

"The other offer is from Captain Zihar on the *Gadsden*."

"Interesting," Pell said, her eyes taking on a distant look as if she was accessing her own memory banks. "*Gadsden* is *Cheyenne*-class right?"

"Your ship knowledge is pretty impressive."

"I've had plenty time on my own idle hands," the Bajoran admitted. "After our last tour on the Cardassian front we spent eight months studying gaseous anomalies in the Beta Quadrant, which provided a lot of downtime that I needed to fill up some way. Between scouring the ship's library and learning *anbo-jyutsu*, it helped during the slow times."

"Well, you are looking pretty fit," Terrence offered. Pell brightened at the compliment.

"So, the *Cheyenne*-class boasts four nacelles, a unique design."

"It does," Terrence agreed. "Reminds me a bit of the *Kitty Hawk*." Glover had left the old, sturdy *Constellation*-class ship to take a position on the *Renegade* several years ago.

"How is that old boat doing by the way?" Pell asked.

"They are decommissioning her from active service in the Fleet," Terrence was a bit glum, "Making way for the newer ships."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Pell said. "I remember Captain Gorik. I thought he would die on the bridge of that ship."

"Yeah, me too," Glover smiled, remembering his former captain. "Captain Awokou had told me Command offered Gorik an admiral's rank and a desk job, but the man still wanted to stretch his space legs. Banti told me Gorik is joining the Border Service."

"You know that's actually a pretty good fit for him, come to think of it," Pell laughed, "But I feel sad for anyone that gets on his bad side."

"Which will be everyone he encounters," Terrence laughed; recalling the testy Tellarite's eruptions, but after a while no one took it personally. It was more of a Tellarite cultural tic.

"And maybe it's not so dour for you either," Pell said.

"Oh?"

"Yes," The Bajoran said with assurance. "You're career is just starting. It will be long and illustrious."

"Thanks Pell," Glover said, heartened by the woman's confidence in him.

"I just wish there was an opening here on the *Serapis* for you. It would be great serving with you."

"Perhaps one day," Terrence said, smiling wistfully.

"Well, I can't say it's a completely innocent wish," the Bajoran smiled, "I think Captain Sorak would find you quite vexing and that could be fun to watch."

Terrence rolled his eyes. "If it's that boring on the *Serapis*, maybe *you* need a change."

"Since you mentioned it," Pell said, "I have been thinking of taking a new assignment, aboard the *Cuffe*. You heard anything about the ship or its captain?"

"The ship, a *Nebula*, yeah, but not the CO," Glover said. "Who sits in the center chair?"

"Sabrina Diaz," Pell answered, "She has a distinguished record in the service, been involved in a lot of conflicts with everyone from the Talarians to the Cardassians."

"The Talarians," Glover nodded; his expression darkening as his memory stirred. "My first war," he laughed without mirth. "If Captain Diaz made her bones fighting against both the Talarians and Cardassians, sounds like a seasoned CO to me," he concluded, "Could be a good fit for you."

"Well, I'm just mulling it over right now," Pell said, adding, "It is good to have options."

"Yeah," Glover began thinking more of the *Gadsden*. He had never been afraid to leap before, but he was hesitating now. With his relationship with Tryla over, and most of his friends moved on, there was nothing left keeping him on the *Renegade*, but yet...he sensed that he was out on a ledge, and below him gaped an abyss. He didn't know, this time, if he was strong enough to make the leap, to get to the other side.

"I've got to go Terrence," Pell was regretful. "Duty calls."

"It does," Glover said, "For all of us. And maybe, just maybe, I should start listening to it again."

USS Renegade

Executive Officer's Quarters

The Next Day...

"You're not happy to see me?" The woman asked, a pinched expression accentuating the ridge bifurcating her bluish-gray face. The Bolian ran a nervous hand through her long platinum braids.

"You changed your hair," Glover observed. The last time he had seen Susan Bano, she had been sporting a closed crop hairdo.

"Yeah," she smiled, her whole being brightening, and lifting Terrence as well.

"It is good to see you Susan," Terrence said, "But not what I'm sure you're calling me about."

"I see," the Bolian answered; the pinched expression returning. "You're right."

"It's the box," Glover replied, his expression growing somber.

"Yes," she admitted, leaning forward, lowering her voice, even though Glover was certain she had encrypted the communication. "The Pandora's Box."

"Well, now we know there's more than one," Terrence shook his head. Glover and Susan had first encountered one of the devices within the Pandorian system; ergo Terrence's name for the thing, during a fateful family excursion several years ago, the last time all the Glovers had been together. Terrence had been expecting much different fireworks from a gathering of Glovers than what they got; the discovery of the artifact had almost ignited a conflagration between the Federation and the Alshain Exarchate. Thankfully that had been averted, and the device had been taken by Special Investigations. He had hoped it would be the last he would ever see of the thing, and to know there were others out there did not sit well with him.

"Yes, we do," Susan's expression was equally grim.

"I'm certain it's been catalogued and stored away with the other one, wherever you Special Investigations folks hide things."

"It has been secured," was all Bano would say. She paused, before adding, "I saw to it personally."

It was then that Glover noticed the extra pip on the woman's collar. Beside the two golden circular pips was a third with a darkened center. "Susan, you've been promoted," he grinned, "Well, congratulations Lieutenant Commander!"

"Oh," the woman blushed as she brushed the three pips at her collar.

"I'm sure it's well deserved," Terrence said, "It appears switching to Special Investigations has been a good move career-wise. Has it been in other ways?"

Susan arched an eyebrow at him. "Terrence, are you inquiring about my love life?"

"Why, not, uh, of course not," It wasn't the first time Glover was glad his darkened complexion masked how warmed his cheeks had become.

"Of course not," Susan repeated, her tone neutral, and Terrence didn't know what to make of that. And he wasn't sure he wanted to make anything of it. He was still grappling with the end of his relationship with Tryla, and seeing Susan again should've been distressing to him, a reminder of another failed pairing, but he had to admit he was happy to see another familiar face just like Pell, one associated with a happier, less complicated time in his life.

The two fell into an uncomfortable silence. Susan finally broke it. "When you encountered this Pandora's Box, did you experience anything unusual?" She finally broached.

"No," Glover shook his head slowly. "No, not like last time," he said. "Did Captain Varley or Lt. Commander Varok report anything?"

Susan's eyes narrowed and Glover could tell that the Bolian was considering whether to confide in him. Terrence thought of prodding her, was ready to remind her that she knew him, that she could trust him. But could he really be sure of that anymore? And more troubling, could he now trust her? Glover hated not knowing the answer to either question, and going against his nature, he decided not to force the issue.

"It's...ah...Captain Varley," Bano quietly ventured a few moments later.

"What's happened?" Glover asked, dreading that the man attempted to access the box.

"It...communicated with him, through his dreams," the Bolian revealed. She ran another hand through her hair and then wet her lips before continuing. "It told him of a star map, a guide to Iconia."

"A star map? To Iconia? Seriously?" Glover was incredulous. "I mean, I guess it's not outside the realm of possibility when it comes to these things, yet the Pandora's Box we encountered before, it used telepathic communication."

"We don't know what these things are," Susan bit her bottom lip, a cute tic, when she sometimes poured on the brain power. "Believe me, we've ran the box we had discovered through various tests, as we are this new one, and yet, we still can't even confidently ascertain if the artifacts are even from our dimension or quantum reality, or extradimensional in origin or heck, things of pure magic."

"There's no such thing as magic," Terrence scoffed. The woman smiled.

"Don't be so closed minded," she chided.

"Are you telling me that you, a Science Officer, believe in magic?"

"I believe there is some technology so advanced, some science so far beyond our understanding that it would be indistinguishable from magic."

"Ha," Glover laughed.

"Tell that to the Q Continuum," Susan shot back, and that quieted Terrence.

"So Captain Varley believes this dream?" Glover asked.

"I can't say does completely, no," the Bolian replied, "However it left a powerful impression. He did promise to investigate it further, once he could spare the time from his command duties."

"Command duties?"

"He's taken command of the *Yamamoto*," Susan pointed out.

Terrence nodded appreciatively, "A good ship. Captain McKenzie must be stepping down."

"He's been promoted and taking command of Starbase Yorktown," Susan explained.

"That ramshackle monstrosity?" Glover was incredulous. "I'm surprised it hasn't been decommissioned yet or simply fell apart."

Susan took offense. "Hey, it was once the crown jewel of starbases, an engineering marvel, on the very edge of the final frontier."

"One that's been surpassed decades ago," Terrence rejoined. "We've gone far beyond Yorktown."

"Terrence you were never one to have a proper respect for history. It was always bigger, faster, shinier, the new, latest and greatest with you." Susan shook her head, her smile belying her chiding tone.

"I've never seen much value in sitting on your laurels, romanticizing the past. We build on the past, to catapult us further," Terrence said.

"Still, an appreciation for what came before, and the sacrifices that were made, is something we should value and respect," Susan replied. Glover shrugged.

"Back to Captain Varley," Terrence shifted the conversation, "So Special Investigations just let the man go like that, even with Varley knowing something of what the Pandora's Box is capable of?" Glover asked.

"Special Investigations let you go, didn't they?" The Bolian rejoined.

"Not really, no," Terrence said. "They got you in exchange. They know I would never put you in danger by exposing anything about the artifacts."

Susan brightened. "You still care?"

"I never stopped," Glover admitted. "I know...it's been a long time...."

"Too long," the Bolian quickly added.

"I...just hope you're happy," Terrence said, his gaze searching. He wished he were there, with her, to look into her eyes and feel her warmth and really get a good sense that she was satisfied with her life and with how things had turned out between them.

"Well, it's not how I envisioned my career would be after the *Kitty Hawk*," Susan admitted, "Or that we would be talking across space right now instead of wrapped in each other's arms."

"I agree," Glover nodded.

"But it wasn't meant to be, not for us," Susan said, her expression both reflective and sad. "You're first love is command, your muse is glory, and you have a greater destiny before you."

"I wish that it included you," Terrence said, honest enough not to feign modesty.

"I am with you," Susan declared, "But as a friend."

"I value that friendship," Terrence replied. "And I hope we see each other soon."

"Well, that might take a little while," Susan smiled, "Because like you suspected Special Investigations didn't just let Captain Varley completely off the hook."

"Oh?"

"The promotion goes with my new assignment," Susan grinned, "As chief science officer aboard the *Yamato*."

USS Renegade

Sickbay

The Next Day...

Glover stepped hesitantly into the infirmary, as if noise would injure Lt. Neela further. The ship's new medic hovered over her, medical tricorder in one hand. Dr. Eknath had taken a position at Starfleet Medical a month ago. Dr. Izaro wasn't one of the Holmes hires. The old Saurian sawbones had recommended the Boslic take over on *Renegade*.

Glover cleared his throat. "Doctor," he said.

The woman jumped with a start, "Oh, Commander Glover," she looked up from her tricorder, down again, and then back up. She ran a nervous hand through her long violet hair. Terrence normally would like the extra attention, but the young woman was a bit too anxious around him. "How are you doing?" Izaro asked him. "I wasn't expecting you."

"I came to check in on Lt. Neela again," Glover said, with added seriousness.

"Oh, umm, of course," Izaro said. She took a step back and looked down at the woman on the biobed. Glover saw the woman was sleeping, her expression peaceful, yet at odds with the nasty scar over the smoothed stump of her arm. "Lt. Neela is currently sleeping."

I can see that, Glover thought, but he kept the thought to himself, and he also refrained from rolling his eyes. "How did the surgery go?"

"Well, it was more a blood infusion than surgery," Izaro informed him. A shadow crossed her face. "Unfortunately we weren't able to reattach her arm. I've already been researching prosthetic options for the Lieutenant once she has is ready for rehabilitation."

"I see," Glover said, looking down at the Andorian. His severe expression softened. He blamed himself for the woman's injury. He should have pulled the reins on her harder. If anything it should be him on that biobed.

And he was beating himself up wondering why he hadn't pulled her back. Was it because he was starting to feel like a stranger on his own ship? A first officer in name only? Glover just didn't know and it was nettling him.

"Thank you Doctor Izaro," Glover nodded. "Please inform me if there is a change in her condition."

"I will sir," the medic said. Terrence's face hardened and his gaze shifted over to the biobed in the far corner, one that he could hear the hum of a forcefield around. Despite the forcefield, Holmes had insisted that the Tzenkethi warrior Glover had incapacitated be shackled to the biobed.

Glover hadn't offered up much protest, but Dr. Izaro's strong protest had been a point in her favor. "And the prisoner?"

"He lost a lot of blood, and since we had not readily available supply of Tzenkethi blood available, I had to synthesize some blood for him. It is adequate, but will not sustain him long term." The man had been unconscious since their fight on Tigon III.

"Good that we're giving him back Tzenkethi authorities then, huh?" Glover didn't hide his sarcasm.

"Uh, sir, do you believe their story that this was a band of brigands, acting without official sanction?"

"No," Glover shook his head. He didn't want to delve too deeply into the why though. Captain Varley and Varok had already departed, with the device they found, aboard a shuttle, on the orders of Rear Admiral Brennan at Helaspont Station. The shuttle was headed to the other side of the Federation border with the Tzenkethi Coalition, and be dropped off at Helaspont Station. From there, who knew where Varley and the Vulcan scientist would go, and if the device would go with them. Terrence knew that Holmes didn't even know what Varley was carrying with him, and he also knew he couldn't utter a word about it. Having one up on Holmes did make him smile though.

"*Renegade* will be rendezvousing with the Tzenkethi in three days," he said. "Also inform me about any change with the prisoner."

"Will do sir," Izaro gave a big nod. Terrence headed toward the exit. "Uh, Commander?" The Boslic called out. Glover stopped, and turned crisply.

"What is it?" He didn't hide his annoyance.

"Well, I, uh," Izaro said.

"Listen Doctor Izaro..." Glover realized his tone was a bit too harsh, but couldn't help himself. "Lezeta, I think I know what you're going to ask, and I suggest you don't. It won't work out, and I don't want anyone to get hurt."

"Oh, uh," Izaro took a step back, as if she had been slapped. She squeezed the tricorder against her chest. Her cheeks purpled.

"Believe me, it's for the best." And Terrence left the woman with that.

USS Renegade **Commander's Quarters**

"Good you let her down easy," Hallford said. Glover sat up on his bed, his muscles spent almost as much as after his fight with the Tzenkethi. He didn't know why he had told the security officer about his one-sided conversation with Dr. Izaro. But he guessed he needed to share something personal after spending the night with her.

Which prompted another question, why he had brought Hallford to his quarters to begin with? Glover hadn't hidden his relationship with Tryla onboard, and he knew some of the old hands still on Renegade would raise eyebrows or the equivalent if they saw him bringing Hallford to his quarters.

Leaving Sickbay, Terrence, off duty, had made his way over to the Jolly Roger, the ship's main recreation lounge.

It just so happened that Hallford had been there, along with Diggs, both them drawing down a bottle of Saurian brandy. The two security guards had invited him over, and Glover had stayed after Diggs called it a night.

A few more drinks later, Glover and Hallford did the same thing. And now here they were, and Glover didn't know what to do.

Hallford shifted on the bed. He felt the mattress lift and then the security officer's weight pushed it back down. She placed her hands on his shoulders, her fingers kneading them. "Hey," she said, "I get it. I've heard about you and Captain Scott. This doesn't have to be anything more than it is."

Terrence frowned. He pulled away from her. "What have you heard?" He demanded.

Hallford smiled awkwardly, "Well, just that you, you two, you know, had a thing."

" 'Had'?" Glover queried.

"Well, yeah," Hallford shrugged. "Hey, no worries, and no judgments."

Terrence's eyes narrowed. "I didn't ask for your concern, nor care about your judgment." Now Hallford frowned. She pulled the covers tighter around her.

"Hey Terrence, why are you acting like that? I didn't mean anything by it."

"This shouldn't have happened," the first officer said. "Let's just chalk it up as too much Saurian brandy."

"Are you serious?"

"Didn't you say this didn't have to be any more than what it is?" He charged.

"But I'm not trash, to be tossed out like space debris."

"I didn't say you were," Glover said.

"That's basically what you just did say," Hallford's eyes flashed with anger.

"They told me you were screwed up, but I didn't realize how badly."

"Who?" Terrence demanded, "Who told you that?" He didn't like the idea of his private life being the subject of discussion aboard the ship.

Granted he hadn't tried hiding his relationship with Captain Scott. He had been proud of it, and in awe of her, that the youngest captain in the history of the Fleet, with nothing but the stars in front of her, would see likewise in him.

However he hadn't thought that the crew would be talking about their problems, or that they would consider him torn up because of them. Glover wondered if he had lost the respect of the crew.

More stuff to cut himself up over, he sighed. Before the self-mutilation began, he said, "I think you should go."

"You're really kicking me out? Over this?" Hallford was beside herself.

"You want to stay?" Glover was as incredulous.

"No, I want us to talk things out...like adults," the security officer declared.

"What is there to discuss?" Terrence shrugged. "You screwed up a 'screwed up' guy, end of story."

"I can't believe you're being this way, this obstinate," Hallford said.

"Believe it," Glover replied. He stood up, the sheet falling, the air cool over his naked flesh. His back was to Hallford but he heard the woman's sharp intake of breath. Get a good look the first officer thought, because it will be your last.

USS Renegade

Main Bridge

Glover took the conn, after Holmes had retreated to his ready room. Terrence winced, and reeled that thought back in. It's still Tryla's room, he reminded himself, as he often had to these days that this was still Captain Scott's ship until she officially relinquished it, and Holmes was just a caretaker.

But deep down, he didn't believe it anymore. He was afraid at any moment they would finally get a communique from Command that Tryla had transferred control to Holmes or even worse, had resigned her commission.

The last two days had been tension filled, especially whenever Hallford had taken over duties at the tactical station. He did his best to avoid eye contact and to keep their conversations terse and professional. He imagined he could feel the woman's eyes boring into his back, but he would never turn around to confirm it.

And when he was off duty he went straight to his quarters and stayed there, not even taking any messages from his family or friends. The only person he wanted

to hear from right now was Tryla and she was the one person who didn't want to have anything to do with him.

"Captain," Commander Rocha said from the ops console. Glover liked the sound of that, and as he turned to the second officer, he recalled his promise to talk with Rocha. "Sensors are detecting a Tzenkethi corvette on an intercept course."

"Are their ship's raised or weapons powered up?" Glover asked. He admired the sleek, tubular look of the blood red ship. It reminded him of an old Earth submarine, with two wings containing weapons pods on each end, as well as two disruptors jutting from the primary hull like pincers.

"No sir," Rocha said. The first officer, with some reluctance, alerted the captain. Holmes strode onto the bridge.

With his deep Southern drawl, he said, "Hail them Aleixo." Terrence, with more reluctance, slid out of the command chair.

Rocha replied, "Tzenkethi have received our message and our responding."

"What the hell?" Holmes didn't hide his shock, and for once Glover agreed with him.

A petite, wizened human woman sat languidly in the too large command chair, which clearly was not designed for her. She smiled, pleased that she had stunned the *Renegade* bridge into silence. "What's wrong gentlemen?" Admiral Nyota Uhura asked sweetly, "Cat got your tongue?"

Tzenkethi Corvette Klorantha

"I can say I never expected to be on the bridge of a Tzenkethi warship when I woke up this morning," Glover said. Uhura laughed. She rubbed the leather on the armrest—well Glover hoped it was leather. He took a look around the cramped, circular bridge, seeing walls of fur, as the backs of the hulking Tzenkethi warriors were attending their stations. The only other person that looked completely out of place, and just as uncomfortable was a raw-boned, Vulcanoid man with pointed ears and a slight v-shaped ridge line on his forehead. Terrence surmised that the man was Uhura's bodyguard since he stood protectively at her side.

"This ship's not so bad," the legendary admiral said, "Nothing a few tons of water and soap wouldn't cure." On that point, Glover could relate. The stench was nearly overwhelming. The admiral's comment prompted a series of growls from the bridge crew. Uhura merely laughed again. The woman, dressed in an unadorned brown utility jumpsuit, she was the very model of composure. "Commander Ravus, you know I positively adore your fine ship." She glanced down at the chains around the chair. "You even removed your prey for me. Don't believe that I, and the Federation, do not appreciate it."

A lean Tzenkethi, with knotted, overly muscular shoulders stepped from behind one of the ship's aft banks. He loomed over both Glover and the fragile looking admiral. Terrence's heartbeat rose and his muscles tensed as he tried to

read the man. Admiral Uhura, on the other hand, was completely unperturbed. The Vulcanoid-her bodyguard?-moved forward but was stayed by a quick hand gesture from the admiral.

"If the Autarch had not inveighed upon me personally to accommodate you, I would gut you all," he said, his long claws digging so hard into his hands that they drew blood.

Uhura merely looked up at the man, her smile dimming slightly, "And like any good automaton, you will do as you're told." The shift in her voice chilled Glover. He knew that this was a person not to be trifled with, despite her advanced age.

"You can have your seat back now," Uhura said, standing up from it. She then looked at the main viewer. Holmes had been waiting the whole time, and didn't hide his impatience.

"I promise to return Mr. Glover to you in one piece," the admiral said, the honey returning to her voice. The *Renegade* commander began to ask, but Uhura made a motion and the quick acting Tzenkethi at the communications station cut the line to the Starfleet vessel.

Terrence wished he could see Holmes's face right then. He bet the man was Thallonian red, completely apoplectic. "You liked that I see," Uhura said, getting close to the younger man.

"I don't think it would be wise to lie to you," Glover admitted.

"A wise man," the admiral said. "Jonathan was right about you."

He immediately got the reference. His expression became wary. That didn't set back Uhura. "I see your guard is up now," she said, "Like Mr. Owens said, wise."

Tzenkethi Corvette Klorantha

"It's okay, we can talk here," Admiral Uhura somehow made herself comfortable on the hard slab that passed for a bed. "I've made sure this room is soundproofed." She patted the space beside her. "Have a seat."

"I would prefer to stand, Admiral," Glover said, purposely eyeing the Vulcanoid who was also remained on his feet, but by the door. The woman smiled and patted the seat again. Terrence sighed and slumped his shoulders. He took a seat beside her. Glover paused to take the moment in, sitting beside a living legend. The lined face, the sharp dark eyes, the wreath of pure white hair, Terrence could only imagine the wonders had seen and history the woman had also seen, participated in, and made herself. Sensing his need to geek out, Uhura charitably allowed the reverential inspection.

"We're going to have to do something about that uniform," Uhura said, tugging at his sleeve. "I'll see what Ravus can rustle up." Terrence looked again at the Vulcanoid. Similar to Uhura, he was dressed in an inconspicuous outfit, his though consisted of a drab gray tunic, pants, and matching boots. An average observer would peg the man a Vulcan and move on, but there was something off

about him, an edginess that seemed to make him not an adherent to strict Vulcan logic, or a very loose interpreter of it at that.

"Admiral, I don't understand what this is all about?" Glover asked.

"Jonathan Owens speaks highly of you, and of course Samson does," she said. "And even when you don't intend to, you wind up assisting the Federation in countless ways, like at the Tigon science colony. That's what I call luck, like a certain young captain I used to know," Uhura's eyes twinkled, before her expression turned somber.

Glover's chest swelled at the comparison. There could only be one young captain that she was referring to. "Admiral, I thought you were Starfleet Intelligence, not from the Department of Special Affairs and Investigations."

Uhura chuckled, "I officially retired from Starfleet Intelligence three years ago," she said, and the commander noted that she emphasized the word "official". The admiral patted his shoulder. "But I have a lot of friends."

"I see," Glover said.

"You're trying," the admiral replied, "And that's admirable."

Terrence turned his attention back to the bodyguard. Uhura noticed the shift. "This is Xinran, of the Vulcan Science Directorate," she explained.

"What ship did you serve on?" Glover asked. The man arched an eyebrow and glanced at Uhura. The admiral smirked.

"Pretty perceptive Mr. Glover," Uhura nodded appreciatively. "Go ahead Mr. Xinran."

"I served...aboard the *USS Goshawk*," the man said tightly.

Terrence tilted his head, scouring his memory. He shrugged, coming up short. "I've never heard of the *Goshawk* before."

The admiral prompted the man. "The *Goshawk* was a *Kestrel*-class ship."

Terrence shrugged again before scratching his chin. "*Kestrel*-class ships were decommissioned decades ago." Understanding finally started to dawn. He gave the bodyguard a strong once over. "You're older than you look Mr. Xinran."

"Correct Commander," Uhura said.

"Furthermore, you're not Vulcan, you're Romulan," Glover added. Xinran's jaw clenched. Terrence had been guessing, but saw he hit pay dirt, and continued as if had been completely certain the whole time.

"You are perceptive," he spat through clenched teeth, "for a human."

"How did you surmise that Mr. Glover?" Uhura was intrigued. "How did you peg Mr. Xinran to be Romulan? Few make that call. Most do see him as a Vulcan and think nothing of it. The more perceptive might consider him a *V'tosh ka'tur* Vulcan or Rigelian. But you made the right call, and I want to know why?"

Glover shrugged and then gave the edgy Xinran a once over. "*V'tosh ka'tur* I've met are generally not as uptight as Mr. Xinran here, and as for being Rigelian, I just guessed with this being all hush-hush, the Romulans just had to be in the mix somewhere, since they're back on the galactic scene."

Uhura chuckled and turned to Xinran. "See, I told you Commander Glover had a keen eye. He would have to be to be such an ace pilot."

Terrence couldn't help but grin. He had never been complimented by a Starfleet icon before.

"Any other insights you care to share Mr. Glover?" Xinran's tone was challenging.

"Vulcan. Science. Directorate," Glover said, measuring each word carefully. "There's more to you than that." Terrence smirked. "More like Vulcan Security Directorate."

The wizened admiral chuckled while Xinran's eyes flashed with surprise.

"Jonathan did say you were quick on your feet," she marveled. Glover glanced back just enough to see the woman smiling, and golden flecks in her twinkling eyes. He had never noticed the flecks before. Before he could investigate further, the Romulan spoke up.

"A Romulan working for the Vulcan Security Directorate," Terrence mulled the idea over. "So what's the rest of your story Mr. Xinran?" Glover asked. The Romulan looked around Glover, to Uhura.

"Go on Xinran," the admiral encouraged.

The man shifted his jaw, his expression darkening. "I am Romulan," he admitted, "I was born in the Empire, but left with my father when I was a child. We traveled to several worlds in the Klingon Empire and the Federation, eventually settling on P'Jem."

"The Vulcan planet?" Glover looked questioningly at Uhura. Xinran scowled that his story would need validation, but the admiral merely nodded in the affirmative.

"My father was a religious scholar," Xinran continued. "After learning about the Klingon faith on Boreth, he took me to the Federation, to P'Jem to study the religion of our Vulcan ancestors, to find the common threads that still bound our estranged peoples."

"I see," Terrence rubbed his chin, which also annoyed Xinran. His eyes became slits.

"It's alright Mr. Xinran," Uhura gently prodded, "Continue."

"I would, if not for the interruptions," he spat back. Terrence rolled his eyes, and Uhura chuckled again.

"You bet me to that Commander," she winked.

"Before I was interrupted," Xinran began.

"Wait," Terrence interjected, with a pointed finger. "When did this happen? There hasn't been official contact between the Federation and Star Empire for decades now, following the Tomed Incident. So, this had to have happened....last century." The realization gave Glover pause. Just how old was this man?

"Now you're catching on," the admiral said. "Mr. Xinran did serve in Starfleet, all too briefly in my opinion, but he is also a man of many talents, science being one

of them. He can be a great help in this mission; if that were not the case, he wouldn't be here, and neither would you."

"Well, this is getting more interesting by the nanosecond," Glover admitted. "I for sure thought Mr. Xinran was one of the denizens of Santora Prime." The planet's mention drew sharply arched eyebrows from both the Romulan and the admiral.

"And what do you know of Santora Prime?" Xinran asked.

"The Federation colony of Romulan defectors and exiles," shrugged, "My dad is a Rihannsu-ophile, the most prominent expert in the Federation on the Romulan history. I've accompanied him several times to Santora Prime."

Xinran's eyes gleamed with understanding. "I've read some of Admiral Glover's work; impressive....for a human." Again Glover didn't take the bait. "I have been to Santora Prime on occasion, but could never stay. The denizens there, they have real memories of the Empire, mine are...scant to say the least. And not all of them fond. I am an outsider, even among outsiders," the man said, with grim punctuation.

Uhura eased in. "Xinran has been of great service to the Federation, serving in Starfleet, teaching at the Vulcan Institute for Defensive Arts, and for Vulcan Security."

"The V'Shar," Xinran clarified.

"Hmm," Glover rubbed his chin. "That's a pretty damn fascinating resume," he said, his eyes narrowing. "I'm sure there's more to it than that." The Romulan's eyes flashed with anger, and Glover shifted on the bed to confront him. Uhura placed a hand on Terrence's bicep.

"Due to our long history with the Romulans, I understand your suspicion Mr. Glover...Terrence," the admiral said, the weariness in her voice showing her age. "Believe me, I understand, but I trust Mr. Xinran, as much as I trust you, and I need you both for what is to come."

"And what is to come?" Terrence asked, both intrigued and dreadful. At that moment there was a knock at the door. Uhura smiled.

"Right on schedule," the woman said, "Enter."

Terrence stood, his mouth gaping in shock. He hadn't been expecting a surprise greater today than being greeted by Admiral Uhura aboard a Tzenkethi warship. And while this new twist wasn't as earth shattering, it damn near close.

As if sharing one mind, as they often had, the two men rushed to each other and embraced. Terrence pulled back, and blinked, making sure his eyes weren't deceiving him. "Cal Hudson, what the hell are you doing here?"

Tzenkethi Corvette Klorantha

Terrence gave his old friend a quick once over. Cal was wearing a roughhewn gray tunic and black pants. "You're going incognito too," Glover said, looking from the admiral back to his old friend. "It's great to see you, but why are you here? And

what's this all about?" He looked back to the admiral, before swinging his head back toward his friend. "Wait a moment; I thought you were on Romulus?"

"I was," Cal nodded, his smile dimming. "I was assigned to the Federation Embassy that we just reestablished there after the Romulans returned to the intergalactic stage. I was just settling in when..." Hudson paused and looked respectfully at the admiral, seeking her permission to continue."

"I'll take it from here Calvin," Uhura said. Hudson bowed his head in respect. Glover turned to the woman.

"The incident that prompted the Romulans to forgo their self-imposed exile was the destruction of several outposts on both sides of the Neutral Zone. It was the *Enterprise-D* that made contact," the admiral paused, her eyes sparkling. Glover surmised that the woman was proud that another *Enterprise* was making history.

"Both the *Enterprise* and their Romulan counterparts had agreed to work together to solve the cause of the widespread destruction," the admiral continued. "However little information was gleaned during that rapprochement; the *Enterprise* was reassigned shortly thereafter, but Special Affairs and Intelligence continued investigating; yet so far our efforts have not born much fruit, but that being said..." She looked at Cal. "Mr. Hudson, would you be so kind?"

He nodded, swallowed hard. "Of course Admiral," the man said, "While at one of the many Embassy dinners I was approached by a Romulan officer."

"Hey, did you tell Gretchen?" Glover joked weakly.

Hudson smiled wanly, rolling his eyes. "Still got to work on your sense of humor I see."

"Gentlemen," Uhura gently prodded.

"Ah, yes, sorry," Glover smiled. "Just trying to inject some levity."

"I understand Mr. Glover, Terrence," the admiral's expression was sympathetic. "This is a very unusual situation I've tossed you into, both of you, and you both have my apologies."

Both men nearly tripped over each other denying any hardships. After the tumult had died down, Hudson continued. "This officer palmed an isolinear chip, of Starfleet manufacture-how she got it I don't know. As soon as I was able I took it to my superiors. The encryption was simple. The messages, and its deliverer, are anything but."

That made Glover even more intrigued. "What was the message? Who was the messenger?"

Hudson parted his lips and then looked back at Admiral Uhura. Her expression hardened, and Terrence saw embers of fire in her eyes. Eventually she spoke, "Commander, have you ever heard the name Valeris?"

Tzenkethi Corvette Klorantha

Terrence composed himself before speaking, "Admiral, how can you trust her?"

"I don't," Uhura said tightly. "That's why I'm here. I want to look her in the eye myself; I'm sorry but I don't trust anyone else to do it."

"You, coming with us into Romulan space?" Glover was incredulous. "Impossible. That's not happening."

"Excuse me?" One graying eyebrow shot up on the woman's forehead; if she had possessed pointed ears, the admiral would've easily passed for Vulcan. "You're not giving orders here Mr. Glover!"

"Admiral," Glover didn't back down, "You're not thinking this through. This could all be part of some elaborate trap. The idea that we bring them the former head of Starfleet Intelligence on a platter, I can't allow that."

"You will follow orders Mr. Glover, my orders, is that clear?" Uhura's tone brooked no debate.

"Believe me Terrence," Calvin clapped his shoulder. "I've had this same discussion with her, as has your father."

"My Dad?" Glover asked, momentarily confused and then a bit peeved that his father hadn't shared this with him, even though he had likely been sworn to secrecy.

"Yes, Admiral Glover," Uhura nodded, "I wasn't about to traipse into Romulan space without talking to the Fleet's foremost expert on the Romulans. I had to use all of my considerable charm to keep him from this mission. I'm almost past my sell date, but if the Romulans got their clutches on Samson, that would be a disaster."

"Did my Dad recommend me for this mission?" Terrence didn't hide his curiosity.

"No," Uhura said, "Jonathan Owens did. Seems you've made friends in all the right places kid."

"And when I looked at your file, you're uniquely qualified for this mission, and there's only one other man Mr. Hudson trusts and he's on the *Okinawa*, on the far side of the Beta Quadrant right now."

"Ben," Glover nodded. "Well, I was your *first* choice, right Cal?" The other man just grinned.

"Granted admiral, I am uniquely qualified, for many things," Glover said, without irony or self-deprecation. "But how am I suited for this mission?"

"I need a damn good pilot son," Uhura said, "And Hikaru is too busy right now. So, I think you'll work in a pinch."

Tzenkethi Corvette Klorantha

Glover was propped against an unforgiving bulkhead, trying to keep his attention on the PADD. On the bed-slab Admiral Uhura was asleep or at least appeared to be. The woman's chest was rising and lowering slowly and she was softly snoring.

Terrence's stomach growled and he tried to ignore it. Just like he tried to blot out the putrid smell from the bowl Cal clutched in one hand; with the other he was digging a spoon in for another bite.

Hudson had been in the mess hall when Uhura had first brought him to the room, and after the admiral had drifted off, the man had gone back. Xinran was tempting the fates there now in the eatery. Uhura had wisely brought some rations and offered to share them, but Glover didn't want to eat up the woman's food. He would eat sparingly, until he could find something more edible.

"Ugh," Terrence scrunched up his face. "How can you eat that stuff?"

Hudson swallowed before laughing. "We got to keep our strength up."

"You don't even know what that stuff is you're eating," Glover pointed out. To that Calvin shrugged.

"At least it wasn't alive; the meat was cooked, for the most part."

"Gretchen must find it pretty easy to cook for you," Terrence said. Hudson lit up at the mention of his wife.

"You know I was never a picky eater," he replied.

"True," Glover said. "I remember when Ben's dad would prepare those feasts for us, and you were just as happy there as you were at the Academy café."

"As long as it's hot," Hudson said.

"And not alive, remember?" Glover added. The two men laughed.

"So how's Gretchen?"

"On tour of the Rigel system right now, singing lead in *Gav'ot toH'va*," Hudson beamed.

"Ah, that's a great opera," Terrence said. "I remember seeing the rendition from the Academy Opera Troupe."

"I should've known you knew that opera, you being such a fan of Klingon culture," Cal smiled. "That won't affect your feelings about this mission, will it?"

"Come on," Glover said. "Can't believe you asked that," he added. "I do admire the Klingons and while the Romulans have steered clear of us since Tomed, they've continued to antagonize the Klingon Empire."

"Poking the proverbial sabre bear," Hudson nodded, "Never wise."

Glover nodded, "You're right. But that whole relationship between the Klingons and Romulans is long and knotty as hell. No clean hands on either side of that one. But I will say, that the sneak attacks the Romulans have resorted to, those were way out of bounds."

"You'll get no argument from me on that account," Hudson said.

"So, what are they like?" Terrence asked.

"The Romulans?" Cal shrugged. "Well, let me see...Romulan society is very stratified," Hudson began. "And I mostly interacted with only a segment of it, diplomats, politicians, and military commanders, the top of the hill. I tried interacting with the citizenry, at various markets, but many merchants and citizens were reluctant to downright hostile."

"Why?" Glover asked.

"The Tal Shiar," Hudson explained, "Some form of secret police. I was told they were everywhere, often disguised as citizens, and obsessively seeking to root out any dissent or treachery among the people. Couple that with the xenophobia I saw regularly exhibited, some perhaps for the benefit of any hidden Tal Shiar agents, I believe it will take quite some time for the Federation and the Romulans to become allies, and even more to become trusted allies."

"You're prognosis belies either thing occurring," Terrence said.

Hudson gave a ghost of a smile. "Believe me, it wasn't all bad. Despite the reputation for duplicity, the Romulans are an honorable people...in their own way. And the few times they let their hair down, so to speak, quite a fun people as well. My time there has been very illuminating to say the least."

"Well you always did have a gift for diplomacy," Glover replied. "I don't know why you haven't joined the Diplomatic Corps by now anyway."

"Gretchen says the same thing," Cal grinned. "But I just like serving aboard starships, I like space exploration. Maybe one day I will change course, but right now, it's Starfleet all the way for me."

"In light of your experiences on Romulus, what do you make of our own resident Romulan, Mr. Xinran?" The commander asked.

Hudson shrugged. "Seems like a good enough fellow to me. Has a chip on his shoulder, though."

"You think he can be trusted?" Glover cut to the point.

"The admiral does," Hudson's eyes sparked with fire. "That's enough for me."

"Yeah," Terrence pulled back, stung. "It's just, the Romulans. You know what they did to my mother."

Cal's expression softened. "Yes, and I'm sorry." Deitra Glover had been on the ill-fated *Starship Tombaugh*, lost with all hands, three years ago. It had taken Glover a long time to accept that he would never see his mother again. Deitra's life had not been an easy one. Before making it to the Federation, she had been a prisoner of the Romulans, one of the few survivors of the infamous Norkan Massacre.

"No, I'm the one who should be sorry," Glover said. "It's not fair to blame Xinran for what Romulans born decades or a century before him had done to my mother. And like my mother, Xinran is an exile of the Star Empire too. That being said, I can't deny I'm suspicious."

Hudson said. "We're going into some unknown territory here, but I caution that you try to keep an open mind regarding Xinran and treat him with the respect he deserves not only as a Starfleet officer but a sapient being. And that you trust the admiral's judgment."

"Fair enough," Glover said tightly. He handed the PADD to his old friend. "So what do you make of this Valeris?"

Cal took the proffered device. He nodded, with an admiring expression on his face. "She's a looker," he said. "The headband and the mole especially are really cute."

Terrence rolled his eyes. "Seriously Cal?"

Hudson blew through his teeth, and took another look. "Graduating at the top of her class at the Academy, the first Vulcan to do so, highly impressive," the man replied, "Though a bit surprising that she would be the first one, with all the other Vulcans who had served throughout Starfleet's history, but in any event, it foretold what should have been a glittering career."

"Yeah," Terrence nodded, "Until she conspired to assassinate the Klingon Chancellor and then the Federation President."

"What could possess her to do such a thing?" Hudson pondered.

"Believe it or not, Valeris wasn't all bad." Terrence wasn't as surprised as Cal to hear the admiral speak. Both men shifted to her, and the woman propped herself up on her elbows.

"Even her views, as detestable as they were about the Klingons, we all held them," the admiral admitted. "But her actions, it went against everything we hold dear and almost plunged us into a devastating war."

"One the Romulans would have likely benefitted from," Terrence said. "My father had told me about how the Romulans had allied with the Klingons *and* the Federation at different points, and was also part of the conspiracy. They were the likely beneficiaries of any war waged between the Klingons and Federation, all they had to do was wait until both sides had destroyed each other and swoop in."

"So you see why the Romulans accepted Valeris's defection," Uhura nodded. "She almost did something no Romulan commander, not Valdore or Keras could pull off."

"But why is she reaching out to us now?" Glover asked. "If she's being feted by the Romulans why would she want to come back to the Federation? Her crimes are almost a century old, but the shadow of them is long, and they have not been forgotten. She is, and would remain a pariah here."

"She is claiming that she has information of such vital importance that she is willing to risk her position in the Empire, and her life," the admiral said.

"And that brings me to the officer who brought us Valeris's message," Terrence said.

Hudson spoke up, "Lt. Leta is a relatively young, very severe woman. Leta was one of the military liaisons assigned to the embassy. We struck up something of a rapport, but nothing of significance, at least on my part. We didn't spend a lot of time together at the embassy function in question, only a few minutes. After exchanging pleasantries she made to shake my hand, approximating the human gesture, but leaving the isolinear chip in my hand. I did my best to play it off. Before I could ask any questions, the woman had disappeared into the throng of partiers. I had considered going after her, but reminded myself of the eyes everywhere, and

somewhat thankfully a long-winded scholar from the Astrophysical Academy pinned me in.”

Glover chuckled. “Sucks to be you.”

Hudson drolly replied, “Ha.”

“So not much to glean from this Lt. Leta I see,” Terrence said.

“No,” Cal answered, not pleased he couldn’t offer more.

Terrence understood though. There were some questions they couldn’t answer right now, or maybe either, though another query swam to the forefront of his mind. “Admiral, this ship, how did you get the Tzekenthi to agree to any of this?”

Admiral, still on her elbows, smiled. “Remember when I told you have I have friends? Well, they aren’t all from the Federation,” she said cryptically. “Before the treaty was signed the old Autarch was...removed, and the new Autarch, is a sweetheart, as much as dictator can be. He understood the importance of maintaining the new peace, even if some diehards among the clans do not. It was easy to convince him to help us, to avoid a renewal of hostilities or even sanctions being placed on his fledgling government. And the Federation Council was more concerned about retrieving Valeris and any information she could give us about what happened along the Neutral Zone, or anything else regarding the Star Empire.”

“But people died on Tigon,” Glover replied tightly.

“Yes,” Uhura’s eyes crinkled with sadness, “And there is nothing to be done about that now. What we are tasked to do is to prevent even more loss of life.”

“And are the people who died just forgotten, swept under the rug?”

Terrence’s voice rose, but he didn’t care. “How can an attack on a Federation science colony be ignored?”

The admiral smiled, “What attack?”

“Excuse me,” Glover did a double take. “The attack we helped stop by blowing that Tzenkethi raider straight to hell. My tactical officer lost her arm during the course of the fighting.”

“That is most unfortunate Terrence,” Uhura said, “But officially, the tragedy at Tigon II has been deemed the result of a malfunctioning fusion reactor.”

“I can’t believe the Federation Council would do something like that!”

“It’s true,” she nodded, her expression sympathetic. “And you, and your colleagues on the *Renegade*, will keep this matter quiet, by order of Starfleet Command.”

“You can’t do that,” Terrence argued. “People need to know the truth.”

“Why?” She shrugged, looking to either man as if she really didn’t know the answer to that.

“Because,” Glover shrugged right back, “It’s the truth.”

“Oh, and you think the truth makes you free?” Uhura’s smile was pitying, “I suppose, in some instances it does, it certainly helped when the truth came about the Gorkon assassination,” she admitted. “Though the truth can also cause terrible

harm; irreparable harm. It was a lesson I've had to learn the hard way, and its one I fear you will learn one day yourself, I just hope you survive the lesson."

"Maybe Admiral, you've just been in the shadows so long you've lost perspective," Terrence challenged.

"Terrence!" Hudson admonished.

"No, it's quite alright Mr. Hudson," Uhura said. "You might be right." She smiled. "I haven't been as young as you in a long time Mr. Glover. I can imagine if I was your age and being confronted with this stance from an elder I would have made the same arguments. I could dismiss it as naivety on your part but I won't; sometimes we do need reminders of what we once were, not everything from youth has to be discarded as we wind our way through adulthood and its hard choices."

"So will you talk to the Federation Council and Starfleet Command about this cover-up?" The commander asked.

Uhura shook her head, "No, I won't."

"I don't understand."

"You make a good point Mr. Glover, and I appreciate your willingness to stand up to me. I know each of you, Mr. Hudson, Mr. Xinran, and yourself, you will all not blindly follow orders, and that's in part why you're here, I don't want yes men. But in this instance, the security of the Federation and the Tzenkethi Coalition is more important than the truth of what happened on Tigon II. I know you've fought in both wars, against the Cardassians and the Tzenkethi, and if you could prevent such a thing from happening again, and it required you to hold back the truth, or lie even to do so, would you?"

"Well, I, well, yes, I would," Glover said quietly, lowering his head.

"Not so naïve," Uhura smiled again. "You'll make a fine captain one day."

Terrence perked up. "Captain? You really think so?"

"Of course," the admiral said. "We admirals talk about such things, from time to time, you know."

"Are you serious?" Glover said, unable to hide his smile.

"Well, it's not all sunshine and rainbows where you are concerned," Uhura's smile grew. "Hikaru has quite a bone to pick with you."

"Really?" Hudson said, elbowing Glover. "You didn't tell me that story buddy."

"Oh, well it was nothing really; one, I thought the commodore would appreciate the run through the Sol asteroid belt on the way to Jupiter Station, one pilot to another. And two, I didn't realize that was his great granddaughter." Both Uhura and Hudson laughed.

Once the laughter had died down and the heat had emanated enough off Glover's face, he asked, "Admiral, why the Tzenkethi though? Why are we on this ship?"

"Ah, now we get to the heart of the matter," the admiral said. She sat up on the slab. "Valeris wants out of the Empire. We're going to get her out. But we damn well can't take a starship into the Neutral Zone. Tensions are heightened now that the

Romulans have sought to reengage with us. We have strong information, though the Tzenkethi would never confirm, that the Romulans have provided material support for the Coalition during its war with us, same with the Cardassians, but despite that the Coalition and the Star Empire are on friendly terms. Long story short, the Tzenkethi is more trusted among the Romulans and would not arouse suspicion.”

“So this corvette is going to take us to Valeris?” Glover asked. “If so, what do you need my piloting skills for?”

“The *Klorantha* is just crossing the Temecklia system, and entering Romulan space without raising any hackles. But they are not going all the way, the Autarch was adamant about that. He doesn’t want a war with the Romulans any more than another one with us.”

“I’m not even going to pretend I’m not confused here,” Terrence admitted.

Uhura chuckled. “Commander Ravus will drop us off just inside Romulan space, where I’ve already purchased a vessel, and that’s where you come in Mr. Glover,” she paused for dramatic effect, “ You’re going to take us deeper into the Star Empire.”

PART TWO: NEST OF VIPERS

Vokar’s Spaceship Emporium

Vokar’s Moon

Loculus Sector

“Welcome to Vokar’s Emporium,” the corpulent man clapped his hands before holding them wide, as if seeking an embrace. “The finest space ship and parts store in the Beta Quadrant!” The man smiled, revealing too many small, sharp teeth. The Tzenkethi corvette had beamed them down to a desolate moon, inside a dusty lunar hangar reeking of oil and other fluids. Glover had been glad to be off the corvette, but he wasn’t so sure this place was better from an olfactory sense. The bulbous man stood between two shuttles in various stages of disrepair.

Cal nudged Terrence, leaned close to his ear, and did his best to whisper. “That’s a Ferengi?” His incredulousness matched Glover’s. The short, fat man was orange-brown in coloration, his enlarged skull hairless, and his ears were nearly the size of his thick head. He wore a striped fur vest over his brown tunic, and furry boots covered his feet. Half covering the back of the man’s head was a glittery brown metallic headdress, which matched the tunic. A whip was curled conspicuously at his hip, surprisingly not obscured by the girth.

The smiling man laughed. He touched the rim of one of his large ears. “I can hear you my friends, and yes I am a Ferengi. DaiMon Snark,” he took a short bow, “I opened many a market for the great Ferengi Alliance.”

"It's been many a moon-not this one-since you sat at the prow of a marauder," Admiral Uhura quipped.

"Yes, quite some time I am afraid," Snark agreed, oblivious of the woman's jab, or perhaps not caring. "I was betrayed, marooned by my crew...led by my own nephew...but one day, I shall avenge myself upon that *skritz* Drux!" Animatedly, the Ferengi thrust one finger into the air. His face contorting with rage, he turned away for a moment. When he faced them again, Snark was all smiles. "But that is an occasion for another day. Today, my friends we have business to conduct, and a dream to help you realize."

"Where is the ship?" Uhura asked, completely disbelieving the man's sincerity. Glover was still getting over that this portly alien was a Ferengi. The tall tales about them were they were fearsome, human-eating monsters.

"That's what I like about you hew-mons, so down to the point," Snark winked.

"We're Eminians," Uhura replied smoothly. "Traders," she added. Unbidden Glover glanced down at his dark clothing to see if there was anything out of order. His uniform, including his combadge, had been vaporized. Catching the self-conscious gesture, Snark grinned; this time the gesture taking on a nasty tone.

"Even the ones with the ears eh?" He pointed a blue-finger nailed finger at Xinran. The Romulan glowered at the man.

"Ears?" The V'Shar agent riposted. "You're one to talk."

Snark laughed, clutching his ample midsection. "Quite amusing, you bunch. But I am no fool, despite my current loss of favor on Ferenginar. I know a hew-mon when I see one. Now I wonder why would you be here, in Romulan space, seeking to purchase a Romulan spacecraft from a humble, honest merchant like myself? Deign to enlighten?"

"You've already received payment," Uhura said, her voice hot.

"Yes, yes, that is true and for that I thank you," Snark said. "The ship is yours; there is no question about that, me being an honest broker and all. However leaving this moon without my informing the authorities of your arrival, as well as the make and transponder signal of your purchased vessel, well..." The man left the rest hanging. His smile took on a predatory cast.

Glover and Cal stepped from behind the admiral, both knowing a con when they heard one. "The...our friend has already paid you, and it would be unwise to act in bad faith," Terrence hissed through clenched teeth.

"I wouldn't dream of it," Snark replied with a mock frown, though the man stepped back. There was a rustling from among the rusting hulks, and two living hulks emerged. The gray skinned, muscled Barolians both clutched cannon-sized disruptors.

Terrence glanced at Cal, and saw the man was similarly smiling. "Reminds me of that time on Rigel X," Glover muttered. The two Starfleet officers faced down the Barolians.

"Please," Uhura held up a hand. "Stop gentlemen." She nodded at Xinran. "I believe the *Major* would like to speak." Glover looked at Cal, and saw the man was looking at him, both with confused expressions. Snark was similarly confused, though he tried to smile away his nervousness.

"Major, you say?"

"Of the Tal Shiar," Uhura was smooth as Andorian silk. "Well the major can tell you all about it."

Snark's smile dropped. His beady eyes darted from Uhura to Xinran. "I don't believe you," he challenged.

Xinran said nothing. The man stood there stoically, and then he smiled. Even Glover was chilled, but the Ferengi was mortified. The man almost fell over backing away from the silent Romulan. He bumped into a wall and threw his hands up as if avoid a pummeling or being vaporized.

"We'll be taking the ship now," Uhura said. "And we should not anticipate you informing anyone of our presence here, shall we?"

"Of course, of course not," Snark was quaking. He frantically waved at his Barolian muscle, to back off. "I'm, I'm a loyal, and grateful expatriate of the Romulan state. They took me in, allowed me to eke out an existence here, away from those that would most wish me harm. In fact I service a lot of the Tal Shiar agent, for a reduced fee, practically a steal, as a sign of my patriotism."

"Why do you think the major choose you to do business with?" Uhura asked, her voice as sugary as Kaferian apple pie.

"Really?" Snark breathed. "I have gained a reputation among the Tal Shiar?"

"Yes," Uhura smiled, but there was nothing sweet behind the gesture. "You have."

The Ferengi's face fell. "What does that mean?" He asked. Uhura nodded to the rest of them, and then Xinran stepped forward and they followed him.

"I think we can find our way from here," the woman looked back over her shoulder.

"What do you mean?" He kept pleading, following behind them. "Please, what do you mean?"

Romulan Imperial Shuttle Patronus

"My Dad would kill to be here right now," Glover said as he accommodated himself to the controls of the scout ship. Thanks to Admiral Glover, he knew enough Romulan to be somewhat dangerous, but he was happy, for the second time today, that Xinran was in the cockpit beside him. Together the two men had figured out how to exit the moon's hangar and had been streaking through Romulan space for over an hour at full impulse.

The admiral had wisely suggested that they conducted a systems check, and also an inspection for any booby traps or trackers that the good DaiMon Snark might have snuck onboard.

The Ferengi had nervously stood at the open hatch, whining about how above board he was as a merchant. The admiral shut him up when she tossed the tracker she discovered at him. Snark awkwardly reached to catch that. "Do you know how much that cost?" He screeched.

"Are there any other surprises?" Uhura had asked coldly.

"No, no of course not," The Ferengi had promised as he gingerly placed the tracking device beside him.

"There better not be," the admiral had declared. "Or we will be back, and next time, we won't be so...understanding."

"Ah yes," Glover said, beaming, "A manual steering column," he said.

"Auxiliary purposes only Terrence," Cal clapped his shoulder. "I remember that joyride around Saturn with those two butterfly dancers. You took so many barrel rolls I threw up on the purple one, you remember?"

"That's one I will never forget," Terrence laughed.

"At least he didn't cheat us out of the cloaking device," Uhura said, stepping into the cockpit. Since they had been underway the admiral had been in the back of the ship, tinkering at Terrence's best guess. He hoped that the woman had found the ship's replicator, or whatever passed for one on a Romulan ship. He wasn't the biggest fan of Romulan cuisine; or rather his father's attempt at it, but Terrence was certain anything was better than what was on that Tzenkethi ship. Glover swallowed hard at the admiral's revelation and shared a look with Cal.

"A cloaking device?" Both men asked.

"Yes," the admiral replied. "All *Aquila*-class scout ships are equipped with them, though it's of a design I'm not familiar with. Much more elaborate than the one the *Enterprise* once procured. Now you see why I was interested in young Mr. Sisko," Uhura smiled. "I needed someone with his engineering skills."

"I can take a look at it," Hudson offered. "I'm no Ben, but I did alright in my engineering courses back in the Academy."

"Please," Uhura said. Cal took off to the back of the shuttle. The woman took a seat behind Glover.

"Admiral, I'm curious," Terrence ventured. "If I'm here for my piloting skill, and I assume Xinran is here for his language and science skills among other things that will facilitate our way through Romulan space, but what is Cal doing here?"

"Believe me Commander Glover, I'm not needlessly risking Mr. Hudson's life, or any of yours or that matter. This mission doesn't happen without Mr. Hudson's involvement."

"Why is that?" Terrence frowned. He didn't like the woman dancing around the question.

"What is our heading Mr. Xinran?" Uhura asked. Glover swallowed his frustration. The Romulan replied.

"You're about to get your answer Terrence," Uhura said. "Xinran, be a dear and open hailing frequencies."

"Hailing frequencies?" Glover looked back at her, and saw the woman smiling. "Who are we contacting? There's no one out there."

"Reading a massive tachyon surge off our bow," Xinran said.

"What Xinran?" Terrence turned back to the V'Shar agent. A flicker caught the edge of his eye and he looked out the wrap-around v-shaped porthole. A massive patch of space was twisting and distorting in front of them, taking on a large avian shape.

"It's a warbird sir," Xinran replied, both his expression and tone deadly serious. "Shall I raise shields, prime the weapons?"

Besides the cloaking device, the scout ship had deflector shields, one disruptor, and one plasma torpedo launcher, though Snark had only supplied them with a single torpedo. There wasn't much in the way of armaments, so winning a fight against the monster before them wasn't an option. Glover was about to order that Xinran strike the warbird before it raised its shields and then he was going to take the scout to maximum warp and hope that the warbird didn't overtake them.

"Don't do anything Mr. Xinran," Uhura ordered.

"Admiral, that's a Romulan warbird out there," Glover said, his pulse quickening, even as he took a moment to admire the humongous green death machine. The warbird had a unique open shell design, which made its twin nacelles resemble wings. The ship was one of the largest warships he had ever seen, nearly twice as long as a *Galaxy*-class starship. Despite its hulking size, the warbird had a graceful avian design, its prominent forward hull looking like a beak.

The console beeped, and Xinran looked from Glover to the admiral, a perplexing look on his face. "The warbird is hailing us," Uhura said with certainty. "Mr. Xinran, you're on."

RIS Patronus

Glover's throat tightened and his fingers hovered over the helm. This isn't working, he thought, but wisely kept his mouth shut. Beside him, Xinran maintained a calm expression, but being up close to the Romulan, Terrence could see the beads of sweat on his ridged brow.

"*So you're saying that your viewscreen is malfunctioning?*" The voice issuing from the audio speakers was dripping with skepticism. "Our sensors do not detect any problems with your shuttle's systems," the man said.

"You're not over here," Xinran said, trying to add edge and authority to his voice. He would need to sell the warbird commander on his Tal Shiar bonafides, but Glover knew it would be much harder; especially that Admiral Uhura couldn't do the

talking for him. The commander looked again at the large warbird hanging above them as if poised to strike.

"What was your identification code again, Major...Lluadh?" The commander demanded. Xinran skeptically looked back at Uhura. The woman, sitting on the edge of her seat, nodded at him to answer. Xinran repeated the identification code. Cal, seated opposite from the admiral, also had a worried look on his face.

Terrence exhaled after a few moments when the commander replied, *"The identification code has been confirmed."* There was a pause, and then, *"Our sensors are reading four life signs on your vessel...one Romulan, three...Eminian?"*

Glover looked at Uhura. The woman flashed a smile. So that's must have been part of what she had been doing in the back of the shuttle, masking their biosigns.

"What is the purpose of your mission Major?" The voice pressed. *"And why do you need Eminians to accomplish it?"*

"That is no concern of yours," Xinran said, though Glover felt without enough force. The man was folding, cracking under the strain of the deception, and who could blame him, with their destruction swirling in the warbird's disruptor banks.

"Furthermore, and more importantly, why do you need one of my crew, my science officer no less, for this mysterious mission?"

"That is also not your concern," the Romulan said, strength returning to his voice.

"What if I refused your request?" The commander challenged. *"What if my science officer were to remain aboard this vessel, attending to her duties instead?"*

Another flash on the console display showed that the warbird had powered weapons. Glover stared hard at Xinran. The Romulan looked to Uhura. The admiral calmly gestured for Xinran to continue.

"That would be unwise," Xinran said, with a rodinium-laced tone. "Commander?"

There was no response, but Terrence noted that the warbird's weapons were fully charged.

Xinran looked to Uhura again, and the admiral silently made a pushing gesture. "Commander," the operative said again, his voice indignant, and Glover could see that that part at least wasn't an act. "I asked you a question."

There was continued silence for a moment, before the other man replied, *"Maec,"* he said, and then with more authority, *"Commander Maec of the..."*

"Imperial Warbird Lucian," Xinran interrupted; his tone now dismissive. *"Commander Maec of the Imperial Warbird Lucian you've impeded my mission long enough. Now, you will comply, or...I will have to report your defiance to headquarters."*

Xinran cut the transmission. The man exhaled and slumped in his chair. Uhura squeezed his shoulder. "You did well Mr. Xinran." Cal also added his encouragement, but Terrence was too busy looking from the shuttle's sensor readings to the ship hovering above them.

"The *Lucian* has raised shields and targeted weapons," Glover said, unable to keep the anxiety out of his voice. "Admiral, I think we should do likewise."

"No," Uhura said.

"At least enact evasive maneuvers," Terrence requested.

"No," the admiral shook her head.

"I can contact them again," Xinran offered.

"You will do no such thing," the admiral said, and sat back in her chair. She crossed her arms over her chest, her face impassive, but her eyes burned like coals. "This is nothing more than a game of chicken."

Xinran was confused, but Cal grinned after a moment, and nodded at Glover. "You remember that race you had with Justine Haas to reach the sun? Neither one of you backed off, until Justine finally came to her senses, but you just had to keep going. Damn near got cooked by a solar flare for that stunt too."

"Well, hey, I won didn't I?" Terrence grinned.

"And winning is what I hope will happen for all of us just now, but patience is required," the admiral said with an enviable sagacity.

The console beeped again. "It's the *Lucian*," Xinran said, with obvious relief. "She's hailing us."

"Wait," Uhura held up a hand.

The atmosphere inside the cockpit grew thick with anxiety as the seconds seemed to stretch into eons. Every time Xinran even looked like he wanted to open the channel, the admiral stopped him.

More sensors lit up on the console. "*Lucian* is powering down weapons and lowering shields," he replied, relief warring with surprise.

The admiral nodded. "Now, answer the hail Mr. Xinran. But let Commander Maec speak first."

The operative nodded. He activated the link between the vessel, and he admirably held his tongue until a reluctant Maec spoke up.

"*I will accede to your request Major,*" the stricken man replied. "*I had to ascertain if you were in fact a member of the Tal Shiar. With the renewal of our relations with the Federation, we all have to be vigilant of alien infiltration,*" the man added.

"Enough," Xinran sounded bored. "You've shown your crew that you can stand up to the dreaded Tal Shiar, and if this mission wasn't more pressing, I would show you the error of engaging in such misguided actions." The man didn't need to be told this time to end communication with the *Lucian*.

Uhura smiled with satisfaction. "Excellent work Mr. Xinran; for a moment there you convinced me that you actually were a Tal Shiar agent."

The man's face pinched. "I don't know if that's a compliment or an insult, to be honest admiral."

"Believe me it's a compliment," Uhura said. "Great job." Seconds later the cockpit filled with the familiar whine of a transporter beam. The shuttle's tiny pad was in the hold.

Terrence's eyes widened in surprise, but his stomach tightened with worry. He wondered what the Romulans had just beamed aboard the shuttle.

"Mr. Hudson," Uhura said. "I think we should greet our new guest; you first."

"Of course," Cal got up from his seat.

"Wait, why Cal?" Glover asked, concerned for his friend.

Uhura looked back. "You had asked why Mr. Hudson was part of this mission, and now you're about to find out." Without saying more, the admiral left the cockpit. Glover was quick on her heels.

RIS Patronus

"*Jolan Tru*," Admiral Uhura said, with a respectful nod.

The woman stepped off the transporter pad, dropping the large jade duffel bag that hung from her shoulder. She glared at the wizened legend. "How do you know our tongue?"

"I don't think that's the appropriate response to a greeting," Uhura responded, before smiling. The woman continued glowering. "Young lady, I was studying Romulan language before you were born."

The Romulan science officer was not mollified by that. "More than likely one of the Starfleet operatives rife throughout the Empire told you our greetings," she surmised. "I wonder what else they have told you." She huffed.

"Spoken like a woman who just willingly beamed onto a ship full of Starfleet officers," Glover shot off. Uhura scowled at him before shrugging her shoulders. The woman turned her ire to him. "Lt. Leta I presume?"

"And who are you?" She demanded.

"Hey, let's tone it down a bit here," Cal stepped forward, putting on his most soothing tone. Terrence had seen his friend utilize that tone before, though for less platonic reasons. "You gave the isolinear chip to me, you initiated this, and the accusatory tone is not beneficial."

A nasty retort was brimming on the edge of the woman's tongue, Glover was certain, but she reined it in. With precision she turned to Hudson. "Lt. Hudson, it is agreeable to see you again." The woman's fires dimmed somewhat.

"Same here," Hudson replied, "Though I wish the circumstances were much different." As the tension diffused Terrence took in their newest guest. The woman was tall, and striking, with her almond eyes giving her longish face a vaguely Asiatic cast. Her skin was bronzed while her hair was jet black and almost touched her shoulders. He noticed that it was shaved on each side, making her pointed ears more prominent.

Glover also took a look at the Romulan uniform. He was one of the few Starfleet officers who had seen a Romulan this close up in several decades. The Romulan uniform had changed a great deal since the ones from last century. Leta wore a thick, padded silver gray jacket with jutting shoulders, and a harness that split at the sternum and went around both shoulders. In the center of the harness was the shiny avian crest of the Star Empire.

Terrence also took note of the sleek, green disruptor at the woman's right hip and the jeweled hilt of blade on her left. Of course it had to be that moment that Leta took notice of him. Her face twisted with disgust, "You humans are as lecherous as Ferengi!" She spat. Cal rolled his eyes. The admiral shrugged again.

"I was just admiring your uniform," Glover replied, "And that didn't take long."

"*Veruul!*" The woman hissed.

"*PetaQ!*" Glover barked back. That incensed the woman even more. For a second Terrence thought he might have to grab his sonic disruptor.

"I should expect barbarian behavior from beings that cavort with Klingons!" the woman nearly screeched. "And you even use their pathetic attempts at language."

"It was the best I could do in a pinch," Terrence shrugged. "We've largely eliminated really good swear words on Earth."

"Another reason why this alliance is ill-advised, and will be extremely temporary on my part!" Leta stated.

"Which goes back to my original statement," Terrence said, "Why are you here?"

"I'm a patriot!" The science officer declared, getting in Glover's face. He didn't back away. In fact he found the woman's scent mildly alluring, and her breath carried a whiff of something that smelled like cinnamon.

"I didn't say you weren't," Terrence replied, "But that still doesn't explain why you're here! If you hate humans and the Federation so much, why are you helping us?!"

The woman twitched, as if she was going to strike him. But once again she pulled back. Showing off her precision again, she turned from Glover and retrieved her bag. She stomped off to the sleeping compartment as if she knew the way.

After she was gone, Uhura looked bemused. Terrence turned to Hudson.

"Cal, what the hell was that about?"

His old friend smiled, "She never acted that way around me, all professional, at times perfunctorily. But not so with you," he laughed. He punched Glover's bicep. "I think she really likes you."

RIS Patronus

Terrence thought he would feel better once they were past the *Lucian*, but who knew how many other warbirds were lurking around, under cloak, out there? Despite Cal being presently at the controls, he was still troubled by the prospect that they were not alone. For all he knew the *Lucian* was pursuing them now.

Glover tried not to think about that as he sat at the table in the makeshift conference room. Normally serving as a kitchen, the shuttle's crew all sat around the table. Terrence couldn't get what Cal had said out of his head about the tempestuous science officer, and found himself sneaking looks at her. But this time Leta didn't catch him because her attention was on Xinran.

Likewise, the V'Shar agent was glaring at the woman, and the hate between them was palpable. Despite that, Glover felt a silly little pang of jealousy that the two had a forged such an intense connection.

"So, Valeris is in the Romii system," Admiral Uhura said. The woman's hands were wrapped around a mug of a steaming beverage called *tarka*. The woman had seemed to be enjoying the drink. Leta had recommended that it be served hot. The science officer had also suggested other food choices, and Terrence had to admit the *meatroll* he had just finished was tasty. Every now and then he sipped the sweet, but tart *carallun*, a citrus drink Leta had been surprised to find among the replicator's options. She had informed them that *carallun* was rarely imbibed off world.

"A system close to the hearthworlds," Xinran said. The man elaborated, "Romulus and Remus," after he caught that Glover didn't know what he had meant. "This mission is getting more dangerous by the nanosecond."

"Yes," Glover concurred. "We're taking a lightly armed shuttle, with one of the highest ranking officers in Starfleet into the heart of the Star Empire. So far the Tal Shiar trick has worked, but I'm concerned that that bag of tricks will soon run out. And then what? Here deep in Romulan space, with no back up."

"The answer is quite simple Mr. Glover," Uhura said, "We don't get caught."

"Oh well, that clears it up," Leta quipped, and Glover hated to find himself in agreement with her, and was pleased the woman could display something beyond anger. He was also pleased to see that the woman had doffed her uniform and was now wearing a form fitting green tunic and tight darker green pants; the tunic also sporting shoulder pads. *What was up with these people and shoulder pads?* Glover wondered.

"While I am certain your skills are commensurate with Starfleet service, evading the Imperial Fleet might prove an impossible task," Leta added. Terrence pursed his lips.

"We've done alright so far Lieutenant," he jauntily replied.

The woman snorted. "Commander Maec? Believe me; it does not take great skill to deceive him. Despite his bluster, he is deathly afraid of the Tal Shiar." The woman glared again at Xinran. "I do find it surprising that a Terran puppet could convey their swaggering arrogance."

The admiral's lips drew into a tight line at the insult. Xinran did his best to maintain his composure, though his cheeks had greened slightly.

Leta's smile was nasty. "I bet they've even domesticated you so much you have a human wife and mongrel progeny, a complete bastardization of your bloodline."

"I will not tolerate such language directed at anyone, especially someone under my charge," Uhura warned.

Leta turned to the older woman. "I'm not under *your* charge!" She replied, "And can't the *Raalar*-lover speak in his own defense?"

Xinran smacked the table with both fists, and Terrence thought the man had left him impressions in the plasteel table. He bolted up, his chest heaving, his nostrils flaring. "You will not insult my paramour ever again!" Leta was on her feet in seconds, as was everyone else.

"Everything okay back there?!" Cal called out from the cockpit.

"Yeah, err, I think so," Terrence yelled back.

Glover almost reached for his sidearm, but stopped when he saw Leta smiling. "Ha," she nodded, "I see that your diluted blood burns like the sands of the Ar'hael," the science officer replied. "One would think, living amongst all these humans, sharing your birthright with them even, that it would weaken you, extinguish the maelstrom raging in the hearts of all Rihannsu."

"If you test me further, I will show you exactly how Romulan I am," Xinran warned, with a venom in his voice that unsettled Terrence. Just who was this man Uhura had brought aboard, and did even she know?

"I might take you up on that offer one day, Xinran or should I call you *Terran*," Leta smirked before adding, "But at the moment, we have business, of a kind that is of great import to our nations."

"Let us return to it please," Uhura said, reminding Glover of an exasperated school principal. The quartet retained their seats.

"None of this adds up, if I'm being honest," Glover ventured. He considered both the admiral and Leta before continuing, "Lt. Leta, you've made your feelings about the Federation and its denizens quite clear, yet you're helping us extract a defector who claims to have vital information that I'm damn sure the Romulan authorities don't want us to have. Is that correct?"

The woman nodded curtly.

"And you make contact with Lt. Hudson and insist that he be the one to accompany you on this mission."

"I did not make that request," the woman said. Glover pulled back, perplexed. He looked at Uhura, but got no help there. The woman's expression was neutral, but he could see the wheels behind her eyes spinning.

"Well, if you didn't, who did?" The commander pressed.

"Valeris," Leta answered. Seeing Glover was about to ask another question, the woman huffed before adding, "When I recounted my interactions with the

embassy personnel, she seized on Hudson. She liked it when I told her that during our discussions, Lt. Hudson had told me that he and his wife were attempting to have children."

"I don't understand what that has to do with anything at all," Terrence said.

"Valeris had said that any person seeking to have children would not want them born in a galaxy at war, that Hudson was a man that could be trusted. I disagreed," she said, her eyes narrowing. "I don't trust any of you."

"That being said, why did you accede to Valeris's wishes? Or orders? Who is she to you?"

That last question actually put a cork in the woman. She struggled to formulate a reply.

"Isn't it obvious Commander Glover?" Uhura carefully interjected, "Valeris is Leta's mother."

RIS Patronus

Glover was stunned, but Xinran roared with laughter. Leta stared honor blades at the man. "So you're the half-breed I see," the V'Shar operative said, and all Leta could do was stew.

"Admiral Uhura, you knew about this?" Terrence asked. He was getting tired of the woman withholding information, living legend or not.

"No, I didn't Mr. Glover," the admiral said, "However I suspected. An old friend of mine often said, 'that if you eliminate the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.' With Lt. Leta's open hostility to us, and our mission, I could only conclude that she was helping us for personal reasons that superseded even her loyalty to the Romulan state. And what bond could be stronger than loyalty to country? Friendship or blood. And blood ties are very important to the Romulans. So Leta being Valeris's daughter made the most sense," the woman paused, smiled, and raised one white eyebrow, "It was only logical."

"Logic!" Leta spat. "You sound like a damn Vulcan!"

"Like your mother then," Xinran laughed again. With surprising speed, Leta jumped across the table, crashing into Xinran and knocking him onto the ground. She rode with him, landing on top. Glover heard Xinran groan. He was out of his seat in seconds, and if he had taken a moment later, the Romulan might have been wearing a permanent grin.

Leta held her jeweled dagger aloft, poised to strike. Like a madman, Xinran grinned through the green blood pouring from his nose. "Do it," he taunted, "Do it!"

Terrence pulled out his sonic disruptor and fumbled with the settings. It wasn't like a standard Starfleet issue phaser. Sonic disruptors could both stun and kill and he wanted to make sure he didn't press the wrong setting.

"Stop her Mr. Glover!" Uhura commanded.

"Screw it," Glover twisted the gun around in his hand, gripping the barrel. He then brought the handle down against Leta's head. The woman fell off Xinran and hard to the deck.

At that moment Cal rushed into the room. He looked around, an expression of horror on his face when he saw the unconscious Leta and the still grinning V'Shar agent.

RIS Patronus

"When Leta wakes up, she's going to be pretty pissed," Cal smirked.

Glover playfully smacked his forehead. "Don't I know it?"

"So what did I miss?" Hudson asked. Once Xinran had attended to his own minor injuries, he had assumed piloting duties. Admiral Uhura had tended to Leta and was checking in on her again now. They didn't have space in the shuttle for an infirmary so Uhura had transformed the science officer's sleeping compartment into a makeshift one.

Glover recounted the conversation, with Cal animating the discussion with a variety of facial expressions, covering the gamut from mortified to amused. By the time Terrence had finished, Uhura had emerged from Leta's compartment and had taken a seat back at the time.

The woman's age was showing in how slowly she plopped into the chair. That made Glover worried how well the woman could hold up if things got intense during the extraction.

"Leta and I had struck up a little rapport, but I never thought she would take an aside I made after one diplomat gave birth-the first human born on Romulus, in...who knows when, but still I hadn't thought she would tell that to Valeris, or anyone really."

"She's a Romulan," Uhura said, "Valeris is likely not the only one Leta shared that information with. Don't take it personal Mr. Hudson. It's the way she was taught. If she hadn't reported it, it could've resulted in her arrest, execution, or even worse, disgrace to her family."

"I see," Hudson said, though he was still unsettled.

"I wonder what other surprises Leta, this Valeris, or you admiral for that matter, have in store for us?" Glover said.

The woman didn't take the bait. She smiled instead, stoking the commander's anger.

"Entering the Romii system," Xinran's voice came through the intercom.

"So what's the plan?" Hudson asked, wanting to get the conversation back on track.

"Valeris is on the fourth planet in the system, a resort planet," Uhura said.

"At least we'll be dying in paradise," Glover quipped. This time the admiral was not amused.

"Terrence," Hudson chided.

"Alright," Glover grouched. "I'll keep my witty retorts to myself."

"Witty?" Uhura harrumphed.

"Ouch," Hudson said with a smile. Glover smiled too, but kept his word and his lips sealed.

"Before her unexpected nap, Leta had handed me over the codes that should allow us to land at the spaceport on Romii IV. From there Leta, accompanied by Xinran"

"Do you think it's wise to put those two together?" Hudson took the question straight from Glover's mind.

"Mr. Xinran will do his duty," Uhura said.

"I'm not concerned about Mr. Xinran," Glover said.

"I'm with Terrence on that," Cal added. "This version of Leta on this shuttle is not the same person I talked with in the embassy, and I don't whatever facets of her personality she has kept hidden from us."

"I trust Mr. Xinran's judgment and his ability to handle himself," Uhura said. "I didn't choose him at random. He's been an exemplary scientist, among other things."

"Of that I have little doubt, but this is a highly stressful situation we've all been placed under, and I can tell the man is sensitive about his heritage. What if encounters others who take issue with it when he is on the planet?"

"I will talk with Xinran, to inveigh on him the importance that he maintains his composure," Uhura said, "And to keep an eye on Leta."

"I think he's doing a pretty good job with that already, and so is Terrence," Hudson joked. Terrence rolled his eyes. Uhura laughed.

"I'm glad you both can keep a sense of humor about all this," the woman said, the façade dropping for just a moment, revealing a deep sadness. "It can help you through some really tough times."

The conversation paused, until Hudson said, "So, Xinran and Leta will retrieve Valeris. What will we be doing?"

"The hardest part of the mission," the admiral said. "You'll be waiting."

"We?" Glover looked at Cal. "What about you Admiral?"

"You really thought I was going to let those two crazy kids go off on their own?" Uhura was incredulous. Then her expression grew somber. "There's no way I'm taking Valeris anywhere until I look in the eye."

RIS Patronus

Dagarth Spaceport

Spaceport Hold-966

Romii IV

"I can't believe she didn't take us," Glover grouched. He rapped the silver helmet on his head. The ear-obscuring helmets, along with two ill-fitting silver-gray

uniforms were just a few of the items Leta had magically pulled from the large duffel she had brought aboard the *Patronus*. "I mean with this thing on, no one can tell us apart from any other Romulan."

Hudson laughed, "You know what Leta said, despite the uniforms, we wouldn't come off as Romulan, in our behavior." Cal was wearing a similar helmet. "And she didn't want to add to the risk of discovery."

"Yeah, and also she said our smell would give us away," Terrence griped, "But I think she was talking about you instead of me."

"Very funny," Cal punched his arm.

"I don't see why we even have to wear these blasted things even inside the shuttle," Terrence said.

"Eyes everywhere, remember?" Hudson reminded him.

"Yeah, whatever," Glover replied. "Leta stuffs us into these padded uniforms and all she gave the Admiral was a cloak."

"I'm worried about her too," Cal admitted. He checked the chronometer again.

"How long has it been?"

"Two hours," Hudson answered.

"And who knows how long it will take for them to get back here," Terrence sighed. He rapped his knuckles against the console. "Do you think the scientist will be alright?"

"Mr. Xinran?" Cal asked. "Yeah, I think he will keep his cool."

"Yeah, I hope so," Glover said, with less confidence. The image of Xinran pounding the table flashed through his mind. "Leta can be pretty needling."

"Is that all she can be?" Hudson grinned.

Glover sighed again. "Sure, she's...hot, I can't lie about that, but she's a Romulan."

"So?" Cal was still smiling.

"Fair point," Terrence conceded. "But there's that one little issue of that she hates our guts," he added.

"Yeah," Hudson's smile dimmed. "And I wonder why that is? It's a deep-seated anger, it seems personal to me."

"Maybe she's bitter about what happened to her mother?" Glover offered.

"Perhaps," Cal said, though he wasn't convinced.

"We could get more answers if we weren't stuck on this bucket," Terrence grouched.

"Terrence, you know the admiral orders," Hudson reminded him. "We stay on the shuttle."

"Yeah," Glover said, but he gestured at the porthole. "But there's so much life out there. This might be my only chance to set foot on Romulan soil; I mean not everyone gets to wine and dine at the embassy on Romulus."

"Oh please," Cal laughed.

“But seriously,” Terrence said, looking back out the porthole. “Look at all the life out there,” pointing out beyond the shuttle. Hudson followed his pointed finger.

The spaceport was bustling, giving both men a good macrocosm of the Romulan citizenry. He saw Romulans of varying skin tones, forehead shapes, ages, and body types, in all manner of dress, from stately robes to tattered, ragged clothing. Glover could count on one hand the number of non-Romulans he saw. He spotted a Barolian, two Koltaari, one Tholian draped in an environmental suit as it skittered down the throughway. There were even the occasional brave panhandler but they moved on quickly whenever officers of the Compliance Division walked through.

The Compliance Division officers were dressed in metallic black broad shouldered uniforms, with knee-length trousers, shiny black boots, and the requisite scowls.

The men tapped truncheons against their legs as they parted the crowds, their heads seemingly on swivels as they sought out any infractions. Once the officers had made their rounds, some of the panhandlers would return.

Terrence was enjoying the people watching until he noted a thickset, iron-gray Romulan, in a fine-tailored white and gold tunic trailed by a retinue. What caught his eye was a young pallid, hairless alien that was definitely not Romulan at the tail end of the entourage.

The alien looked like an adolescent, and was dressed in rough cut clothing compared to the Romulans walking in front of him. And he struggled carrying a load of luggage, latched onto his back and also holding two bulging suitcases in his hands.

The young man stumbled and fell, the luggage crashing to the ground, some knocked open and clothing and other trinkets spilled out. The portly Romulan wheeled around with surprising speed. The retinue scattered as the man upbraided the alien, who was struggling to get up. The man kicked him in the midsection and the teen fell back to the ground. Some of the other Romulans in the retinue began laughing.

The corpulent Romulan continued kicking the alien, who scrambled to his back and kept backing away; throwing up his hands, but nothing stopped the older Romulans assault.

“You know what Admiral Uhura said,” Hudson warned.

“And you know I’m putting a stop to this,” Glover declared.

“I was hoping you were going to say that,” Cal replied. “Let’s go.”

Dagarth Spaceport

“You there!” Glover used his best command voice. “What you are doing?!” The entourage melted away, but the heavy Romulan continued pummeling the alabaster alien. Glover grabbed the man’s arm in mid-swing. The Romulan glared at him and ripped his arm away.

"How dare you!" The man spat. "You dare put your hand on me Decurion?" The man turned to backhand Glover, but Terrence grabbed the bigger man's hand and dug his fingers into the soft flesh.

"I ask the questions here!" Glover barked, drawing gasps from the retinue and other onlookers.

"What's your name Decurion? Who is your commander?" The man demanded. The man reeked of something alcoholic.

"You are in no position to ask any questions here," Hudson said, backing Glover up. The fat man glared at both of them, before his face split into a nasty grin.

"You two must be from backwater worlds, the Outmarches perhaps?" Terrence looked at Cal, and the other man seemed just as perplexed by the question. "It is obvious you don't know who I am. I am a member of the Imperial Senate! And you're impeding my return to Romulus to attend to important business!"

"And what does that have to do with assaulting this being?" Glover still held the senator's arm. He looked down at the still cowering alien. He noticed that the young man was wearing dark goggles.

The senator's laughter was grating. "You don't *assault* your property."

"Property?" Hudson asked, his mouth drawing into a tight line. The senator looked at them both, seeing if either man was being serious.

"You two need to lay off the ale," the senator said. "Believe me." He pulled his arm free of the commander's grasp, swaying as he did so.

"Are you saying this child is your slave?" Glover asked, his anger rising.

"Of course," the senator said. "Now you," he gestured to alien. "Get up and collect our things. Once we are aboard, I will instruct you on the perils of clumsiness."

"You will do no such thing," Cal declared, stepping in front of the alien.

"Come now, you've had your fun," the senator's mirth faded. "The only reason I have indulged us thus far is because of those uniforms. Everyone knows that I am a firm backer of the Imperial forces; I served myself, aboard the *Talok*, an old *Vas Hatham*, when the Empire was on the rise.

I was centurion on the *Talok* when we clutched the Glintara system in our talons, but now, the Cardassians lord over that system...it's been nothing but a steady erosion of our power and prestige, despite the campaigns against the Taurhai and Klingons." The man shook his gray head and placed a hand on Glover's shoulder. "And now, some in the Senate are even talking about *peace*, peace with the Federation, even after what they did at Tomed or Narendra III!" Some of the senator's hangers-on gasped on cue.

"Perish the thought," Hudson muttered sarcastically.

"Indeed," the senator sighed, lost in his reveries. Suddenly he looked up, his eyes gleaming. "It's up to you fine warriors, your generation, to erase the stain of our failure."

"Is everything okay here Senator Penv?" Five Compliance Division officers pushed through the gathered crowd. The man looked at the ascetic man who had asked the question, blinked, and then snarled.

"Of course it is! Did I call upon you?"

"No, uh, no sir you didn't, but we got several reports that you were being accosted by two soldiers," the policeman replied.

"Does it look like these men are threatening me?" Penv challenged. He awkwardly wrapped an arm around Glover's shoulder and pulled him close. It was all Terrence could do to not elbow the man in his ample gut. "We were just sharing war stories. Perhaps you would understand the language of warriors if you weren't wearing a child's uniform," the senator laughed, and Hudson joined him. Glover reluctantly followed suit. A spell of awkward laughter ensued. The lead Compliance officer's face was burning green.

"Now begone, the lot of you!" Penv flicked his hand at the policemen. "I have pressing matters to see to." Terrence could tell the Compliance leader wanted to say more, but wisely remained silent. The quintet backed away, but didn't leave the spaceport. In fact, Glover was certain the officers were looking right at him and Cal, but he didn't want to turn around and make them aware he knew it.

Hudson grabbed Glover's bicep. He whispered, "I think that's out cue."

"But what about the boy?" Terrence asked, pulling away from his friend. The senator had already forgotten about them. He kicked the young alien, prompting the servant to get on his feet. Then the senator stood over him, with both hands on his

"There's nothing we can do about that," Cal said.

"We can't just let them take him. You know what Penv has threatened to do to him."

"Yes," Hudson said, "But what do you propose, we take out five policemen, Penv's entourage, and then go calmly wait in the shuttle until our friends return?"

"No, of course not," Terrence hotly replied. "That sounds ridiculous."

"And that's exactly how you're talking and acting right now," Hudson said. "We can't right this society's wrongs, not here, not now, despite how much it galls us. We have a mission and we need to return to it."

"This, this just isn't right," Glover was now almost pleading. The young man had recovered the luggage and it was awkwardly placed on his back. He was trudging away, behind the chattering retinue, Senator Penv at its head.

"It's the Romulan way," Hudson said. "You wanted to get a slice of Romulan life, and you've gotten it."

"Yeah," Glover glowered. "It's something I won't forget," he promised.

Dagarth Spaceport

Glover had nudged Cal past the *Patronus*. He leaned close to them. "The Compliance officers are following us."

"Great," Hudson huffed. "You just had to interfere and draw attention to us, didn't you?"

"If I recall, you were the one who said 'Let's go'," Terrence said.

"I was caught up in the moment," Hudson breezily replied.

"Now the goal is not to get caught period," Terrence said.

"Is it time to start running?" Cal asked.

"Not yet," he said, taking a chance and pausing at the base of a gleaming statue of a hard-faced woman, a raptor gripping her shoulder. Glover took a moment to gauge where the officers were.

Hudson read the inscription at the statue's base. He first read the words in the original Romulan before whispering, "Admiral Dagarth, conqueror of Haakona Prime," before taking another look at the woman's likeness.

"Your Romulan is coming along nicely," Glover replied.

"Where are our friends now?" Hudson said, still pretending to study the statue.

"They are closing in, from five different directions. I'm guessing they want to minimize casualties."

"It's still pretty packed here," Hudson said. "I think it might be best to continue moving with the flow."

"I agree," Glover said. Before they entered the throng, he whispered, "And Dagarth was no hero; my dad told me how she unleashed a mutagenic virus on the Haakonans, eradicating them."

"My God," Hudson said.

"The Romulan way," Terrence sadly shook his head.

They didn't get far before a voice called out. "Halt!" Terrence looked at Cal.

"Is it time now?"

"Nah, let's just play this out."

"Oh boy," Cal rolled his eyes.

"Just follow my lead."

"The last time that happened we spent two days in detention on Wrigley's Pleasure Planet."

"Well, getting there was fun," Terrence offered.

"That's never the issue," Cal rejoined. "It's getting out of the jams is where it gets sticky."

"Fair enough," Glover said.

"I said halt!" The man repeated, and Terrence heard a vicious crackling and people screaming.

At the base of another smaller statue, Terrence turned with military precision, his shoulders bunching, taking on a wrathful expression. "Are you talking to us?!" He figured since angry indignation worked for Penv, he might as well give it a go.

"Yes," the austere Compliance officer replied. "Produce your identification." He pointed his baton at Glover, its tip sparking.

"We will not," Hudson said, standing beside Glover and getting easily into the act.

The man eyed Cal and then Glover. He motioned and the other officers came through the crowd. Glover quickly looked around and each of them was clutching a crackling truncheon.

"You can furnish your identification here, or at the station," the man said.

"We are on a mission of the utmost importance to the Empire," Glover said. "Interfering with our completion of the mission would unwise."

The officer gave an unnerving smile. "Does this crucial mission involve accosting a senator and then spending time marveling at the Admiral Dagarth statue?"

"That is no concern of yours!" Hudson snapped.

"We are the law here, not you," the man shot back.

"So, the Compliance Division," Terrence said loudly, and with scorn, "Supersedes the Imperial Fleet?"

This time the man was not cowed. "That line might work for a well-known senator, but not for two unknown soldiers in ill-fitting uniforms. Uniforms that could have been stolen."

"Stolen?" Glover chuckled and Cal joined him. "Who would dare?"

"There are dissidents and infiltrators everywhere. For all I know, you're both Klingons," the man said.

"I don't smell them over here, so they can't be Klingons," one of the other police officers joked, incurring a hard stare from the leader. When the leader faced them again, his eyes narrowed.

"Remove your helmets," the leader said. "You could be smooth paned Klingons, or even humans; they're everywhere now, like *nhaidh*."

"We've entertained this enough," Glover said, his stomach starting to churn. This was going on too long; they were drawing too much attention. And if Romulan authorities had eyes everywhere, Terrence didn't know who else was watching them now, or whatever force could be brought together against them at any moment.

Glover instinctively reached for his disruptor. He grimaced, remembering he had left his weapon on the *Patronus*. He glanced at Cal. Hudson had a similar constrained look on his face.

He caught Terrence's eye and gave a little nod. *The hard way then*, Glover read in his friend's eyes. Glover began checking for the two guys at his side and sizing up the leader. He knew that Cal was doing likewise.

"I am giving you one final opportunity to comply," the lead officer said, though he began stepping forward, and his men mimicked him. Glover and Cal went back to back.

"That's enough!" A sharp voice broke up the brewing fight. Glover looked at the speaker with a mix of relief and annoyance. He was still angered by how the senator had treated the alien servant and he wanted to unload on someone, and these officers were asking for it.

His anger receded once his mind grasped who the woman was. He had only seen her image on a PADD, and though that image had been recorded almost a century ago, the woman had barely aged.

Her fair skin was still tight, yet supple, the mole just below her lips alluring as it had been in the image. Her black hair was cut shorter, in a pixie style, and the headband was gone, but the sharpness in her gaze remained. She wore an expensive violet robe and cloak, with a turquoise-jeweled necklace glinting in the waning sunlight.

The lead officer stood up straighter, "Lady Valeris," he said quickly. "Please keep your distance. These are likely spies!"

The woman laughed, and Glover gave Cal a sidelong glance. Granted he had never met the woman but he did know she was a Vulcan and to see her break out into full throated laughter was unsettling. Despite knowing some *vo'tosh ka'tur* Vulcans, old stereotypes were hard to get rid of.

"These men are old veterans of my husband's campaigns," she said, gliding easily between the lead officer and the humans. She glanced over them and pursed her lips. "You can see those uniforms barely fit them. They've been planet bound too long; enjoying too much *viinerine*."

Hudson nudged Terrence and both men laughed. The lead officer reluctantly joined in. "My apologies Quaestor," she dipped her head respectfully. "They are mud boots from the Diodor sector," she explained and the quaestor's eyes widened in understanding.

"You are far from your home sector," he said.

"The literal fringe," Valeris nodded. "And they have traveled far, to join with me, and travel some more to the Hearthworlds for a reunion of the *Brutus* crew."

The quaestor nodded somberly. "My father served with your honored husband years ago, shortly after Tomed. My father had been lost in Breen space years before Narendra III."

Valeris patted his shoulder. "Martius spoke of your father with pride. If he had been with him at Narendra, maybe things would've been different...for all of us."

"You honor me and mine with your words," the officer gave an overly formal bow. He cleared his throat and nodded curtly at Terrence and Hudson. "My apologies."

"You were doing your duty, and there are no injured feelings because of it," Hudson said. Glover merely nodded in affirmation.

Once the Compliance officers had left, Glover allowed himself to relax, just a little. He looked around the Vulcan woman. "Where are the others?"

"I sent them on to the transportation you procured," Valeris said. "I thought it would be better if I handled this alone. Uhura protested of course," the woman gave a slight smile, "But she eventually relented."

"I suggest we make haste," Valeris added. "The quaestor is an overly sentimental sort, but not many in the Compliance Division are."

"It would seem so," Glover said, "And he reveres you."

"Not me," the woman pointed behind the men. Both Terrence and Cal turned around. This stone figure held aloft a trident, a fierce expression they had of him.

"That was my husband," Valeris said, "Martius was lost with his crew at Narendra III..." her voice lowered, and grew pained, "Destroyed in battle against the *Enterprise-C*. The universe is ironic isn't it? The namesake I betrayed eventually got its revenge."

Terrence asked, "Is that why you're doing this, to make amends?"

"No," the woman said, her face taking on a determined cast. "The past is the past. It is...illogical to dwell on it. My concern now is the future, and at the moment, it is perilously close to the precipice."

Dagarth Spaceport

Spaceport Hold-987

Romii IV

"I never thought I would ever see the inside of one of these things," Glover didn't hide his wonderment. He glanced around the darkened ship, admiring the classic design.

"Can you believe these ships almost conquered Earth?" Hudson breezed past him. Uhura shuddered. Such a prospect made Xinran look grimmer.

"I remember our face off against one of the *Vas Hatham*-class along the Neutral Zone nearly a hundred years ago," Uhura said, "There is not much to admire about this vessel, whether it's a predecessor or not as far as I'm concerned."

The woman's words sobered Glover. He reined in his enthusiasm. "I lost relatives in the Earth-Romulan War," he added, a bit defensively, "On the *Mendi*, among other ships and planets."

"So did I," Hudson chimed in. "Not fighting the war though," the man added. "They were Boomers, their ship destroyed when the Romulans attacked Draylax."

"So we do take this seriously Admiral," Glover intoned, "But yet, we still can marvel at the design, the history of this vessel."

"Which is a completely logical position," Valeris smoothly interjected. The laughing woman at the outset had disappeared, and a composed, emotionless Vulcan had taken her place, or merely resurfaced. "This *Bird-of-Prey* saw action in several major engagements of the Earth-Romulan War, and was present at the fateful Battle of Cheron."

She placed a hand tenderly against a curving pylon. "Both of Martius's parents fought in that war. His mother had served on this very vessel. Once it had been decommissioned, Martius bought it to honor her, and used it for personal transport."

"Whoa, I wish I had a baby like this to putter around space," Hudson replied. "Gretchen barely lets me take the shuttle I do have for a spin around Sol whenever I'm back home."

"Unlike many Romulans, the Martius clan were not chastened by the Star Empire's defeat by Earth; they saw the war as a noble endeavor, despite the outcome," the Vulcan added. "His views were unique for a Romulan of his class...one of the many things that I found...intriguing." Lt. Leta, standing quietly behind her mother, shifted uncomfortably. The young Romulan likely didn't like Valeris sharing personal stories about her family.

"How did you meet Commander Martius?" Glover asked, because he wanted to know more about Valeris and keep Leta squirming.

"General actually," Valeris said. "As I said, he wasn't like many of the other Romulans I encountered. He was a patriot, but not a chauvinist. It took me a while to realize that distinction though. We met at the Imperial War College. I was teaching Vulcan history there."

"The Imperial War College is pretty prestigious," Cal said. "And they let you teach there?"

The woman smiled, "You forgot to add, a traitor like me."

"I didn't say that," Hudson replied, a bit taken aback.

"But you were thinking it," The Vulcan nodded, "And it is a logical assumption. My defection to the Star Empire, after serving my sentence on 60 Virginis II, was viewed suspiciously on both sides. It took two decades from the moment I crossed into Romulan space to be granted the opportunity to teach at the Imperial War College, and even then I have been under surveillance."

"Are you under surveillance now?" Glover looked troubled.

"Of course," Valeris said matter-of-fact.

"So they know we're here?" Hudson frowned.

"No," The woman shook her head, "They still think I am entertaining visitors back at Stronghold Martius," the woman said. "Give me some credit, I can elude simple watchers."

"She's right about that," Uhura muttered, her expression dark. The woman had been oddly quiet, and it left Glover wondering how what had happened when the admiral reunited with Valeris. He looked at the stewing Xinran and debated whether the man would be forthcoming about that meeting.

"Mother...I do think it wise not to tempt fate though," Leta added.

"My daughter is correct," Valeris said. "We should exit this spaceport with haste. Perhaps I overestimate my own clandestine abilities. It has been a while since I've fully employed them."

Terrence wanted to know about Valeris, Martius, Leta, and their family dynamics, but he also wanted to get his hands on the controls of a 22nd century *Bird-of-Prey*. He used to play with toy replicas and built a model of his own.

"Show me the helm," Glover said. Valeris nodded at Leta. The woman scowled at both her mother and Glover before stiffly marching to a door off to the side. Terrence glanced at Hudson, and his friend gave a knowing smile.

Cal leaned close to him and lowered his voice. "Some alone time might be good for you both."

"I can hear you Mr. Hudson," Valeris said, pointing to one of her tapered ears.

The man looked embarrassed, "Well, I, uh, was just joking."

"Sure," the woman was highly skeptical. "But in any case, Mr. Glover my daughter is waiting on you, and she is not a woman to keep waiting."

Dagarth Spaceport **Spaceport Hold-987** **Romii IV**

"You hit like a Breen," Leta sneered. She sat across from him at the cockpit.

"Look, I'm sorry about knocking you out," Terrence said, feeling anxious but relieved to finally be able to talk to the woman about it. "But things were getting out of hand. And I had to get control of the situation before either you or Xinran killed each other."

The Romulan touched her head and laughed. "It was nothing. I've been hit much harder in combat practice."

"Is that so?" Terrence grinned.

"Humans, you are a weaker species, simple genetics," Leta stated.

"Perhaps we are not as physically strong as Vulcanoids," Glover conceded, "But we are full of surprises, and can compensate for the strength disparity. Remember that little thing called the Earth-Romulan War?"

The woman glowered at him. "Mere luck," she scoffed. "If the other species hadn't aided you, the great wings of the raptor would still be spread across Earth."

Glover laughed. "You don't give an inch do you?"

"Would you prefer otherwise?" The woman asked, with the glimmer of a smile.

"No," Terrence said. "I would not."

"Perhaps human constitutions have to be handled with care," the Romulan opined.

"We're pretty durable," Terrence asserted, winking at her. "Care to find out?" He couldn't believe what he had just proposed, but it felt like the right thing to do. Before he could never imagine being attracted to a "Romulan", he saw them as a mass, an entity, one that had hurt his mother deeply, and had caused untold misery to countless millions in their wars of conquest, but here, on this ship, in this cockpit,

was just a woman, an extremely beautiful woman at that, hard, proud, fierce, but also, and Terrence was never wrong about these things, interested, and the commander just decided to roll with it and see where it took them.

The woman frowned at him and then snorted. "In your dreams."

"What? You've got a mind sifter aboard this thing too?" Glover joked.

Leta rolled her eyes. "You're incorrigible."

"Hey, I've been called worse," Terrence grinned.

"Now that your amorous attempts have failed would you like to continue learning about this ship's systems?" Leta asked. Glover laughed.

The man shrugged. "This was just the opening round," he promised, "but sure."

Glover leaned back in the seat and took a look at the helm's controls. "So, what's this ship's name?"

"The *Odaus*," Leta answered, standing behind him. "An honored name," she added. Terrence marveled at the ancient flight control station, with actual buttons and levers. He was going to enjoy this vessel, though there was a pang of regret that they had left the *Patronus* behind. He had liked the sleek shuttle, its nacelles designed to look like wings pressed against the body of the vessel, as if the shuttle was permanently diving toward prey. The *Odaus* was more graceful, with its two curving wings ending at daggered nacelles. To him, the *Vas Hatham*-class looked more rudimentary, despite coming on the scene nearly a century later. The *Vas Hathams* were merely functional, while the *Odaus* was a work of art.

Leta stepped forward and began instructing him about the various controls on the main bridge.

"What kind of weapons does this thing have?" Terrence asked.

Leta's face pinched.

"Listen, if the journey across the Neutral Zone doesn't go smoothly, I need to know what we have to keep this ship in one piece," Glover added.

The Romulan eventually relented. "The disruptor cannons still work, that's it."

"Shields?" Glover asked. The woman nodded in the affirmative.

"What about a cloaking device?" Terrence asked. "If I recall from my history books, these old vultures used to have cloaks."

The woman glowered at him.

"Out with it," Terrence urged.

The woman stared daggers at him. "Yes, my father wrangled to retain the ship's cloaking device."

"Is it still functional?"

"Of course," the woman huffed, insulted by the question.

"A two century old cloaking device," Glover was impressed, "Still operating."

"Romulans build things to last," Leta said proudly, "We respect tradition, we are proud of our history, our accomplishments."

"Some might say that Romulans are so proud of their accomplishments because they claim everyone else's."

"Show me this 'someone' and I will gut them where they stand," Leta's look was predacious.

"I surrender," Glover threw up his hands and laughed. He had to admit that he was drawn to the woman's fierceness, also her pride in her heritage. The woman crossed her arms tightly over her chest, her guard still up.

"If you're finished, I will continue instructing you about the rest of the bridge."

"Of course," Terrence said, still smiling. Together they walked around the bridge, Leta talking, though Glover half paid attention because the woman's nearness, her scent even was distracting.

"What perfume are you wearing?" Terrence eventually asked, when the two were standing over the environmental control terminal.

Leta blinked. "Excuse me?"

"You've put on perfume," Glover said. "What is it?"

The Romulan woman glowered at him. "How did you detect that?"

"You are...pretty close to me," Terrence said, enjoying both the woman's scent and her warmth. Leta scowled and then put distance between them. Glover smirked. "Still avoiding my question?"

Leta grunted, she glared at him, jutting her chin out. "I evade nothing."

"Okay then," Glover said, shrugging.

"It was a gift, from my sibling Taev," Leta said, her hardened countenance cracking just a bit. "From the Placidus system."

"So you have a brother," Glover said, "And where is he?"

The woman's face hardened again. "He died," her voice was clipped. "He's joined my father now in Vorta Vor."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Glover offered. The woman's eyes burned like supernovas.

"I didn't ask for your sympathy! And I don't care for your lies!"

"Hey, I wasn't lying, I'm sorry for your loss," Terrence said, reining his temper. He understood how emotional the death of a loved one could make a person.

"You're probably relieved that there is one less enemy for you to slaughter!" Leta charged.

"That's really unfair!" Glover flared.

"Is it? Your kind murdered my father at Narendra!" Leta pointed her finger like a dagger. And it made Terrence think of the blade still at the woman's hip.

Glover bit back an angry retort. "The *Enterprise-C* responded to a distress call," he said as calmly as he could. "That's standard protocol. Four warbirds sneak attacked a Klingon colony, killing not only men, not only Klingon warriors, but civilians as well."

"There are no innocents among those savages," the woman spat. "They've slaughtered my people by the thousands! We were only defending ourselves."

"By a sneak attack?" Glover sneered. "Doesn't sound like that was defending yourself at all. And it doesn't say much about your vaunted honor either!"

"How dare you!" Leta reached for her dagger.

"Go for it," Glover said calmly, his eyes boring into her. "You'll regret it."

For the first time the woman blinked. Not physically, but her left hand hovered over the blade. Eventually she forced it by her side. The woman continued boiling however.

"You don't have to like me, or even trust me, but for the time being, we need to work together," Terrence said. "Getting your mother safely back to the Federation is in the best interest of both our peoples."

The woman eyes were as hard as marbles. She wasn't giving another inch. Glover shrugged. "Suit yourself." He sat back down at the helm and began a diagnostic. He was ready to get this thing space borne.

The thickened air was cut when Valeris and Admiral Uhura, with Hudson and Xinran quick behind them, all poured onto the bridge.

"We heard shouting," The Vulcan said, looking from Glover to Leta. "Is everything okay?"

"It is fine mother," Leta said through clenched teeth. Valeris raised an arched eyebrow.

"Do you concur Mr. Glover?"

"Just peachy," Terrence shrugged. He decided to switch gears. "I'm glad you are here...Lady Valeris. The exit codes to leave the spaceport were not in the ship's system. I will also need a flight plan, doctored or otherwise. We just need to get out of here to start our way to the Neutral Zone and then into the Federation."

"About that," Valeris began, drawing a curious look not only from Glover, but Cal, Xinran, and even Leta. The admiral's expression was suspicious.

"I knew it," Uhura said, her face contorting with uncharacteristic disgust. "I knew this was some kind of trap."

"It isn't!" Valeris rounded on the elderly woman, with a surprising and dangerous ferocity. Even the normally unflappable Uhura took a step back. Though Glover, Cal, and Xinran all moved to prevent the Vulcan from harming the admiral. Leta drew her blade to defend her mother.

"Stop it, all of you, please!" Valeris said. She lowered her voice and dipped her head in a sign of penitence, "My apologies Admiral; I've been under a tremendous strain as of late. However that is no excuse to treat you so poorly. You've risked your life, and the lives of these brave men, based on nothing more than my word; the word of a traitor in your eyes."

"And not in yours?" Uhura shot back. "Did you learn nothing from your twenty-year stay at Sundancer?"

"Yes, I did," Valeris's voice softened even more, "I did have regrets. I took lives, I deceived my colleagues, my friends...Spock," she paused, trembling, her eyes glistening. "I hurt him...and he...he..."

Uhura's mouth gaped open and she covered it with one hand. Her eyes moistened too. Glover looked at Cal, who glanced at Xinran who finished the circle with Leta. None of them knew what was transpiring between Valeris and Uhura, what dark memory the two women shared.

"Spock never talked to me about that," Uhura admitted, "But I had served with the man for almost thirty years. All that time and I could see through his impassive façade. It hurt him, what he did to you. It scarred him."

"I know," Valeris smiled, but there was no mirth in it. "He invaded my mind...but I was also in his."

Uhura reached out to the woman and touched her shoulder. "So you know he regretted it. In his own way, he loved you."

"I know," she nodded, "And I him."

"But he did what he needed to do, what he had to do, to stop the conspirators from destroying the last chance for peace," Uhura declared, with a desperate conviction.

"The needs of the many outweigh the few," Valeris began.

"Or the one," the admiral finished hollowly.

Valeris wiped her eyes. "And it is in that spirit, that I must undertake this mission, sacrificing the lives we have built here, the acclaim, the friendships, because the future is at stake." The woman looked sadly at her daughter, but Leta's face was stony.

"This information that you have," Uhura said. "You didn't give it to me at your residence, but are you willing to trust me with it now?"

Valeris's smile was sad. "Admiral...Uhura...Nyota, I have always trusted you. It was the Klingons I never trusted. They massacred my family on P'Jem. I could never forgive them for that, no matter how much logic dictated that I did. And even now, I still don't."

"If you still distrust us, why did you ask to defect back to the Federation?" Uhura didn't mask her confusion.

"I don't distrust the Federation in all matters, just where the alliance with the Klingons is concerned, and I am certain that the alliance, as rocky as it has been, will eventually collapse. The Klingon-Romulan alliance should have been a cautionary tale, but it was one that has remained unheeded in the halls of the Federation Council."

"So if you trust me," Uhura said, "Where is the information?"

"What is the information?" Glover butted in, drawing a baleful stare from the admiral. Terrence took a step back.

"I am the information," Valeris said. "I would never place the data where it could be found by the Tal Shiar or other security forces."

"McCoy always did say Vulcans were like walking computers," Uhura muttered. She winked at Glover, "Now, echoing the impudent Mr. Glover, what is the information?"

"That I will not share," Valeris said, "Not yet."

"Excuse me?" Terrence huffed. Cal and Uhura also frowned. Xinran simply had an I-told-you-so look on his face.

"The information I have obtained is merely a start," the Vulcan said, unruffled by the glowers. "I now seek to acquire definitive, physical proof."

"And just how do you plan to do that?" Cal beat everyone to the punch.

"Mr. Hudson, we're going to the Arx."

The Starfleet officers looked confused, but Leta paled. At least someone knew what the Vulcan was talking about.

"Mother, how did you know about the Arx?" She asked.

Valeris smiled. "My search for answers led me there."

"That's impossible," the Romulan lieutenant shook her head. "Only members of the Imperial Fleet are privy to that information and you have not served in almost thirty years."

"I had help," Valeris's smile dimmed.

"From who?" Leta demanded.

"Your brother," the Vulcan said softly.

"What do you mean? How is that possible? Taev is dead!"

"He's alive," Valeris declared with maternal certainty...or delusion. "He's alive, and he's there, at the Arx, and we're going to rescue him."

PART THREE: WAKE OF VULTURES

Imperial Bird-of-Prey Odaus

"I didn't sign up for any of this!" Glover declared.

"Yes, Terrence is right," Cal backed him up. "We've already tempted fate far too many times on this mission as is, but to now go into the Arx." Hudson was sitting across from Glover, at the navigation station.

"A hidden research facility," Admiral Uhura said quietly, her tone and countenance contemplative. Valeris had ceded the command chair to the venerable admiral.

"Yes, one that not even you Mother was supposed to know about," Leta groused. The young woman and Xinran had argued over the weapons console, until Valeris had stepped in and convinced Leta to take over the operations terminal. Xinran now sat beside the weapons station.

"I didn't know, until Taev contacted me," Valeris said. The woman sat at the communications console.

"Taev is dead!" The lieutenant shot back.

"He is alive," Valeris said, with an unshakable faith.

"No mother, no he isn't," Leta said, her voice fraying.

"They never returned his body, we have never seen his remains," Valeris replied. "We only have what the official story that the Imperial Fleet concocted, that Taev's vessel was lost in a subspace particle storm."

"But that was not the truth. Taev's ship responded to an attack in the Devron system. The same mysterious attackers that also laid waste to several outposts on the Federation side of the Zone."

"How do you know that?" Uhura asked.

Glover looked back and saw the Vulcan tilt her head, a curious expression on her face. "I gleaned the information from the Central Information Net."

"You hacked into the information net?" Leta was incredulous.

"I know a lie when I hear one daughter," Valeris simply stated. She paused, assuredly waiting for Uhura to get a dig in. However the admiral demurred. The Vulcan continued, "I began investigating and uncovered the logs from the *Vicia*."

"Taev's ship," Leta muttered.

"The *Vicia* had confirmed a similar signature technique to the destroyed Federation outposts, from the information culled from Starfleet's inquiries into the destruction of their outposts."

"Why didn't Romulan authorities inform us?" Uhura demanded.

"It is likely the Romulans working with Starfleet to investigate the disappearances of these outposts were not aware."

"But why would the Romulan High Command or the Senate for that matter, sit on this information, when it impacts us both?" Glover asked.

"And what does this have to do with the Arx?" Hudson added.

"That's where the *Vicia* was taken," Valeris answered.

"And how do you know this?" Terrence prodded.

"Taev," the Vulcan said, her voice growing softer. Leta exhaled loudly and threw up her arms. The younger woman stormed off the bridge. Valeris looked in her direction, Terrence figured the Vulcan was contemplating going after her daughter, but then Valeris looked back at him, a steeliness coming over her features. "I anticipated that you would not accept my word."

"What gave you that impression?" Uhura's incredulousness was thicker than duranium.

The Vulcan dipped her head respectfully. When she raised it, a small smile played on her lips. The woman pulled a silvery data disk from the folds of her cloak.

"I thought you said you didn't store any information," Xinran groused, beating the Starfleet officers to the point.

"She lied Mr. Xinran," Uhura said, her anger simmering. "And I'm not surprised."

"It was not a falsehood," Valeris said.

"Then what do you call it?" Hudson demanded.

"An omission," Valeris replied, tilting her head.

"Great Bird of the Galaxy!" The admiral threw up her hands.

"If I had supplied the information, you would not go to the Arx; you might even have left me and Leta on Romii IV."

"Unlike you Valeris, my relationship with the truth is less tenuous than yours," Uhura said. "I told you I would get you across the Neutral Zone and I meant it."

"Of course Admiral...Uhura," Valeris was penitent. "Perhaps I have spent too long in the Star Empire; trust is the first casualty in order to survive."

"Further," Valeris continued, "I decided to be more transparent to convince you of the gravity of the situation that confronts, and that it is imperative that we infiltrate the Arx and rescue my son."

The Vulcan inserted the disk into a receptacle in her terminal. The main viewer's large monitor shifted from the starfield to another bridge. Glover's eyes widened at the dark shape dominating the other view screen.

"What's that?" He asked.

"Looks like a giant sphere," Hudson said, his voice laden with questions. Both men turned to Valeris. The woman's eyes were glued to the screen, her face had paled.

"What is that thing?" Cal beat him Terrence to the quick.

Before the Vulcan answered, Uhura gasped, "My God."

Imperial Warbird Vicia **Traveling Under Cloak**

"Commander's Log, Supplemental: Responding to a distress call from the Sector 1393 outpost, in the Devron system, we have encountered a vessel of unknown origin exiting the planetoid that housed this sector's outpost, the outpost was obliterated. We will now engage the alien vessel."

Centurion Taev's stomach churned as Commander Alaris ended her recording. The finality of the woman's curt message meant that the only thing left was the battle ahead. The communications officer had already sent the space buoy with the woman's words, quite possibly the last words from *Vicia* that the Imperial Fleet would hear.

"Lower the cloaking device," Subcommander Crito ordered. "Raise shields and charge weapons."

The main bridge dimmed and then brightened as the warbird pulled back its cloak. A massive spheroid hung over the benighted planetoid, as if waiting for them.

Taev thought of his mother and his sister, but then grasped those distracting thoughts and pushed them away into the back of his mind. He would see them again, he promised.

"Our readings confirm that the vessel possesses the same signature technique from the attacks in Sectors 9873, 52017, 11695, and 92601," Science Officer Sabia informed the bridge, confirming what Taev and everyone else already knew.

"Is it the Federation?" Crito asked, his thirst for combat contorting his patrician features. Like Taev, Crito had also lost family at Narendra III, yet it had not consumed him with a desire to avenge himself against Starfleet, like it had Crito, and Leta, his own sister, he had to admit.

Alaris scowled, shifting in her chair. "No, I've never seen any Federation ship with that kind of design; they do ascribe to a certain aesthetic, bland though it may be."

The woman standing at the commander's side laughed, the sound scraping. Taev glanced around the bridge and saw that he wasn't the only one displeased. Major Cassia of the Tal Shiar stood at the commander's side, one hand on the center chair, symbolizing the hold the intelligence organization had over the Imperial Fleet. Unlike the senior staff, the petite woman wore a different uniform that discarded the dark sashes adorning the bridge crews' uniforms for a harness that ran up her torso and split at her shoulders.

"Which means nothing Commander," Cassia replied, "This could be an attempt at Federation deceit," the woman replied, her eyes glittering like jade, "A poor one at that."

"The paranoia of the Tal Shiar, notwithstanding," Alaris said with customary defiance, "I will not feed the furnace of war the Tal Shiar continually wishes to stoke, without definitive proof that these ship is in fact of Federation origin or under Starfleet control."

Cassia merely smiled, and that chilled Taev even more than if the woman had glowered. The Tal Shiar agent merely patted the chair's headrest before standing primly at attention, her arms behind her back, her eyes peering across space, as if into the heart of the darkened sphere to ascertain who sat at its controls.

Could it really be the Federation? Had Starfleet intruded upon the Empire's self-imposed exile after all these years? There had been debate in the Senate about reengaging the galactic community again, and even a few voices called for challenging the Federation again.

The hardliners felt the Federation had been weakened by decades of conflicts with the Talarians, Cardassians, Tzenkethi, and Tholians; all tiny cuts to be sure, but over time small wounds shed lifeblood as surely as death strokes. The Federation's alliance with the Klingons was not strong, that savage empire riven by internal strife, and it was doubtful that the foreheads could aid the Federation if the Star Empire struck hard, and swiftly, according to men like Senator Penv.

Taev held no love for Starfleet. Their *Enterprise-C* had murdered his father at Narendra III. But he was loath to pin these attacks on them to satiate his own vengeance. Major Cassia, and unfortunately his good friend Crito, were of the Senator Penv school of thought.

"Scan that vessel," Alaris ordered.

It took several tense minutes before Sabia looked up from her scope. The woman's voice was dry, her usual ebullience drained away. "The hull is composed of tritanium among multiple alloys, some from the Alpha and Beta Quadrants, but others...are not in our memory bank."

"So, are you saying that this vessel might not be from our space?" Crito didn't hide his disappointment.

"Yes Subcommander," the science officer answered. "It is likely that this sphere came from the Gamma or Delta Quadrants, maybe even from the Andromeda galaxy or beyond."

"Is it also not outside the realm of possibility that the Federation have conjured new alloys and metals of which we are not aware?" Cassia asked.

The science officer pursed her lips, clearly in disagreement with Cassia's hypothesis, but being a scientist and well as wise, Sabia nodded. "That is a possibility Major."

"This could still be the precursor to invasion," Cassia replied, folding her arms.

"It could be...but not likely," Alaris determined. This time Cassia did glower at the woman for contradicting her. Taev glanced at Sabia and saw the young woman brighten at the commander's defense. It was good to see Sabia smiling again. She had been tense for days since the High Command had ordered *Vicia* to join in the investigations of the mysterious attacks on outposts along the Neutral Zone. One warbird, the *Scelus*, under General Hesperian, had already been lost responding to an attack in Sector 52017.

"What about its weapons systems?" Crito asked, turning to Taev.

Taev had already started scanning the anonymous ship for weapons. "Our scans detect no shields...or weapons," he frowned, reviewing the readout again.

"That's impossible," Cassia sneered as she moved over to his station and nudged him out of the way. The woman bent down to read the data herself. "This makes no sense."

"Perhaps the Federation has colluded with a superior power," Crito offered.

"Enough with the Federation Crito!" Alaris snapped.

"If there are no weapons, what could account for the damage that ship had inflicted upon the outpost?" The Tal Shiar agent challenged. The woman's words sadly stirred up memories of the remnants of the other outposts. They hadn't been razed or flattened even; they had been scooped from the earth, as if a gigantic cosmic hand had reached down from on high and ripped the outposts, and all the souls within, from existence.

Alaris ignored her, "Sabia, did your scans detect any life signs?"

The science officer worked her console, but came up with a reply similar to Taev's. And her expression was just as perplexing.

"Could this ship be using some kind of sensor veil?" Cassia asked. "To trick our sensors?"

"It is conceivable," Taev admitted, "But that would portend that we are facing an opponent with a level of technology never encountered before." He paused, looking at the woman and then Crito, "Including the Federation."

"Magnify the vessel on the main viewer," Commander Alaris ordered. There were noticeable gasps, a complete breaking of decorum, but the commander didn't reprimand anyone. Like Taev, and all the rest, he could see that Alaris was transfixed by the image nearly blotting out the screen.

The sphere was vast, a motley collection of metal slates and piping, lit within by a green fire. "Hail them," Alaris ordered. The young man at the communications console immediately did so.

Alaris stood from her seat and stepped down of its pedestal onto the bridge. She locked her arms behind her back, her expression turning deadly serious. "Alien vessel, I am Commander Alaris..."

"Commander Alaris," a voice, actually a multitude of them all speaking at once, yet in unison, interrupted the woman. Something Taev had never witnessed without lethal repercussions. "Of the *Imperial Romulan Warbird Vicia*," the voices continued. Taev noticed how emotionless they were, robotic even. "Species 3783, you will lower shields and prepare to be boarded. We will add your biological and technological distinctiveness to our own."

"Alien vessel, identify yourself," Alaris demanded.

"We are the Borg," the voices calmly answered. The commander looked at Crito, Cassia, and then Taev. None of them had ever heard of the name. "Lower your shields and prepare to be boarded," the voices added.

"Are you responsible for the attacks which devastated this outpost and several others?" She demanded.

"The outposts are irrelevant. Lower your shields and prepare to be boarded. We will add your biological...."

"Alien vessel," Alaris dropped the façade of civility, interrupting the mysterious speakers this time. "You have violated Romulan space and committed acts of war against the Romulan state. You will surrender immediately to be taken into custody to answer for your crimes...or you will be destroyed."

"Borg vessel is activating a tractor beam," Sabia called out.

"Evasive maneuvers!" Alaris ordered, with such suddenness that it caused the man at the helm to jump. But Sublieutenant Khaiell quickly complied, just jutting the ship away from the grasp of green tractor beam.

"Fire forward disruptors, full spread" Crito ordered. Taev moved just as quickly as his counterpart at the helm. The *Vicia* was one of the *D'deridex*-class, one of the Empire's most powerful warships, and Taev seldom was given the opportunity to fully unleash on an enemy. Most of the time the *Vicia* was assigned to patrols or carrying supplies to far flung outposts or to their Garidian allies.

Occasionally some criminal or dissident would fall into his cross hairs, but none lately, and he had yet to test his mettle against the Klingons. He had been looking forward to being assigned near the Klingon border, until Admiral Goma himself had ordered *Vicia* to resolve the outpost disappearances.

Disruptor beams and pulses slammed against the large sphere, enough firepower to demolish a moon.

"Direct hits!" Taev couldn't hide his excitement as his readings informed him of how much damage he was inflicting on the alien vessel. The viewscreen was filled with smoke and fire from explosions with each contact he made.

"Halt," Alaris barked. She turned to Taev. "Damage report!"

"Twenty direct hits," Taev replied, looking down at his screen.

"Any damage to key systems, weapons, propulsion?" The commander demanded.

Taev looked askance, and Sabia spoke up, "Our readings never ascertained where the propulsions, weapons, or even the commander center for the bridge were."

"What?" Alaris was incredulous.

"Commander Alaris, I think we have more pressing concerns," Cassia was uncharacteristically alarmed.

"Great Halls of Erebus!" Crito gasped. Taev looked at the screen. He clutched his stomach, as if he had been gut punched. The sphere was repairing itself. How was that possible? In a few moments it would look like nothing had touched it all!

"The Borg are hailing us," the openly frightened communications officer said, dreading nearly clotting his voice.

Alaris had to clear her own voice before saying, "On screen." The viewer shifted from the outside of the ship into its vast interior. It went on forever, row after row, of what appeared to be humanoids, in black carapaces. A red light filled the screen, nearly blinding Taev. He threw up his hands and squinted through it. Once his eyes had adjusted he saw that the light emanated from a monocle covering the eye of a man as ghastly, pallid, and bald as a Reman. However this man's tapered ears and blunt face were familiar.

"General Hesporian," Alaris croaked.

The venerated soldier shifted his head, the red light bathing Alaris. "I am Dicensis...of Borg. I have been designated to speak on behalf of the Collective, to facilitate the assimilation of the Romulan people."

"Like Erebus you will," Alaris declared. "Centurion, unload everything you have at that thing."

Before Taev could reply, several flashes of green resolved on the bridge and three wraiths covered in black carapaces, with elongated appendages replacing an arm, appeared on the bridge. Their armor was a nest of tubes, some sticking out of deadened skin, as if they were obscene walking replicas of the sphere that had spat them out. Each had appeared near important stations. Sabia screamed as one of the

creatures pushed her out of the way and drove its appendage, with something that looked like a drill bit attached, into her console, causing sparks to run up its arm.

"Isolate that console!" He heard the commander bark. Engineer Lerv tried to fight the apparition but the hefty man was tossed like a leaf. Crito fired at the one near the helm, knocking it the ground. The creature disappeared, leaving only a scorch mark.

Taev wished he could help Sabia and the others but he was struggling himself. His wraith had been driving him back; it was all Taev could do to hold the creature's arms aloft. The creature was pallid, and bald like Hesperian, but from a race the Romulan had never seen. Taev stared into its one organic eye, the other covered by an eyepiece. The Borg didn't blink. There was nothing there, no emotion, colder even than a Vulcan, and oddly he smiled, thinking of his mother. If there was one thing he understood it was Vulcans.

He wondered what she would do in this situation. And then it came to him. He remembered his teaching. Risking his life, he released one arm, moving quickly as it swung down like a hammer. With his free hand he reached out, for the creature's neck, seeking purchase. He just hoped that this alien's physiology contained the right bunch of nerves.

The alien staggered, its single eye rolling up in its socket and then it crashed to the deck. "What did you do to it?!" Crito asked, shocked.

"And you didn't think it paid to be half-Vulcan," Taev grinned. Crito often teased him about his heritage. Despite that the fact that the smooth-paned Crito resembled a Vulcan more than Taev, who had inherited his father's proud brow.

The subcommander held up his honor blade, thick with viscous blood. "I'm just fine being Romulan."

Alaris and Cassia were both bent over, driving their honor blades into a still twitching Borg. Taev pulled his own blade and slit the throat of the Borg he had knocked unconscious.

Afterwards he searched for Sabia and was comforted to see the woman standing by her smashed console. She was shaken, holding herself, but in one piece.

"Those things, they can adapt to our disruptors," Crito said. "I got off a shot, so did Sub-lieutenant V'ret, but after that, these creatures had some kind of personal shielding which fended off further attacks."

"So we did it the old-fashioned way," Alaris smirked, wiping her blade across a sleeve.

"It's not over yet," Cassia warned.

"And we lost Engineer Lerv," one of the Decurions attached to the bridge was kneeling over the prone engineer, his neck bent at an unnatural angle.

"Assume his post," Alaris ordered and the Decurion quickly complied. The commander held aloft a small, circular object. "A circuit of some kind," Alaris said, before tossing it to a startled Sabia. The woman almost tripped trying to catch it.

“Reconfigure one of the auxiliary consoles for your station. Glean what you can from this.”

“At once Commander,” Sabia said, rushing off to the aft section of the bridge. Alaris ordered the crew to begin picking clean the other corpses, for more clues to what they truly were and how they could be defeated.

Taev had just begun his inspection when he jumped back as the Borg disappeared, along with the others.

“I suggest we leave as well,” Cassia warned. “We have to inform the Praetor what we’ve discovered here.”

“I concur,” Alaris said, taking her seat. “Helm, bring us about, maximum warp; take us into the electrokinetic storm we avoided on the way here.”

“But Commander, seeking shelter inside that storm could be just as dangerous as facing these Borg,” Crito warned.

The *Vicia* commander shrugged. “I don’t see what choice we have in the matter old friend,” she replied, using a term of endearment Taev had never heard the woman use before. Alaris added a wan smile, “It might even, even the odds.”

“One can only hope, Commander,” Crito said, turning forward, his expression hardening.

Taev went to his post, though he felt useless. He had thrown almost everything *Vicia* possessed at that sphere and it hadn’t been fazed at all. It sat there, over the planetoid, strangely not attacking, as if mocking them. Or toying with them.

Perhaps the chase is what the Borg or Dicientis wanted. Hesperian was as great a hunter as he was a soldier of the empire.

He felt the thrum of the engines, the strain on the ship’s struts as it powered up for warp. “Now,” Alaris commanded. Taev grabbed the edges of his station as the warbird bolted from the sphere.

It was only a few moments before he heard the news that he dreaded most. It came from the helm. “The sphere is pursuing.”

Imperial Bird-of-Prey Odaus

“That’s all you footage you have?” Hudson’s disappointed mirrored Glover’s own. Terrence had been riveted by the life-and-death struggle that had taken place aboard the warbird.

“Yes, there’s got to be more,” Terrence added.

“There is,” Valeris admitted. “But I just wanted you to understand the threat we are facing.”

“A threat Admiral Uhura recognizes,” Xinran spoke up, his voice clotted with surprise and suspicion. Glover turned to the older woman and saw that the look of horror had not left her face.

“You know who, what, these Borg are?” Glover asked, his temper getting the best of him. “And you didn’t tell us?”

"Or Starfleet Command," Hudson added, with even more reproach.

Uhura looked at each person on the bridge before she sighed, her age catching up to her. "Yes," she said quietly, "I knew, or suspected. So did Command, that's why I'm here, to confirm it."

"So what are we doing here exactly?" Terrence threw up his hands. "And why did Command send the Enterprise on that song and dance with the Romulans if they knew about these Borg?"

"Suspected," the admiral emphasized, her voice steeling. If Glover had been standing, he might have taken a step back. "Seventy-two years ago, during the maiden voyage of the *Enterprise-B*, the ship encountered a strange energy ribbon."

"Yes," Glover interjected, as he recalled that fateful voyage from his history classes. "The mission where Captain Kirk died, but what does that have to do with the Borg?"

Uhura glared at him until Glover's contriteness made its way to his face. Satisfied the woman continued, "Two ships had been caught within the energy ribbon. The *Enterprise* was only able to save passengers from one of the ships. The passengers were refugees," the woman said.

"El-Aurians," Hudson said, immediately apologizing. Uhura took a long look at him and then smiled.

"Yes, Mr. Hudson, the El-Aurians. Their home system had been overrun by an enemy they called the Borg."

"So we've known about these Borg for damn near a hundred years?" Glover didn't hide his incredulity.

"Not quite," the admiral replied. "We only had scant information about them. Very little empirical data," she added. "We knew about cube ships, but not spheroids, and rumors that the Borg were cybernetically enhanced beings."

"And these were closely guarded secrets," Valeris said, a small smile playing on her lips. The admiral glowered at the woman.

"Command felt there was no need to create unnecessary hysteria, without proof," Uhura said. "So, Special Affairs and Investigations, among others, sought out that proof. One of the most promising efforts came from the Federation Council of Exobiology and a couple...the Hansens. However, their ship, the *Raven*, was lost over a decade ago."

"Now you have your confirmation," Valeris said.

"My God," the admiral shook her head. "They are real."

"And now they are here," Xinran said, his voice filled with portent.

"You said you have more," Glover turned to Valeris. "Show us."

The Vulcan hesitated, her cool exterior cracking. "This is my son here," she said. "He went through this, Taev and his compatriots...these things are difficult to re-watch."

"I understand," Terrence said.

“Valeris, I can’t grasp what you are feeling, but we need this information, we need to be as forearmed as possible before we reach the Arx,” Uhura said gently, motherly even.

The Vulcan took a moment before saying, “I guess showing you the rest of the footage is the only...logical response,” she said, with a ghost of a smile.

Uhura arched an eyebrow. Glover glanced at Hudson, and Cal chuckled.

Valeris turned back to her terminal. Her fingers tapped the console and the star disappeared again, and was replaced by something far darker than the depths of space.

Imperial Warbird Vicia **Traveling Under Cloak**

The deck trembled again and another console went up in flames, this time engulfing Sublieutenant V’ret. Centurion Taev held onto his terminal to keep his footing, blocking out the man’s cries. “Another direct hit!” he called out. Reaching the roiling maelstrom had thus far not been the sanctuary that Alaris had banked on. If the warbird wasn’t being pummeled by the Borg it was being buffeted with electromechanical discharges that were increasing in their intensity.

“They can see through our cloak!” Major Cassia said.

“General Hesperian,” Commander Alaris stated grimly, perched on the edge of her command chair.

“No, not the general,” Subcommander Crito declared. “It’s that abomination that these Borg have twisted him into, this Discentis.”

“In any event, drop the cloak, and transfer that energy to shields and weapons,” Alaris ordered.

“What good will that do?” Cassia scoffed.

Alaris glared at her. “If you wish to express such sentiments you can do that off the bridge!”

“You remember who you are talking to,” the Tal Shiar agent warned.

Alaris laughed. “You’re trotting out the Tal Shiar card now, when we’re facing that thing?” She pointed at the viewer. The Borg sphere was advancing on them.

“The sphere will overtake us in five seconds,” Sublieutenant Khaiell informed them.

“Drop us out of warp,” Alaris barked. “All stop!”

“What?” Cassia was incredulous.

“Remain silent, by choice or...” the commander left the rest of the statement hanging, but the ominous tone was enough. The Tal Shiar operative stepped back.

Taev grasped his console again as Khaiell abruptly brought the ship to a halt. Other crew members weren’t as lucky, with several falling to the deck, Crito included. The sphere flew past them.

“Centurion, fire everything we’ve got at that sphere.”

"We've done that," Cassia spoke up. "Their shielding absorbs our weapons."

"Modulate the resonance frequencies," Alaris said.

"At once," Taev said. He moved quickly, changing the resonance for each hit. The fusillade ripped into the spheroid, stabbing deeply into its dark depths, causing gouts of flame and destruction. Against any other foe, Klingons, Breen, Taurhai, or the Federation, the victory would have been assured.

But this time Taev didn't even hold his breath. He knew what would still be intact after the smoke cleared. He did his duty however, informing the commander of the seeming success of the strike.

"Incurring such damage should force them to take a few moments to repair," Alaris said. "That's all we've been given, so let's make the most of it." The commander ordered the helm to resume course, at full warp.

"Erebus!" Crito spat as the bridge filled with shafts of green light. Borg swarmed all over the bridge, a repeat of the previous battle, but this time they came in droves.

"Helm, get us out of here!" Alaris roared as she jumped to her feet. Sheets of black armor covered her, as if devouring her, and then Taev lost sight of her as the wraiths came for him.

Taev pulled his honor blade, given to him by his father, a weapon that had been in the Martius Clan before the Sundering. One of his ancestors had even used it to shed blood during the Time of Awakening, and Taev thought of that venerated ancestor and the others as he drove the blade into the exposed flesh of the Borg, the blade poking right into the throat and out the back of the head.

The Borg was wracked by spasms, but that didn't deter Taev. He used the body as a shield as he drove back the other Borg behind them, using the dying alien as a battering ram as much as possible. Once the alien became dead weight, Taev ripped his blade free from him and rushed to join another battle.

Melee weapons were one thing it seemed the Borg couldn't adapt to; however the revenants were using their elongated appendages to parry blows. Some Borg though had torches or sharpened ends to their appendages and they used those accordingly.

His ears twitched to the sound of the bridge doors parting, and Taev foolishly took a look back, to see gold-helmeted Tal Shava pouring from the lift.

For his mistake he nearly lost his head. The Borg did cuff him severely, making the man's eyes water. But his pain was consumed by the fires of his anger. He knew he would be facing his father and all of his ancestors soon and he wanted to be worthy to stand before them.

The creature lumbered, raising its longer arm to bring down on Taev. Taev went inside, stabbing until he drew geysers of fluid, blood, or coolant, it didn't matter which to him.

He had moved on before the Borg had fallen to the deck. The centurion rushed to the aid of Crito and Cassia. Both Romulans were back-to-back, holding back a closing circle of Borg.

Taev never thought he would see Crito working with the Tal Shiar, but this situation superseded his disdain for the Tal Shiar.

Pulling his disruptor out and clutching the barrel, Taev used it like a club, smashing it into the head of one of the circling Borg.

He tossed the Borg to the side and grabbed at another one, slicing the woman's throat. She also got tossed to the side. Taev was moving on his third when he saw Crito, his face bloodied, but determined, lunge at a Borg and miss. The creature grabbed the man's arm and roughly drew him forward. With his other hand, two gray tubules snaked from his wrist, puncturing Crito's neck. The man sighed and stumbled.

"Subcommander!" Taev yelled, his heart thudding as Crito sank to the ground. The centurion's outburst distracted Cassia. The woman looked back, and that was all it took before tubules latched onto her neck like fangs.

The subcommander fell to his knees, but his eyes were open, and they were changing, the flame of who he was, who had once been, was extinguishing, and Taev saw the man's face rippling as if a nest of insects had been disturbed beneath his skin.

"What did you do to him?!" Taev demanded, "What did you do?!" But none of the creatures answered. They carried on their deadly assault with even less emotion than his Vulcan cousins.

"Centurion!" He heard Alaris's voice shout above the din. The woman was somewhere in a sea of black armor.

"I'm coming for you Commander!" Taev promised, elbowing a Borg away from him.

"No!" She shouted. "To the helm. Prepare for ramming speed!"

"But Commander," he said.

"Do as I command," she ordered. "This will be the last I give you, now honor it."

"I will," Taev quickly threw up a salute before he turned to helm. He saw that Khaiell was slumped over it, blood and flesh dripping onto the deck. It seemed the helmsmen had had an unfortunate encounter with one of the Borg torches.

The centurion evaded and battled his way to the helm, protected by all the gods in the Romulan pantheon it appeared, and some likely not. He pushed Khaiell out of the chair and took control of the helm.

He tried his best to concentrate on the task at hand, but every few seconds he looked back and around him, anticipating the cold sting of one of the Borg fangs at any second.

To his comfort he saw the Tal Shava had cut through the black and were making their way to him, drawing the attention of the Borg. Taev put in the new directions.

A hand touched his shoulder, causing him to jump. Taev drew his blade.

"It's me!" Sabia shouted. Taev blinked, unable to speak. "It's really me!" She added. Her face was battered, but she managed to smile before wincing.

"You're alive," Taev jumped from his chair and grabbed the science officer, so hard that the woman grimaced. "I...apologize." He said, a bit sheepish. He had longed to embrace her, but had kept silent, for far too long, and now, it was too late. He cloaked his emotions and stood straighter, his face taking on a professional air.

"For the time being," she said. "I heard the commander's order, and I'm here to get you the seconds you need." Taev then noticed the bloody honor blade at the woman's side.

"Thank you Science Officer...Sabia," he said, sitting back down. He powered up the warbird's engines and angled it back toward the still sphere.

In a sense the *Vicia* had become a large honor blade and he had been entrusted to wield it for the Star Empire. And there could be no greater honor than that.

"Ramming speed! Now!" Alaris called, before she shrieked, and then went silent. Sabia gave a war cry and leaped at the Borg coming at them. The woman's voice was tragically cut short.

Taev forced himself to look ahead, at the damaged spheroid in front of him. He poured all his hate into the control column. He smacked the warp drive propulsion seconds before he felt the bite, a coldness that quickly turned to fire as it poured through his blood and across his skin.

The centurion tore at his skin, wishing to rip the insects swarming through his body, their chittering forming into a song in his mind, a dirge that tugged on him, and a midnight chorus that beckoned him to join.

He welcomed as the *Vicia* thrust forward, into the very mouth of the abyss and Taev welcomed, begged for the darkness.

Imperial Bird-of-Prey Odaus

"Oh gods, Taev," Leta's voice broke through the silence, and pained Glover's heart. He turned from the screen to see the woman standing in front of the lift, shaking like a buoy in a hurricane. He couldn't imagine the woman could ever be so rattled.

"Yes Daughter," Valeris said tenderly. "This is the last transmission from the *Vicia*, one that the High Command kept from us."

"One that you stole from the Central Information Net," Leta charged, her anger overcoming her grief.

"One that Taev sent to me," Valeris gently corrected.

The younger Romulan shook her head. "That's not true," she declared. "It's all right there, his death is right there."

"It would appear so, but appearances can be deceiving," the Vulcan said, glancing at Admiral Uhura. The woman returned a knowing gaze.

"The only deceiver here is you!" Leta pointed an accusing finger at her mother. "Either you are making this up or you have kept the fact that Taev survived away from me, for all this time. You've left me to suffer alone; you left me when I needed you."

Valeris dipped her head, her cheeks growing green with what Glover figured was shame. As well she should, Terrence thought.

"All I wanted was to learn the truth, of what really happened to the *Vicia* crew," Valeris raised her head; her dark eyes were large and pleading. "I didn't expect to find Taev alive, I didn't know what to do, I don't know now. But he's alive. He's at the Arx, and we must rescue him."

"And if any of that is true, then what Mother?" Leta threw up her hands. "We'll live comfortable lives in the Federation? You'll be a two-time traitor, and Taev and I will be encircled by our enemies, the ones who murdered our father!"

"I was once a Starfleet officer," Valeris pointed out.

"That's not helping your case Mother," Leta rejoined.

"The Federation isn't as bad as you might think," Xinran, who had heretofore stood silently at an aft bridge console, waded gingerly into the conversation. "If you do decide to stay there you will find its denizens quite welcoming."

"Maybe for a human lover like you," Leta flared, "One can practically smell your Terran whore's stink roiling off you. Of course they accept their lackeys, like one might accept a *set'leth*," she smiled, the expression cruel. "You're nothing more than a pet to them, and your self-hatred makes you too dimwitted to realize it."

"I've told you before about your language," Uhura chided.

This time Xinran didn't rise to the bait. His smile was just as cruel. "Perhaps you're looking in a mirror and don't like the reflection you see, *Vulcan*."

Leta looked from Xinran to the admiral. She jutted out her chin, challenging both. "And what are you going to do about it? Any of you?"

"Leta, daughter of Clan Martius, you will respect my compatriots." Valeris was firm.

"Respect my enemies, or you, a traitor to the Empire," Leta flared.

"Hey, cool your thrusters," Terrence said.

The Romulan woman rounded on him. "You don't give me orders!"

"I was just trying to say," Glover made another attempt.

"Mr. Glover this is a family matter," Valeris said respectfully, but firmly. With some effort Terrence reeled in his reply.

"I have no more words for a traitor," Leta said, planting her boots and crossing her arms.

Valeris looked at her daughter sympathetically. "How little you know child, how much I've kept from you, and Taev, to protect you both."

"What do you mean?"

Valeris's face contorted as the woman struggled with uncomfortable truths. "I am a traitor," she confessed. "I've never left the service to Starfleet. I owed Starfleet my life and it is a debt I can never forsake."

"So you do finally admit it!" Leta said, "And you've damned me as well."

"I apologize for hurting you Daughter," Valeris continued, "But now is the time for you to see the fullness of our lives, and the truth, and the lie behind our existence here in the Star Empire."

"What are you saying Mother?!"

"I remained loyal to Starfleet, as a member of Section 31, an organization that was authorized in the original Starfleet Charter-Article 14, Section 31-and was charged with defending Earth and later the Federation entire from extreme threats."

"Section 31?" Hudson's brow wrinkled. "Terrence you ever heard of them?"

"No," Glover replied, intrigued.

"Neither have I," Xinran added. The three men turned to Admiral Uhura. The woman's eyes glinted with a dark recognition.

"So you know what she's talking about?" Glover surmised.

The woman remained tight-lipped. Valeris smiled, "Now is not the time to hold to our secrets Admiral."

"I agree with Valeris," Glover said. The admiral stewed for a moment.

"Yes," she said eventually, her voice cool. "I have heard of Section 31, nearly forty years ago, and I know what they are all about," was all she said.

"You think so?" Valeris tilted her head, her smile toying. "I don't think so."

"So this is a real thing?" Hudson was surprised.

"Very much so Mr. Hudson," the Vulcan told him.

"And you're still a member?" Glover asked.

"Yes," Valeris nodded. "I have been for a long time."

"Admiral Cartwright, one of the ringleaders behind the assassination of Klingon Chancellor Gorkon, was purported to also be a member of this Section 31."

"And these guys are sanctioned by Starfleet or the Federation Council?" Cal was incredulous. So was Glover.

"Not. Quite." Valeris answered.

"They operate with impunity, relying on anonymity and their ability to coerce people into silence about their existence," Uhura said.

"And Starfleet Command allows this?" Glover asked.

"Many in Command are not aware of Section 31's existence, believe it is overblown or a conspiracy theory," the admiral replied. "I found it hard to fathom myself, though my investigation into the loss of the *Enterprise-B* yielded unexpected and troubling truths."

"This group isn't sanctioned is it?" Hudson asked.

"Not...officially," Valeris answered. "However there are many Federation officials who are aware and supportive of Section 31's actions."

"Care to name them?" Uhura asked with faux innocence. The Vulcan merely smiled.

"What does this Section 31 have to do with anything?" Leta demanded.

Valeris's smile waned, her features became composed. "I didn't work for Section 31 alone," she said, her voice growing quiet. "Your father, Martius assisted me."

Leta stepped back, as if slapped. Her face blanched. "You're lying!" She said. "That's impossible! It's not true!"

"It is Leta," Valeris said, her face impassive. "Martius understood how destructive a war with the Federation would be, and he understood the true threat...the Klingons."

"No, no, no," The younger woman closed her eyes and placed her chin on her chest.

"The histories often mention Admiral Cartwright and General Chang as conspirators in Gorkon's removal." Valeris explained.

"Assassination, not 'removal'," Uhura pointed out, "and you are also mentioned in the histories."

"Touché," the Vulcan dipped her head. "Not much is discussed about Romulan Ambassador Nanclus's role in the conspiracy. Martius was in the ambassador's circle, one of the warriors ready to join with the Federation to eliminate the Klingon menace, until Kirk interfered."

"I was a part of that too," Uhura added.

"Yes," Valeris cut her eyes at the admiral. "You were."

"My father would never betray the Empire!" Leta declared.

"That is correct," Valeris said. "Martius was a true patriot. And he understood that men like Senator Penv are *the* true danger to the Empire."

"Senator Penv believes in Romulan exceptionalism," Leta retorted. "In the greatness of our people and nation!"

"Penv believes in Romulan *expansion* which is not the same thing as greatness, and his chauvinism has only one expression, one method, which is utilizing military force. Despite the propaganda the Imperial Fleet is not the preeminent navy in the Alpha Quadrant. Martius understood that the Star Empire could not defeat the Klingon Empire or Cardassian Union outright, and not without much effort. He understood that another war against the Federation, especially after the Tomed Incident, would be suicidal."

"My father wasn't afraid of the Federation!" Leta screamed.

"Your father died in battle against Starfleet," Valeris pointed out.

"An enemy you still serve!" Leta charged, ripping her disruptor from her holster. "You're a traitor!"

Glover looked at Cal and then Xinran. Both men had tensed. Glover saw that the Romulan had his hand on the top of handle of his disruptor. Admiral Uhura looked troubled, but Valeris was the picture of calm.

"If you feel it is your duty to claim my life I will not stop you," Valeris said. "Nor will I judge you. It is only logical that you act out the patriotic duty that you have been conditioned with since birth."

"Enough with your damn logic!" Leta threw down the weapon and then threw up her hands. She cursed, in a string of invective so quick that Glover's universal translator didn't catch it.

"You are right," Valeris said after the woman burned through her rant. "My logic has failed me...more than once," she turned to Uhura. "And it fails me now. I can't leave Taev in the Arx. I am his mother. He needs me. And I must go to him."

"And risking us in the process," Glover grouched.

"Providing you with crucial information Commander," Valeris rejoined, "That Starfleet had not obtained. Once we have retrieved Taev, his personal experiences with these Borg, plus the knowledge from the *Vicia's* logs will be invaluable to Starfleet."

"She's right Mr. Glover," Uhura said, though her tone was not pleased.

"Can't lie old buddy, but I'm damn curious to see what this Arx looks like," Cal said. Glover groaned.

"You too Cal?" His old friend merely smiled. "What about you Xinran?"

"The sooner we're out of Romulan space the better," the man replied.

"At least someone still has some sense," Glover joked.

"How can any of you find levity in your impending deaths?" Leta flared. "If this was for anyone else, anyone but Taev, Mother you would be atoms right now." Valeris took it evenly, but Uhura and Cal both gasped. The Romulan woman glared at each of them. "And I would gladly feed the rest of you to a pack of *thrai*."

"If I knew what that was, I guess I would be afraid," Terrence smirked. The woman snorted before stomping off the bridge.

"Someone should see after her," Uhura suggested, though she looked squarely at Valeris. The Vulcan woman impassively looked at the closed door her daughter had just exited through.

"I'll go after her," Xinran started from his post. "I don't trust her unsupervised."

"I don't think that would be wise Mr. Xinran," Valeris said. "You and my daughter have a...combustible relationship to say the least. Your presence might antagonize her further."

"That might be the case, but I agree with the lieutenant," Glover interjected. "Leta doesn't need to be alone right now."

"You are correct Mr. Glover," Valeris said evenly. "Please see after my daughter."

"Me?" Terrence was surprised that the Vulcan had charged him with the responsibility.

"Yes," Valeris replied.

"Why me?"

"Yeah, why him?" Hudson added.

"Mr. Xinran isn't the only person who provokes a response in my daughter," Valeris said with a knowing smile. Uhura rumbled deep in her throat.

"Something you wish to share Commander?" The admiral asked.

"No, uh, no, of course not," Glover reached for his collar, the temperature suddenly increasing.

"A mother knows these things," Valeris added. "Whether you...or Leta do not. Go to her Mr. Glover and bring her back. I will endeavor to make her see reason."

"Okay," Terrence reluctantly agreed. In part to escape the heat in the room and also all the eyes that were boring into him.

Imperial Bird-of-Prey Odaus

Glover searched the ship, his heart thudding, but he wasn't sure why. He knew with Cal at the helm and on the controls, if Leta was crazy enough to sabotage the ship his old friend would inform him. And he hoped with Valeris still on the bridge she could counteract any damage that her daughter might cause.

As Terrence raced through the ship, searching the most obvious places, starting with the woman's quarters, he tried to ignore the thrill he felt at walking through history.

During the brief respites off the bridge, he had sought to access the *Odaus's* surprisingly still functioning memory bank.

The history this ship had participated in was astounding, though, at the time they weren't weighing the historical import Glover was sure, they were merely carrying out orders and trying to survive.

Leta's grandmother had been a centurion named T'Reni aboard *Odaus*. The woman's service record, from what Terrence had been able to make out of it, had been impressive.

T'Reni had even taken command of the ship at the Battle of the Luminaire Nebula. That name had brought Glover up short.

The Palmer side of his family had suffered tragedy on the *Mendi* during the war, but one Glover had actually saw action in the Luminaire Nebula. His great-great-great Uncle Montague had served as a medical officer aboard the *S.S. Liberty*, one of the then new *Christophers*. *Liberty* had led a taskforce including quite a few notable ships of that war, *Argus*, *Liberator*, *Adventure*, *Starlight*, *Swiftfire*, *Dragon*, and *Providence* among them, into that cauldron, scoring one of Earth's major victories in the process and helping decisively turn the tide against the Romulans.

Many birds-of-prey had been lost in the Luminaire Nebula, and it was a sign of T'Reni's skill that she had shepherded her ship out of it intact.

Perhaps it was fate, or some winking deity that had placed him aboard this ship, seeking out the ancestor of a woman who had likely fought like hell to kill his own ancestor. "Small universe syndrome indeed," Terrence muttered to himself right before he activated the lever on the combat room.

Leta was inside, in the center of the room, stretching. Glover's breath caught in his throat. The woman had shorn the tight-fitting uniform she had been wearing on the bridge. In fact, it lay crumbled off in the corner of the room. Glover wore a similar dark, checkerboard patterned outfit. He had been happy to take off the ill-fitting uniform from the *Patronus* to one from the uniforms still stocked in the *Odaus*. The old-style Romulan uniforms were tighter-fitting than the bulkier, blockier uniform Leta was wearing when she first aboard *Patronus*.

Still though, the archaic uniforms weren't as skin-tight as the current Starfleet uniforms that left very little to the imagination.

But Leta was unencumbered by barely any clothes. The woman was dressed only in a jade tank top and matching shorts. She was stretching, her moves showing nearly every muscle in her angular frame.

Terrence could only admire the woman's graceful movements. Her back was turned to him and the woman seemed so intent on her movements that she hadn't noticed him enter the room.

Before the commander announced himself, Leta said, her back still turned to him, "Enjoying the view?"

Glover's cheeks warmed. "Oh, I, uh, I was just about to announce myself."

"Yeah," Leta said, turning around, with a smile on her face. "Is the front as appealing as the back?" She held open her arms to the side, giving Terrence free reign. But this time he averted his eyes.

"Listen, let's start over," he suggested.

"How so?" The woman said. She walked toward him. Something in Glover told him to back away, but his feet were planted. She got close to him; her breath smelled as sweetly tart as an Osol Twist. She touched his face, and trailed a finger from his ear and down his jawline. Terrence heart raged against his chest and he shuddered involuntarily.

Leta chuckled, the sound coming deep from her throat. "All that, just from a touch? Has it been that long Terrence? I can't imagine that it is hard for you to take on lovers."

"Of course not," Glover pulled away from her, though it was a struggle. "That's not what I'm here for."

"I deal with my anger in two ways, fighting or..." she tugged at his belt. He placed a hand over hers.

"Don't," he said.

"Why not?" Leta challenged. "You will meet me in the center of the combat room, in battle...of one kind or other."

She dropped her hand and returned to the center of the room. "Join me Commander Glover. I've always wanted to test myself against the 'best' of Starfleet."

"At least you recognize that," Glover smirked. The Romulan matched his smirk.

"Not good at detecting sarcasm I see," she said.

"Alright, perhaps you will need some convincing," Glover took off his jacket, and dropped the disruptor in his holster as well. He met Leta in the center of the room, dressed only in a black undershirt and black trousers. Since Leta was barefoot he decided to go shoeless as well.

"So are we going to talk about what happened up on the bridge or not?" Glover asked.

"There's nothing to talk about," Leta said as she crouched and began circling him. Glover copied her.

He was looking for clues of how she would attack him. Glover knew nothing of Romulan fighting styles, and very little about Vulcan forms, which he assumed might be the basis of the Romulan fighting arts.

"There's a lot to talk about," Terrence rejoined. "You got a lot dropped on you."

"Like what?" Leta shrugged, "Only that my mother is a traitor three times over, and that my father, from the Line of Clodius, a line unbroken since Worldfall, that he too betrayed the nation, the people, he had always taught me to put first, over my own life."

"Sometimes the truest form of patriotism is opposing a government's unjust course of action," Glover offered.

"And would you do the same? If your precious Federation violated whatever you considered moral?" Leta asked, right before she lunged at him.

Terrence easily evaded her grasp. His brows knit as he pondered the woman's question. "I would like to think so," he said, honestly, "but truthfully, I don't know. I do place trust in Starfleet Command and my superior officers to be of sound enough mind and moral rectitude not make immoral choices, nor force me to do so."

Leta returned to her full height and laughed, "You are very naïve Terrence."

"Is that so?" Glover struck, sweeping the unsuspecting woman's leg. She fell to the floor with, with Terrence's hand behind her back, to ease her fall. He lowered himself over the woman, just above her.

He took in her aroma, her sweat like some alluring spice. Terrence stared deep into the woman's eyes. "Not so naïve after all am I?"

Leta shook her head and laughed. She reached up and kissed him, with such ferocity and it had Terrence falling back. The Romulan climbed on top of him.

"Wasn't expecting that were you?"

"No," Glover admitted, gulping air. The woman pinned his arms to the floor.

"I win," she declared.

"Yes, but not in combat," he said, pulling the woman closer. It took a moment for their bodies to meld, as they learned each other's rhythm. Glover ran his fingers through the woman's thick mane of hair, as she hungrily, angrily kissed him.

"Ow," Glover muttered as Leta pulled away from him, the man's blood on her lips and teeth.

"Very interesting taste, human blood," she replied.

"Okay, I've never heard that one before," Terrence admitted.

"I like it," she said, and then she looked deeply at him. "And despite myself, I like you."

"Same here."

"Which is unfortunate."

"Why do you say that?"

"It's too late for you Commander Glover," the woman said, her expression hardening. "It's too late for any of you. I've sent them our location."

"What?" Glover was confused. "What are you talking about? Who?" The deck trembled and the air was rent by a siren.

"Commander Glover...Terrence, we need you up here," Cal called out from one of the bulkhead speakers.

Glover didn't move. Instead he looked at a slightly penitent Leta. "What did you do?" He asked.

"My duty," she said, pulling away from him. Glover grabbed her arm. The deck trembled again.

"Commander Glover," Hudson called again.

"I actually am sorry," Leta dipped her head. Behind her the air shimmered and several green shafts of light emerged as Glover's ears filled with the whine of transporter beams.

Terrence didn't protest as the woman left him to join the hardened Romulan soldiers that had just appeared in the room. She saluted the vulpine-faced, dark eyed Romulan holding a disruptor in one gloved hand. Unlike most Romulan males who preferred the clean shaven look; this man had a thatch of black hair running beneath his bottom lip and down his chin. Another thing that stood out about the man was that his dark hair wasn't in the nearly standard bowl cut style. The commander noticed that the other three Romulans also had their weapons trained on him. The interlopers were wearing a different kind of uniform than what Leta had worn before; their uniforms were darker, more streamlined, more like the old-style *Odaus* uniforms than the current, shoulder-padded, silvery uniforms Glover was more familiar with.

"Colonel Crassus," Leta said with cold formality. The man looked at her dispassionately and then behind her to Glover. Terrence's skin crawled when the man smiled at him.

"Lt. Commander Glover, of the *Starship Renegade*," the man said with a lethal geniality, "I already know much about you, but I am looking forward to learning so much more."

Imperial Warbird L'Nar

"I'm so pleased we didn't have to vaporize any of you," Colonel Crassus said, pausing to take a sip of a pale yellow beverage. "Though Xinran, son of Njal, did test my soldiers' patience," he shook a gloved finger at the security officer.

Terrence looked at the other man. His face bore several dark green bruises. Glover could tell the man was just about to leap from his seat at Crassus.

"Your passion is heartening Xinran," Crassus nodded, "It shows that some Romulan fire remains in your wilted bloodstream."

"If you didn't have weapons aimed at me, I would demonstrate how much fire I have," Xinran promised.

Crassus glanced at the guards posted in all four corners of what Glover surmised was a kind of wardroom. The colonel sat at the head of the table, with Leta standing at his side. Terrence, Valeris, and the other Starfleet officers sat around the table.

Each had plates of food and drink placed before them, but Glover wasn't feeling hungry or thirsty. He was still reeling from Leta's betrayal. A few days ago, the idea of a Romulan being treacherous would have a no-brainer, but Leta had slipped past his personal shielding, he felt something for her and he thought she did likewise.

He looked at her and the woman looked away. Perhaps she really did feel something after all, but if so, why?

"It is truly an honor to have the venerated Admiral Uhura as my guest."

"You have a very unique definition of guest," Uhura rejoined. Crassus gave another unnerving smile.

"I look forward to you divulging much information about Starfleet's secrets," Crassus said. "Major Leta has provided the Tal Shiar a great boon, a great boon indeed."

Valeris raised an eyebrow. "Major?" Leta dipped her head.

"Ah yes," Crassus said, "Did you really think your own daughter, a woman of such ability, would still be a lowly lieutenant? Or resign herself to serving in the Imperial Fleet even. She was meant for bigger things, much more grand. And before we recruited her, *she* came to us."

"Leta, you are in the Tal Shiar," Valeris stated. It wasn't a question. The Vulcan was trying to grapple with the revelation, to process it.

"Yes," Crassus replied. "And she has been a valuable member. She provided detailed information on your intrusion into the Central Information Net. And she convinced us not to arrest you after you enlisted her into your plan to bring Admiral

Uhura into Romulan space. How could we not allow such a treasure to literally fall into our laps?"

"How could you do this Leta?" Uhura flared, seemingly angrier than Valeris. The Vulcan woman's expression was closed off, but Glover was certain there was pain in her dark eyes. "How could you betray your own mother?!"

Leta looked ahead, her expressions steely, but Terrence thought he saw the woman's ridged brow furrowing just a little, then again, perhaps that was his imagination, and just what he wanted to see.

"Leta understood the distress her diluted heritage caused among many," Crassus paused and looked at Xinran. "As I am sure that Xinran also experienced something similar in the so-called egalitarian Federation." The Romulan tensed.

"Don't let him goad you Mr. Xinran," Uhura sympathetically, but firmly, advised.

"What better way to prove herself worthy, truly patriotic than joining the Tal Shiar," Crassus proposed. "And she rightly understood that if there was to be war with the Federation, the Tal Shiar would be instrumental to our winning it, and she so wanted that war, she so wanted to avenge her father's murder. The fact that he turned out to be a traitor only stokes the fires more, that the Federation could lure a man of such stature to betray his own nation, to place a stain upon the entire Line of Clodius."

"When are you going to get to torturing us?" Cal asked, "Because I would rather go through that than sit here and have to listen to you ramble on."

Xinran snorted and grinned in solidarity. One of the soldiers moved in Cal's direction, prompting Cal, Glover, and Xinran out of their seats.

"Remain at your station," Crassus ordered, holding up one hand. He hadn't raised his voice, but his authority reverberated throughout the room. "Please gentlemen, return to your seats. Your *viinerine* is getting cold."

"Lt. Hudson, alas you are of little use to us," Crassus continued after the men had sat down. "The only reason you are still breathing is because you can be useful as a bargaining chip for the others."

"Well, that's nice to know," Cal grouched.

"And what use am I?" Terrence charged.

"Now you Mr. Glover, I am curious about the recent parasite infestation of Starfleet, but more so, with you, it's your father, Samson Glover, the purported 'expert' on my people. I read his translation of the *Eridam Papers*. Quite an interesting take on their content," Crassus concluded. "I look forward to discussing your father with you, and what other insights he might have about us. It's a pity that Admiral Uhura didn't bring him along instead of you."

"It doesn't matter Colonel because he would tell you the same thing that I will," Glover said.

"And what would that be?"

"Nothing," Terrence riposted.

"We'll see if you will be so tight-lipped after a few sessions with a mind sifter. The Klingons are barbarians, but they do make excellent interrogation devices."

"Can I get an early start then?" Cal asked.

"So eager Mr. Hudson," Crassus replied. "Are you also so anxious around Gretchen?" Glover's heart thudded at the mention of Cal's wife, and Hudson stared daggers at the Tal Shiar colonel.

"Don't you ever mention my wife again," he warned.

The colonel put up a hand. "Out of respect for Federation-Star Empire relations I will not mention her again," the colonel said, the unsettling smile returning. "I wanted you to know, all of you, that we know more about each of you than you realize and that we can reach any of your loved ones if you don't comply with our wishes."

"You don't scare me Colonel," Uhura said, and Glover knew she meant it.

Crassus nodded, realizing it as well. "Not yet," he said, "Not yet Admiral. But soon," he promised, "You'll be positively terrified."

Imperial Warbird L'Nar

"Don't Terrence," Leta said quietly, but with force. She placed a restraining hand on his arm. Glover considered pulling away from her.

But then he remembered where he was, and what was transpiring. His defiance could make things worse, for him, his friends, maybe even Leta. He dared looked back at her, but the woman was already pulling away from him.

A loud cheer went up as a louder thud made the deck tremble. They were in a combat room, one much larger than on the *Odaus*. And the walls of this one were adorned with melee weapons, and not all Romulan. Glover had made out several Klingon weapons and even one sharpened Andorian *hrisal*.

But none of the men fighting for the amusement of the *L'Nar's* crew carried any weapons. Colonel Crassus had ordered his men not to kill Cal or Xinran, though he had not made a similar commandment to their Federation counterparts.

Xinran was on the back of a downed Romulan. The V'Shar operative was noticeably trembling. The man was barely holding it together. His rage had almost crested.

"Move Xinran!" Cal called out. The Romulan had taken his eye off his own opponent, catching a hard punch to the stomach. Hudson folded over. But his warning had been successful. Xinran moved to the side, just avoiding another Romulan diving in to tackle him. The soldier missed the tackle.

Xinran jumped to his feet and kicked the man hard in the face, crunching bone. Glover winced. The Romulan placed his boot over the man's throat.

"Don't do it," Terrence muttered.

"Do it," the *L'Nar's* first officer, a glacially beautiful dark-hued woman said louder. Despite the raucous atmosphere, the woman stood at attention, her arms behind her back.

"Don't Xinran!" Glover called out.

"Prove yourself a Romulan," the woman demanded. "Prove yourself worthy to be a son of ch'Rihan for once." Xinran glared at the woman.

Behind him, Hudson was still on his knees. "Decurion, put the human to sleep," she ordered.

"Cal!" Glover yelled out. He stepped toward the combat ring.

"Do not interfere," the first officer ordered, while still looking ahead.

Glover glared at the woman. "You don't give me orders!"

"Yes, I do," the first officer said, still not looking at him. "If you do not comply, I will have you restrained. The colonel's orders were explicit, but still left a lot of latitude."

"I'm just going to have to test the limits of your latitude then," Glover said and ran onto the combat floor.

The decurion standing over Hudson looked at him. Cal, still on his knees, reached out, grabbed the man's legs and took him off his feet. Hudson delivered an incapacitating elbow against the other man's temple.

Glover placed a hand on Xinran's shoulder. "Don't do it Mr. Xinran," he demanded.

The man looked up at him, his expression so lost and hurt, so roiling with anger that it hit Glover like a feedback loop.

"You don't understand Commander, my own people have taken so much from my family," Xinran said, his voice cracking. He looked down, his face contorting with rage. "And this *veruul* dared dishonored my father."

"I don't care about him," Terrence said. "I just don't want you to give these bastards what they want!" He pointed at the leering crowd. And then Glover glared at the first officer. He jutted out his chin, daring the woman to respond. The throng quieted after Xinran reluctantly removed his boot from over the downed man's throat.

"There are many ways to enforce compliance Commander Glover," the first officer said. "Admiral Uhura and the Vulcan for example," she said. "With one order I can deliver unto them unimaginable agony and there is nothing you could do about it."

"Damn it, she's right Terrence," Hudson muttered as he stood beside Glover. "We can't endanger the admiral."

"I don't think the situation can get more dangerous...for any of us," Glover replied out of the corner of his mouth.

"It can Commander, believe me," the woman replied. She nodded curtly and the crowd began to encircle the Starfleet officers. The three men stood back to back. Terrence flexed his muscles, ready to fight.

"Enough entertainment for today Subcommander," Colonel Crassus's voice cut through the thickening tensions. "We have entered the Chaltok system and I want you back on the bridge."

"I will be up once I take care of the refuse," she answered.

"See to it quickly T'Rhiel," Crassus's tone was even, but still carried portentous weight.

"Yes Colonel," T'Rhiel said. She pulled out her disruptor. Glover's eyes narrowed. He straightened his back, preparing for the final burning of disintegration.

She fired two shots, vaporizing the men that Xinran and Hudson had dropped. T'Rhiel looked at Glover coldly, purposely. "Refuse dispensed of. I would advise all of you to not become as useless," she said. "Lt. Ehrek, return our guests to their quarters."

The beefy Romulan stepped forward, his disruptor already drawn. T'Rhiel turned quickly on her heels and moved toward the exit.

"Subcommander T'Rhiel," Glover dared call out. The woman paused, though she didn't turn back to him. "Why are we in the Chaltok system? Where are you taking us?"

Despite not being able to see her face, he heard the smile in her voice, "Why the Arx of course. Your mission will be completed after all."

Imperial Warbird L'Nar

Subcommander T'Rhiel didn't escort Glover to the interrogation chamber. She arrived after he had been forcibly strapped into the chair. The Romulan dressed in white surgical scrubs moved out of the way and stood at attention. T'Rhiel stood over Glover. Behind her, the two guards that had forced him into the chair had taken up positions by the door. Terrence was pleased to see the bright green smear of blood on one of the guard's busted mouth. The skin scraped from Glover's knuckles didn't trouble him one bit.

T'Rhiel placed a finger under Glover's chin and he attempted to jerk away, but his head was restricted by the restraining band that had been placed over his forehead.

"Come now Commander Glover," T'Rhiel pursed her lips. "Such defiance. We'll see how defiant you will be after a few sessions with our mind probes."

"What happened to the mind-sifter?" Glover asked through gritted teeth.

"The colonel wanted something left of you afterward, so he ordered that mind-sifter to be used on the Vulcan and the traitor." Terrence was immediately fearful for both of them. "Too bad these interrogation chambers are soundproofed."

"If you hurt either of them, or any of my colleagues," Glover warned.

T'Rhiel shook her head. "Don't waste my time with idle threats Mr. Glover." She motioned to the white-haired doctor.

The man produced two small rectangles, both glowing an ominous crimson. "These are mind probes," the *L'Nar* first officer explained. "Doctor N'Ral will attach these to your forehead. Doctor, enlighten our guest as to what is about to happen."

"Of course Subcommander," N'Ral said as he attached the devices on Glover's head. Though the medic talked, Terrence continued staring daggers at T'Rhiel. "The mind probes will allow us to record your thoughts, which we will be able to view via this screen." T'Rhiel patted the screen facing Glover. "It can cause distress if you are uncooperative," the man said, with some concern. "This is a more civilized method of interrogation," he added.

"More humane," T'Rhiel needled.

"Yes, all together, a less messy alternative to the mind-sifter or other interrogation methods," Dr. N'Ral concluded.

"I feel so much better now," Glover rolled his eyes.

"Begin the interrogation Doctor," the first officer ordered.

Glover tried to steel himself as best as possible.

"Dr. N'Ral suggested you don't resist," T'Rhiel said. "Though personally I hope that you do."

Glover bit back a retort. He knew the woman wanted to rile him, to knock off his concentration. "Do your worse," he eventually said.

"Oblige the commander," T'Rhiel ordered.

The red glow began growing; he could see it on the edges of his vision. And then he felt the fingers, digging into his mind, probing his thoughts. Terrence tried to put up mental blocks, to fight back with his anger, but the fingers were persistent, burrowing.

"Interesting," T'Rhiel said, one finger at her lips as images began to fill the screen. It was a mixed jumble, snatches from Glover's life.

"Tell me about the *Starship Renegade*. I want to know everything about the *New Orleans*-class."

"No," Glover said, through gritted teeth. "I will never betray Starfleet."

"You don't have a choice in the matter," T'Rhiel replied. "Dr. N'Ral, increase the power of the mind probe."

The crimson light became blinding, pulling Glover out into a sea of red, an ocean of pain. It tore a cry of agony from him as the fingers became blades, fiery ones that slashed and burned through his brain.

"No, no, no," Terrence shouted, closing his eyes to the blinding light. He was bathed in sweat now, his muscles straining to the point of pain as he fought against his restraints.

"This isn't working," T'Rhiel said, her voice distant, just on the precipice of the encroaching darkness, an abyss Glover would've welcomed. "Mr. Glover you appear to be more than what you appear to be. Humans, normal humans should not be able to withstand this level of probing. Dr. N'Ral, discontinue the probe."

The red sea receded, though the pain lingered in his mind. It took Glover a few moments to open his eyes. The regular light was now stinging. "Doctor, perform a genetic scan of the commander."

The medic ran their equivalent of a tricorder over Glover. The man shook his head, "I am no expert on human physiology," the man offered, "but I see no abnormalities there."

"Because you don't know where to look," she said, snatching the tricorder from his hands. She frowned as she read the findings. She scanned Glover again, and took another look.

"There are subtle alterations of your neural pathways, congenital in origin," she concluded. Glover looked as confused as the medic. She pushed the tricorder into N'Ral's chest. The man barely caught it before it fell to the deck. The first officer bent down and looked Terrence over, her interest piqued in him in a way Glover knew wouldn't be beneficial to him.

"One or both of your parents was genetically engineered," she surmised. "Fascinating."

"Go to hell," Terrence spat.

"Dr. N'Ral, repower the mind probe," she ordered. "But let's not focus on Mr. Glover's treasured oath to Starfleet. I find his personal life, those he loves, far more interesting."

"No, aahhh!" Glover screamed as the knives began stabbing, increasing in intensity as several lovers and friends came to the fore, leading eventually to a picture of his father and then his mother on the monitor. He could barely make out his mother's proud visage through his tears.

"Cease at once," T'Rhiel said, and Terrence detected a troubled tone in the woman's voice. She turned to him. "This...is your mother?" The superior air had evaporated and a shocked expression flashed across the woman's face.

"Yes," he said, his voice ragged, his chest burning as if he had ran the Academy Marathon.

She leaned closer, and whispered in his ear, "She lived on the Norkan colony." He jerked up. "How did you know that?"

"Where is she now?"

"Use your scanner to find out," Terrence remained defiant.

"Dr. N'Ral," she ordered. "Dig deeper."

Glover shivered as the agony began again. "Erebus," the woman whispered, as she found Glover's deeply buried pain. The scanner uncovered the small memorial service Samson and Glover had held for his mother after the *Starship Tombaugh* had been declared lost, with all hands.

"What happened to her?" T'Rhiel demanded. Terrence refused to answer. She instructed N'Ral to turn up the juice.

"She was lost, on the *USS Tombaugh*, all hands," the words were ripped from Glover.

"She's dead," T'Rhiel replied, her voice stricken. "Dr. N'Ral, stop the memory scanner."

The pain receded again. "Guards, unshackle the commander to his cell."

Glover wanted to fight, but his muscles failed him. The guards picked him up like a sack of green potatoes. "You know my mother," Terrence said to the first officer. "How do you know her? What does she mean to you?"

For once T'Rhiel was speechless. "Get him out of here," she said eventually.

"No," Glover tried to plant his feet, but the guards forced him through the door. "Answer me!" He demanded before the door closed behind him.

Imperial Warbird L'Nar

Glover was thrown back into the cell. He stumbled, almost falling, and damn near twisted his ankle as he turned around to confront the guard he had pushed him. But by that time the guard had activated the force field locking him in. The guard sneered at him.

Terrence wished he could push through the energy field and strangle the man. He glared at the man. "Why don't you drop the force field?"

The guard placed his truncheon against the field, causing it to crackle. Despite wobbly legs, Glover stood firm, squinting as sparks shocked him.

"Pretty fearless...for a human," the other man laughed. "If I didn't have my orders..."

"Yeah, excuses, excuses," Terrence threw up a hand and turned his back to the guard. "I see why you can't defeat the Klingons, excuses."

"Listen to me, you *nhaidh*!" The guard bellowed, but Glover ignored him. He noticed Hudson lying in the corner of the cell. He went over to his friend. He knelt down.

"Cal," he said gently, "Cal, are you okay?" He gingerly touched the man's shoulder. With a groan Hudson rolled over.

He frowned at the two scorch marks on the man's forehead. "Mind probe," he said, to himself as much as to Hudson. He touched the bruises on his brow and winced.

Hudson trembled and drew into himself more. "The mind probes affect everyone differently," the voice made Terrence jump.

He turned around quickly, his aching muscles as primed as possible for a fight. He could just make out Valeris sitting in a shadowed corner, kneeling, her hands in front of her, as if she was praying, or meditating.

"Spock tried to teach me the value of meditation, but I had never put much stock into it. I saw how little praying or meditation did for my parents." Valeris said. "My parents are the reason you are here Mr. Glover."

"What do you mean?" Terrence asked. He wanted to approach the woman, but something told him not too; he wasn't sure if it was out of respect or fear. Did he really want to go through the door that the woman was now holding open for him?

"Admiral Uhura," Glover could hear the smile in the woman's voice. "She's become quite the manipulator in her advanced years."

"What are you talking about?" Glover tried to keep the impatience out of his voice.

"My parents were part of the clergy on P'Jem," the Vulcan said. "P'Jem was one of the planets attacked by the Klingons after the war."

"The Four Years War?" Terrence asked, still not sure how any of this had anything to do with the admiral choosing him for this mission.

"No," there was the smile again. "Not the Four Years War, that tragically forgotten war. How old do you think I am Mr. Glover?"

"Oh, uh, well, I mean you, ah, do you look great," Terrence fumbled about.

"For my age you were going to add?"

"No, of course, not I mean," Glover continued flailing.

"I am teasing Mr. Glover," Valeris let him off the hook. "I have come not only to value meditation and reflection as I've matured, but also humor. We Vulcans do have emotions; we merely choose to suppress them."

"Yes," Terrence nodded, "I get that."

"Well then," the cheer drained from Valeris's voice, and it took on a faraway cast. "During my childhood, P'Jem suffered two attacks by the Klingons. The first occurred during the brief war that was stopped by the Organians."

"Ah," Glover said. "That war."

"Yes," Valeris replied. "Not as long, or disastrous as the Four Years War which occurred some two decades before, but still a lot was lost in that brief exchange of hostilities, including our monastery."

"My parents decided to stay and help rebuild the monastery. They were unprepared when a conflagration between the Romulans and Klingons only a few years later spiraled into Federation space, and P'Jem was once again in the crosshairs. One of the Romulan priests studying at P'Jem was the scion of a powerful Romulan family, one that Klingon marauders hoped to capture for ransom. Their attack resulted in many deaths, including their purported captive, and my parents."

"I'm sorry for your loss Valeris."

"Thank you Mr. Glover," the woman replied. "But it is I that remain in your debt."

That brought Glover up short. "I don't understand."

"Your ancestor, your great grandfather, Hamilcar Glover, led a landing party to rescue the survivors of the attack. I had gone for days without food and water, hiding from Klingon warriors. Hamilcar saved my life. I am forever in the debt of the Glover family. And Uhura knew that, she knew my personal story. She thought your presence here would prevent any treacherous actions on my part." Valeris paused,

her emotional control slipping, "It is the same reason the admiral brought Xinran along as well."

"I don't follow," though there was something wiggling in the back of Glover's brain that told him otherwise.

"I met Xinran as a child, on P'Jem," Valeris's smile was elegiac. "His father was a visiting religious scholar, similar to my own parents' vocation. Xinran and I were once friends. His father was who the Klingons were after. He lost his father when the Klingons attacked that second time."

Yes, Glover thought, but kept to himself. Xinran had mentioned coming living on P'Jem before, and as soon as Valeris had mentioned the planet he should've made the connection, but with everything in flux, Xinran's recounting of his personal history, had dropped into the recesses of his mind. If he had had the time he would have kicked himself for that.

The woman wiped her dry eyes, as if they were filled with tears. "Our pain bonded us, and we stayed in touch throughout the years. I tried to recruit him into the conspiracy; Xinran serving aboard the *Goshawk* at the time. He would have no part of it, yet his own honor kept him from informing the authorities. After the conspiracy had been foiled and all the investigations were done, Xinran's career in Starfleet was ruined. Despite all the pain I have caused him, the river of anger between us, it has been...agreeable to see him again."

"Well, I'll be damned," Glover replied. There was so much family history, so many worlds the Glovers who had chosen Starfleet service had visited, and so many conflicts they had participated in, Terrence hadn't remembered P'Jem.

And to know that Uhura did and that she was using him to manipulate Valeris angered him, but also made him respect the admiral even more. She was thinking at a level Glover hadn't fathomed. He was just glad Uhura was on their side.

When the survivors arrived at Vulcan the priests offered me the *fullara*, a ritual to repress unwanted memories and emotions, to help me get over P'Jem, to move on, but I didn't want to move on. I needed to hold on to my pain, I thought it would honor my parents' lives and their sacrifices; but now, after all that transpired, perhaps things would have been different...maybe better, worse, who knows..."

"We all have regrets," Glover offered.

"Surely not you Mr. Glover," the smile had returned. "You are a young man that doesn't seem to possess any."

"Perhaps I'm merely as good an actor as you and Admiral Uhura," he rejoined.

"Not quite," she replied, and he could tell the smile was fuller now. "But in time you might become a master at it. The first part is learning how to lie to yourself."

"I see," Glover pondered.

"Once you are able to deceive yourself, doing so with others becomes facile," the Vulcan added.

"And what have you lied to yourself about?" Terrence asked.

The woman sighed. "A great many things," she answered. "But the most important self-deception as it pertains to our predicament is my miscalculation over Leta's loyalty. I thought I could break through a lifetime of indoctrination, but even love wasn't strong enough."

"If there is any bright side, at least we're going to the Arx," Glover knew the joke was flat before he finished it. But Valeris chuckled anyway, the sound musical.

"Yes," her voice grew grim. "However my plan was not only to visit the Arx, but to leave it as well. And this sojourn unfortunately has all the hallmarks of a one way trip."

Imperial Warbird L'Nar **Traveling Under Cloak**

The disruptor dug into Glover's back. He elbowed the guard pushing him. The guard hissed. "You are eager to die today human."

"I won't be going alone," Terrence shot back, through clenched teeth.

"Keep moving," the guard warned, poking the weapon into Glover's side again. Terrence whipped around and smashed the man in the face, cracking the guard's nose.

Other disruptors were shoved at Glover's face, but the man stood over the downed guard, daring him to get up. Cal moved to help, but Terrence warding him off.

"Enough Commander Glover," Colonel Crassus said. "You've provided enough good sport for the evening." The Tal Shiar commander had provided just enough distraction for rough hands to seize Glover's arms. He struggled against them.

"Terrence, don't," Uhura said quietly. He looked at the woman, heartened to see her alive and all the rest of his colleagues, though each one looked the worst for wear, with Xinran faring the worst.

The Romulans had spent days interrogating him, the admiral, Valeris, and Cal, while subjecting Xinran to endless combat training rounds eager to test themselves against a V'Shar operative.

"I would heed the admiral's advice," Crassus warned. "I have graciously allowed your party to come to my bridge, and any more disruptions I will consider disrespect," the icy threat lie just beneath his calm tone.

He turned his back to them and motioned from behind. "Come now. I want you to see this."

The rest of the captives trudged slowly behind the striding colonel, while two guards delighted in pushing Glover along. Crassus ordered them lined up, situated between his command chair and the long helm terminal. Crassus stood between Uhura and Glover.

"Release him," he ordered the guards. The men reluctantly complied. Though they took positions close by, and Glover didn't have to look back to know they had

their weapons at the ready. "Drop our cloak and helm, all stop." The lighting on the bridge brightened, though the effect wasn't disconcerting due in part to the room's drab green and tan interior. The deck rumbled beneath Glover's boots as the ship became stationary.

"What do you want us to see Colonel?" Uhura asked, her voice imperious despite their current predicament.

The woman's tone amused the commander. "The Arx."

"There's nothing out there," Cal grouched, not in the mood for Romulan games.

"That's where you're wrong Mr. Hudson," Crassus replied.

"We are still in the Chaltok system," Valeris said. "The Arx is located in the Hectori sector, 72.8 hours away."

Crassus smiled. "You continue to impress me," he then looked at Major Leta. "Like mother, like daughter." The woman was at a standing console beside the command chair. The woman couldn't quite hide her pensiveness. Subcommander T'Rhiel stood impassively at another standing terminal on the opposite side of the empty command chair.

The woman's brows knit as she saw Glover looking at her. She briefly met his gaze and then shifted again. Terrence was surprised that for a brief moment her expression had become anxious.

"Lt. Nalvin, contact the Arx," Crassus said, smirking at Valeris. The woman's eyebrow was arched, likely in curiosity.

"No response sir," the nervous man replied. Crassus frowned.

"Hail them again."

The communications officer gulped before replying, "Still no response."

Crassus grabbed his chin. "Damn Admiral Danclus and his bureaucratic games." He cleared his throat and barked at the jumpy Nalvin. "Open hailing frequencies again."

"Yes sir," Nalvin said.

"Admiral Danclus," Crassus raised his voice. "This is the Tal Shiar *Imperial Warbird L'Nar*, demanding you approve entry into the Arx."

"Nothing still sir," Nalvin said.

"Imperial Fleet arrogance," Crassus scoffed.

"Perhaps a warning shot might encourage compliance," the woman at the tactical station suggested. Crassus shook his head and gave a tight lipped smile.

"It's always disruptors first with you Sica," the colonel said. "No," he sighed. "Danclus is being particularly ornery today. Send one more entreaty," he advised Nalvin. The man responded in the negative.

"The Imperial Fleet still doesn't understand the respect of the Tal Shiar," Crassus replied. "Subcommander T'Rhiel, submit the override code." The subcommander quickly input the information into her terminal.

"What the hell?" Cal breathed as the space in front of them began to ripple. The void continued contorting as a new, massive shape emerged.

"My God," Uhura gasped as a hulking tetrahedron loomed over the *L'Nar*, as if threatening to devour the now tiny warbird.

"You were right Lady Valeris," Crassus said. "The Arx had been in the Hectori sector."

"But it moved," Valeris replied.

"Because it's more than just a space station," Glover interjected. "The Arx is a warp capable space station."

Imperial Warbird L'Nar

"Admiral Danclus, if you hadn't been so obstinate, I would not have to force your hand," Crassus said. "We should not have daggers drawn. We are both wings of the same raptor."

"The admiral is not responding," Nalvin said.

"Come now Danclus," Crassus cajoled. "Let's not pout. Give us entry into the Arx." The colonel waited for a few tense minutes. Glover could tell the man's irritation was growing.

"It's going to be one of those days," the man eventually said. "T'Rhiel, open the gates."

"Colonel, perhaps the admiral can't respond because there is a problem, communications or otherwise, aboard the Arx."

"Perhaps," Crassus replied, "But the Arx's shielding repels even our sensors."

There was a flicker of light within the mountain of darkness. A beast opened its mouth, its maw lit with infernal light.

"Now Danclus sees reason," Crassus muttered before saying louder, "Helm, take us in."

"Belay that," T'Rhiel said. Crassus frowned, his dark eyes burned like coals.

"How dare you," he began.

"The Arx is scanning us," the subcommander said. The woman was clearly troubled.

"Why would they do such a thing?"

"The Arx, they are sending a message," Nalvin interjected, his confusion consuming his anxiety.

"Put it on screen," Crassus barked.

"Sir," the communications officer hesitated. "It's not for you...it's for Lady Valeris."

Glover joined everyone on the bridge in looking to Valeris. The Vulcan calmly took in the scrutiny. "Colonel, if I may?" She asked.

He nodded curtly, "Of course."

"Lieutenant Nalvin, accept the communique."

The image of the behemoth shifted to a darkened room with a pallid figure, face hidden in shadow.

"I am Valeris," the Vulcan said, her voice thick with caution. "You wished to speak to me."

The figure leaned forward. Leta gasped. Valeris blanched. "Mother," the man said, touching the screen, with the drill that had replaced his hand. The man was pale, with dark pulsing veins. Half his head was shorn, the other half mottled and disfigured with electrodes. "The transformation....is nearing completion."

"Taev, my son, no," Valeris shook her head, her voice breaking.

"You are not supposed to be here, what are you doing here?" The man's voice was so pained, even Terrence felt it.

"What do you mean? You called for me?" Valeris was also hurting and not hiding it.

"I...I was lashing out, trying to retain what little of myself was left, before it, before it's taken from me," Taev answered. "And I wanted to warn others. I didn't expect that you would find it, or me."

"I will always find you," Valeris promised.

"I...I am not me anymore, now there is only death, and you must leave. Now."

"No," Valeris shook her head, her expression hardening.

"We're coming for you," Leta declared.

"Little bird, it's...too late for me," Taev said. "Too late...I hear the song, it courses through my soul; soon...it will be all that I hear...all that I am."

"We're going to rescue you," Leta pleaded.

"What happened to you son, what happened to the crew of *Vicia*?" Valeris asked.

"We survived..." the man tried to smile, but the deadened muscles in his face wouldn't allow it. "The desperate maneuver stopped the sphere, and we actually survived. It was not only the Borg that did this to me...it was our own scientists...here at the Arx."

"Good Lord," Uhura muttered.

"The sphere was recovered and taken to the Arx. The sphere is here now. And Imperial scientists were seeking to understand the transformation process, the assimilation process...to create an inoculation against it," Taev added. "Who better to experiment on than the survivors of the *Vicia*, whom the Fleet had reported as having been lost?"

"Typical," Xinran spat.

"Where is Admiral Danclus?" Crassus interrupted.

"Admiral Danclus...along with many in his command staff, escaped from the Arx before..."

"Before, before what?" Crassus demanded.

"Before," the man paused, the words caught in his throat. His eyes rolled back, exposing a cloudy whiteness, as the man's body twitched. "The song, the song...I must..."

"Sir, Arx is transmitting information, leagues of it," Nalvin said.

"This...this will help...it must help...before...before," Taev was struggling to speak. "The song...is so...beautiful." He threw his head back and fell out of his chair.

"Taev!" Both Valeris and Leta screamed and both women ran to the main viewer, oblivious of guards and brushing past Crassus. The guards, as was Crassus and everyone else on the bridge were so transfixed by what was happening on the screen that they didn't react, and barely noticed.

Both women touched the screen. Taev was hunched over now, the muscles of his bare back contorting, things like insects rippling beneath his skin.

"Colonel," T'Rhiel said in a commanding voice that broke through the fog. "The Arx is activating tractor beams."

Taev shot up, his expression dead, his individuality stripped. "*Imperial Warbird L'Nar*, we are the Borg," the words rattled out of his mouth, but Glover could tell the man was not their author. "You will lower shields and prepare to be boarded."

"Get us out of here!" Leta said.

"Who, what is the Borg?" Crassus asked.

"Get us out of here now!" Leta screamed.

The colonel grabbed her arm. "You will answer my questions!"

The woman elbowed the man in the throat. He went down gasping, clutching his throat. "We have no time for this." Leta looked up and into the eyes of Sica who had her weapon aimed at the young major.

"My daughter is correct," Valeris said. "We have seen what these Borg are, and what they can do, if the Arx successfully attaches tractor beams to this vessel, our chance of surviving an encounter with the Borg drop precipitously."

"Understood," T'Rhiel said. "Until Colonel Crassus recovers I'm assuming command. Helm, evasive maneuvers."

"You got to do more than that," Glover said. "Get us the hell out of here, maximum warp!"

Imperial Warbird L'Nar

Glover was on edge. He had long ago learned to marshal his fear, to put it in the back of his mind in order to accomplish the mission at hand. But at the moment he had no mission, leaving the fear and anxiety to burrow into his core.

Subcommander T'Rhiel had ordered the prisoners along with Leta into the stateroom adjoining the bridge, under a cohort of guards led by the brutish Lt. Ehrek. The hulking Romulan was sneering at his captives, tapping his drawn disruptor against his leg, as if daring someone to attack him. Glover could see that a fuming Xinran was weighing his options.

"I need your attention here Mr. Xinran," Admiral Uhura chided. The man grumbled before joining the rest of them as they huddled around the desktop in the office. On it played some of the footage that Taev had sent from the Arx.

T'Rhiel had demanded that Valeris scour the data for any information that could help them survive. With each rattle the warbird took growing in intensity, Glover knew they didn't have long. And he hated being stuck on the sidelines instead of either at the helm or in the command chair.

A sharp jab in his side pulled Glover out of his commiserating reverie. "You want to move over?" Leta asked. Terrence bit back a retort. Despite the fact that the woman had betrayed them and might yet cost them their lives, she was still captivating.

And now she was standing beside him, though her attention was on the screen. Her eyes widened. "Taev," she murmured, her voice nearly hitching her throat. "Dear Taev..."

Imperial Warbird Vicia

He heard voices scraping along the edges of his consciousness like leaves pushed by the wind along the streets of Romii IV, ones he had once paraded down like a conquering hero, like his father....

"Here's one," another voice, also distant, but strong enough to break through the others rustling in his mind. "He's still alive."

"Great Halls of Erebus!" There was another voice, filled with horror. Taev tried to open his eyes, to see what had frightened the man so, but his eyelids wouldn't move, neither would the rest of his body. "How is he even still breathing?"

"Help me with him," the first voice said.

"No," the other voice declared. Even beyond them he heard shouting and then screaming and then the voices inside him trilled as others joined the chorus. A new energy, as if new life itself now coursed through him. He tried to use the new energy to open his eyes, to move, but it was no use. He tried to part his lips, to greet his rescuers, and then to scream for help, but it was as if his mouth no longer existed. Only Taev could hear his scream, and he feared that it would go on forever.

He awoke again, this time not to darkness, but a faint grayness, as if there was a film over his eyes, or rather eye; one eye seemed permanently closed, if not missing altogether. If that was the case, Taev didn't feel the pain of its removal; in fact he felt no physical sensations at all.

"Fascinating," a shadow fell over him. Taev squinted, trying to bring his working eye into focus. It took effort, but the shadow began to resolve into the shape of a man, a tall man, bent over, and his face near Taev's. The man had patrician features, much like his own father.

Nearby he heard a voice drenched in irritation, "What do you find so fascinating *now*, Doctor R'Mor?"

The man stood up, his face now out of Taev's vision. "Admiral Danclus," this Dr. R'Mor formally addressed his superior. "This is a tremendous find. I have not discovered why this young man survived the crash of the *Vicia* into the alien spheroid, but I do think I have ascertained why the assimilation process that had overtaken other members of the *Vicia* had been halted in this instance."

Assimilation process? The other members of the Vicia? What had happened to them? What had the Borg done to them? What had the monsters done to him? He wanted to ask, but found he couldn't speak, as if the Borg had taken his voice from him, and now even their voices were gone. He was trapped within himself.

"And?" Danclus pressed.

"It...appears," R'Mor bent back down, so close that his nose nearly touched Taev's face, though the man would not have felt the contact. "That the electromechanical discharges from the electrokinetic storm that had ensnared both the *Vicia* and the Borg sphere not only disabled the alien vessel, even more than the actions of the last ditch efforts of the *Vicia* crew, but electrocuted most of the drones within, and for the others...including Centurion Taev here, it severed his link to the hive mind connecting all the Borg on the ship."

"Is there some way to harness this power, to use it against the Borg?" Danclus asked, his voice no longer demanding though Taev could still detect calculation. "This sphere wasn't the only Borg vessel; there had been reports of a cube that had attacked the science outpost at Tharos. So there are other Borg out there, and there will be more. They're testing us, and we must be ready to meet the real challenge."

"To do that, we need to understand the full process of assimilation, including the connection of the affected to the hive mind." R'Mor said. "We've salvaged some equipment from the sphere, including a distribution node that has provided a wealth of data on the Borg and several of what appear to be regeneration chambers for individual drones."

"You want to place the centurion inside one of these chambers to reconnect him to this hive mind?" The admiral asked.

"Admiral, I caution against this course of action!" Another voice interjected. A female voice.

"Senator Telaan," Danclus said with barely concealed menace. "This is a military matter."

"And I have been a firm supporter of the Imperial Fleet," the woman didn't relent. "And these Borg are a threat to the Empire I have sworn to protect, the same as you."

"What do you say to that Doctor?" Danclus said.

"The senator is wise to voice caution; however there is no discovery without risk. The Arx is the most heavily fortified research base in the Imperial Fleet," R'Mor replied.

"That you are aware of," the senator interjected, and Taev could hear the smile in her voice.

R'Mor swallowed hard. "Of course," he paused, "Be that as it may, this is the safest location I know of where we can even attempt to initiate connect with the Borg hive mind, and with the unique features of this lab, we can escape if we detect any Borg vessels who have been alerted to our actions."

"The doctor is correct, Senator," Danclus said. "Proceed R'Mor, and keep me...us, informed of your progress."

"Yes Admiral."

The Arx

The shriek ripped through his raw throat with such ferocity that R'Mor and his assistants shrank back.

"It appears the centurion is awake," an attractive, stately woman, dressed in fine plum colored senatorial robes, replied, folding her arms.

"Restrain him," R'Mor said, his voice quavering. The guards at the door hesitated.

"You heard him," the woman snapped. That jolted the guards into action. They rushed to Taev, grabbing his arms roughly. He thrashed against them, twisting, trying to break free, but they pinned his arms to whatever he was resting on. He heard the clink of the restraining manacles over his biceps. Though secured, he bucked against them.

For some reason the guards didn't go for his legs. Taev decided to make them regret that. He lashed out, or tried to, but he felt nothing, and obviously neither guard was affected.

Taev glanced down, seeing what they had done to his legs, and his anger was extinguished, just gone...like his legs. He blinked and then looked up at a sympathetic R'Mor.

"My legs...my legs...what happened?"

"You...were severely injured when *Vicia* crashed into the Borg vessel," the doctor said. It was then that Taev realized the man and his assistants were dressed in white surgical scrubs. "Your partial assimilation by these Borg saved your life."

"What are you going to do to me?"

"We are going to place you inside a Borg alcove; we are going to connect you fully with their hive mind." His expression was sympathetic. "We are going to complete the assimilation process."

"No," Taev wailed, "Please, don't. You don't know what it's like." He began pushing against his restraints.

"No," R'Mor admitted. "I don't. Can you describe it?"

"It's...almost beyond words," Taev said, his one working eye filling with moisture. "You are almost nothing, infinitesimal in the tide, the great chorus of voices, all murmuring, yet all speaking as one...melding together, held together, by something...someone greater even than the multitude."

"Someone?" The imperious woman stepped into view and R'Mor gave her respectful space. She peered down at Taev. "These Borg have a leader?"

"Not...no," he tried to shake his head but remembered he couldn't move. "Not a leader, a queen."

"You will contact her," another figure stepped into his view. It was Admiral Danclus. "You will ask her what she wants from us, and inform this 'queen' that further incursions will be responded to harshly."

If Taev could laugh he would have done so. The woman snorted.

"Now is not the time for empty threats Admiral," she chided.

"Senator Telaan," Danclus's voice grated like broken glass. "These aliens have committed acts of war against the Star Empire. The idea of negotiating with them is preposterous, and it sounds more like an inane idea from your husband Flavius than one conceived by you."

"I would be mindful not to insult the husband of a senator, who also is a powerful procurator of the prosperous Didacti system in his own right," Telaan warned.

"And I would never dream of committing such a faux pas," Danclus didn't hide his insincerity.

"Some leading our glorious Imperial Fleet have a tendency to jump to conclusions, victims of unwarranted paranoia. I seek not to negotiate with the Borg, or their queen, but to understand their nature, their mindset to better defeat them," the senator explained. "And understanding what their ultimate goal is which is the first step in denying it to them."

Danclus nodded tightly. "I...concur." He moved out of eyesight. "Proceed with the connection Dr. R'Mor."

"No, no," Taev pleaded. "No!" He was powerless to resist as they wheeled him along. He couldn't even twist his head to see the doom that awaited him.

"Be gentle with him," the doctor warned once the gurney had come to a stop. The guards placed firm, but not gouging grips on him as they removed his restraints. Taev considered fighting them, but knew it was futile. Even if he could break free, he had no legs to run away. "Gentle, gentle," R'Mor pressed.

"Don't do this," Taev begged. "And not for me...but for you." R'Mor paused and turned to his superiors.

"You have your orders Doctor," Danclus flared. The senator looked grim, but didn't protest.

"Place the centurion into the alcove and secure him within," the scientist said. This time Taev didn't protest. Instead he centered himself, and steeled himself to hold on to as much of himself as he could once he was swept into the ocean.

"Centurion Taev, once you are within the alcove, the instruments within should repower the dormant Borg nanoprobes in your bloodstream, connecting you to the hive mind."

"Subject is secured," one guard said, out of Taev's vision.

Dr. R'Mor frowned. "He is not a subject, he is patriot."

"Yes, a proud son of Romulus," Admiral Danclus added. "The scion of Martius."

"From the Line of Clodius," the senator spoke. To hear such eminences speak of his family, of his blood line, in time's past would've filled Taev's heart with pride, but now he saw them as merely empty platitudes. Final words to send him to a fate worse than the bowels of Erebus.

For the first time he felt the pinch and the coldness again. And then the voices began to pour into his mind, like an increasing rainstorm. Taev thought of his family, his sister and his mother, as the downpour grew in intensity. "Mother", he screamed, as the water began to slash through his mind, seeking to tear away everything he was, to leave only the storm within its place.

He could feel his power fading, a shadow covering his remaining eye, and then text and readings overlaid his vision and the voices grew stronger, comforting, as if they had been there all along, and he found himself missing them.

With most of his last vestige of self Taev heaved his few bits of thoughts into space, in the hopes that someone wiser than Danclus and the other superiors aboard the Arx could use them to defend the Empire. Taev knew that the Arx was now a lost cause. As he slipped below the waves, into the churning waters, he held onto this the only piece of himself he could, the last time he saw his father, his mother, and his sister. He smiled as oblivion took him.

Imperial Warbird L'Nar

"That's it?" Subcommander T'Rhiel asked, the question coated with a hint of frustration and fear. The ship continued rattling as the Arx's weapons found purchase.

"Why aren't we dead already?" Xinran asked, drawing the woman's ire.

"Not helping," Cal muttered to the V'Shar agent.

"There's nothing there but a funereal recounting," T'Rhiel was disgusted. "Nothing to help us stop the Borg."

"Not true," Admiral Uhura said. "The Borg sphere was stopped by severe electromechanical discharges."

"I don't see any electrokinetic storms nearby, do you?" The subcommander rejoined. The admiral ignored the jibe.

"That is correct, but we might have the next best thing," Uhura said. "It is fortuitous that we are in the Chaltok system."

"Yes, I feel like I just won the lottery at Vokar's Folly," Ehrek muttered, eliciting a reproachful glare from T'Rhiel. The man turned a light shade of green.

"What do you mean by our sudden good fortune Admiral?" T'Rhiel demanded.

"Chaltok is rife with subspace anomalies," Uhura pointed out.

"How you would know that?" T'Rhiel was suspicious.

Uhura chuckled, "I was alive when Chaltok IV was destroyed. The *Enterprise* escorted the Federation delegation that signed the Polaric Test Ban Treaty in the aftermath of that disastrous experiment."

"Ah, polaric ion energy," Cal pointed out. "I recall learning about that treaty at the Academy."

"I did too actually," Valeris added. "I'm not so old that the rudimentary history of the event wasn't captured in our history texts."

"Care to enlighten us with some of that ancient history?" Glover asked. Uhura harrumphed at that and Hudson laughed.

"If I may Admiral?" Valeris asked. Uhura nodded her assent. "A century ago, polaric ion energy was heralded as the solution to the energy needs across the Alpha and Beta Quadrants. Various powers sought to harness the unstable molecules to make use of the tremendous power they yielded."

Glover nodded, looking at the admiral and then subcommander. T'Rhiel scowled but also nodded in agreement.

"The ions were highly unstable, and the devices created to generate them also were insufficient. A polaric ion disruption could not only eliminate all life on a planet in seconds but set off a series of subspace chain reactions."

"Not to mention the temporal properties," Xinran added.

"Temporal properties?" Cal asked, clearly not pleased. "Please don't tell me this is going to wind up being another time travel thing?"

"Yes, it could very well be just such a 'thing' Mr. Hudson," the Romulan expatriate replied.

"So what happened at Chaltok IV?" Glover wanted to get back on track.

"Chaltok IV housed a research station that was conducting polaric ion experiments. There was a detonation that nearly destroyed the planet and led to the Polaric Test Ban Treaty." The admiral explained.

"In 2268," Uhura further punctuated, cutting her eyes at Glover as if expecting a retort. Terrence wisely kept his mouth shut.

"Okay, so am I going to have to be the one who asks, but what does that have to do with our current predicament?" Cal said.

"The Chaltok IV tragedy littered this system with subspace fractures," the admiral said, "which provided the Romulans the perfect cover to continue experimenting with polaric ion energy."

There was a rumbling among the Romulan captors and T'Rhiel hissed. She reached for her disruptor. "Mind your words Admiral Uhura." Glover tensed, readying to take down the closest guard he could before the Romulans atomized them all.

"The admiral is correct," Valeris said, "I did not see it before, but it is logical," she dipped her head in Uhura's direction. T'Rhiel looked at both women, her face contorting between anger and confusion. Her hand hovered over her holster.

Glover was just as confused as T'Rhiel appeared to be. "Am I going to be the one who has to say this?" Hudson interjected, "But what do you mean Admiral?"

"The Arx," Uhura said. "A massive structure like that can't be powered by a forced quantum singularity, and multiple artificial quantum singularities inside a singular structure is inviting disaster. The reason why there are so many subspace fractures in this region nearly a century after the Chaltok IV tragedy is because some of them are new or were relatively recently created. The Romulans are using polaric ion energy to power the Arx."

Imperial Warbird L'Nar

"I'll be damned," Cal beat Glover to the punch. The admiral looked at Valeris and in turn the Vulcan looked at T'Rhiel. The dark-skinned Romulan remained pensive.

"Either you remain unwilling to state the obvious, or you are oblivious," Valeris replied.

"I don't know what you mean," T'Rhiel replied.

"The Arx, among studying the Borg, was conducting illegal polaric ion experiments as well," Valeris stated coldly, yet the words hit like hammers. The subcommander twitched at each blow.

"That would be a violation of the Test Ban Treaty!" T'Rhiel charged, her anger taking over. "And even accusing the Star Empire of doing such a thing is inviting war!"

"Perhaps not the Star Empire entire," Valeris said calmly, "But the Tal Shiar, and perhaps other sympathetic segments of the Empire's power elite."

"Working in contravention of the Romulan Senate or Praetor," Uhura added, "And galactic law."

"I find that doubtful, but more likely there was just enough plausible deniability to shield the Praetor and the Senate from any fallout," Xinran added. Glover and Cal both nodded at that. Even Leta was looking less certain herself.

"I could have you all executed right now for the lies you've just spewed on the Praetor and Senate," T'Rhiel warned.

"But you won't, because you know we are speaking the truth," the admiral said. "The Arx generates polaric ions. Do a scan to prove us wrong?"

"There is no need for even that," Valeris said, "A deeper exploration of the data Taev sent us would likely yield the answer."

T'Rhiel glowered. "If what you said was true, *hypothetically*, how could we use that to our advantage?"

"And this is when we call in Colonel Crassus," Uhura said, with golden speckled twinkles in her eyes.

Imperial Warbird L’Nar **Stateroom**

“Out of the question!” Colonel Crassus pounded his fist against his desk, before favoring his bruised throat. He glowered at Major Leta. “And Subcommander T’Rhiel I could, and should, have you summarily executed for entertaining such treasonous ideas.”

The Federation denizens were packed into the colonel’s office, along with Crassus, T’Rhiel, Leta, and several other Romulan officers. Guards were stationed at the doors which added to the room’s stuffiness.

“Despite the histrionics you didn’t say our assertions were wrong,” Uhura pointed out. “The Arx is one big polaric ion generator, and we can use that to our advantage.”

“I’m not confirming anything you suggest,” Crassus held his ground. “But to further suggest that we fly back to the Arx, that I send my men into its maw, to ignite the *alleged* polaric ion generator is madness. We have to get to far enough away from the Arx to warn the Fleet about the Borg threat.”

“That’s not going to happen,” Valeris said, ignoring Crassus’s withering stare. Instead the Vulcan looked at the anxious engineering officer. “Your engineer knows that the Borg are altering the Arx’s propulsion exponentially. It can’t be too long before the reconstituted propulsion overtakes the *L’Nar*.”

Crassus swiveled to the engineer. “Is that correct?” The scrawny man in question looked ashen. He swallowed before nodding in the affirmative.

“So what are we to do?” T’Rhiel interjected. She had been standing behind Crassus’s chair, but stepped forward. The dark-hued woman ignored Crassus’s glower as well, though she did deferentially step back.

Valeris parted her mouth and then dipped her head in Admiral Uhura’s direction. “I defer to you Admiral.”

“Colonel Crassus I understand your trepidation about putting your ship and all the souls under your command at needless risk, however this is a necessary risk.”

“As you and Lady Valeris have made me quite aware,” the Tal Shiar colonel said tightly. “I know the precariousness of our situation, but what are your solutions?”

Uhura merely smiled. Even Terrence could tell that the Romulan commander was trying to hide his anxiety, was trying to reassert some semblance over a situation that was beyond his control, or any of their control.

“I propose that you avail my team with one of your shuttles. We will journey to the Arx, get inside, and then ignite the polaric ion propulsion therein.”

Crassus’s laugh was harsh, like metal scraping against metal. “Are you really trying to cloak your cowardice in an alleged act of self-sacrifice?”

Uhura frowned, and Glover tensed. “I will not allow you to escape,” the colonel added. “Your fate will be ours.”

"I'm trying to save you, can't you see that?" Uhura's frustration came to the fore. "But you're too short-sighted, too caught up in your own web of deceit and paranoia to even trust that my offer is legitimate."

"I can vouch for Admiral Uhura's veracity," Valeris said. Crassus's grin was just as nasty as his laugh had been.

"Ah, the word of a traitor," he replied. "I feel much better now."

"My mother is many things," Major Leta stepped forward, "But she is no traitor. And though Admiral Uhura serves our enemies, she has done nothing but conduct herself with honor for the brief time I have known her. I have no cause to believe she would shirk that honor now."

Crassus considered Leta's words. He shook his head. "I had hoped you would be stronger, that perhaps even your bastardized Vulcan blood would make you more dispassionate, but you are just as swayed by emotional attachment as any untrained Romulan, and so to that, I applaud you, Major Leta, you have overcome your defiled genetic makeup, but you have chosen the wrong loyalties. Obeisance to the Tal Shiar is beyond blood, is beyond..." The man never finished his sentence, and Glover found his last words about blood being grimly portentous. The man gurgled as jade-green blood spouted from around the dagger's tip. It had entered the back of his neck and pushed through the soft, giving flesh of his thorax. The tip glinting with medal and lifeblood. Behind him T'Rhiel pulled the blade wetly from the dying Crassus. The room filled with the coppery tang of blood.

The man rasped, grasping with his gloved hands spasmodically at the air as if it were a physical thing he could possess and then shove into his mouth.

Glover winced as the man struggled on for a few more seconds to recapture his expiring life. And then the colonel fell forward.

Every Romulan drew a weapon of some sort, either a disruptor or dagger. T'Rhiel held her own honor blade, still slick with Crassus's blood, up, while she stared down every other person in the room. "I am now taking command of the *L'Nar*," she declared. "Time is of the essence and we could no longer afford the colonel's empty posturing. Subcenturion Sica, you are hereby promoted to full Centurion and are now first officer."

The other woman, her disruptor still in her hand, lowered it slowly, as the new reality dawned. She nodded curtly. "Noted."

"Now, my second act as commander of the *L'Nar* is to endorse Admiral Uhura's plan," T'Rhiel nodded to the woman.

"Thank you...Commander T'Rhiel," Uhura said carefully.

The Romulan smiled, and Glover's heart sank. He glanced at Cal, who was also scowling. There just had to be a catch, he read in his old friend's expression.

"Lt. Ehrek, two guards of his choosing, and Subcenturion Gielo," she nodded at the scrawny engineer who couldn't stop swallowing, will accompany your team. However, you Admiral will remain here...as my guest of course."

Uhura's smile was frostier than the highest cliff on Efros, "Of course."

"Now what just a minute," Glover stepped forward. "I don't like the sound of that, or of Admiral Uhura being your prisoner."

"She's already my prisoner, as are you," T'Rhiel said, as she stroked the back of the chair that had once been lorded over by Crassus. "And would you rather your venerated icon journey to the Borg ship to face certain death..." Gielo's swallow was so audible that T'Rhiel paused, and then she grunted with displeasure. "Would you not rather have Uhura here, relatively safe and sound aboard *L'Nar*?"

"How safe can she be as your prisoner?" Cal shot back.

"What's the alternative?" T'Rhiel shrugged.

"You're in no position to make demands of us," Xinran said hotly. "This was the admiral's plan and now you are trying to keep her from being onboard the *Arx* to execute it. It seems to me that are still things aboard that monstrosity you don't want us, particularly the admiral to see."

"I trust that your Vulcan Science Directorate tenure was legitimate," T'Rhiel said instead. "I would hate to have to sacrifice my science officer or Major Leta, who will also remain onboard *L'Nar*."

"Commander," Leta said as formally as she could muster, "I would be of more benefit to the boarding party."

"Despite Crassus's being a blowhard he was correct that your emotional state is of concern," T'Rhiel said, "I will not jeopardize this mission even further."

"Nor will you give up an opportunity to keep Valeris in line," Glover muttered. T'Rhiel smirked at him and Terrence recoiled.

"We will need Major Leta's help, at both the science and navigation consoles, as we continue making our way through the extant subspace anomalies in this system, and the new ones your fireworks display will cause...if you are successful of course."

Valeris looked at her daughter, the two women sharing a silent, knowing look. She then regarded T'Rhiel with chilly confidence. "I will see my daughter again."

Imperial Romulan Warbird L'Nar

Main Shuttle Bay

Glover ran his hand along the streamlined hull and around the jutting wing and its tapered nacelle. Cal nudged him. "You're in love again," he joked.

Terrence chuckled. "I am going to enjoy getting in the cockpit of this baby." This ship was larger than the *Patronus*, its prow more pronounced and sharper, and Glover didn't have to check its systems to know the shuttle carried a larger complement of weapons. The engineer Gielo had mentioned that the ship belonged to the *Pugio*-class of shuttles.

"You'll be sitting in the hold, with the other prisoners," Lt. Ehrek declared. Glover turned to the man.

"If you want to get there and then back in one piece, you'll want me piloting this ship," he said.

Ehrek laughed. "What do you know of Romulan spacecraft, *human*?"

"Enough," Glover said, stepping to the eager Romulan security officer. The two men bumped against each other. Terrence eyed the Romulan who stared right back at him.

"Don't press your luck," Ehrek warned.

"Stand down Lt. Ehrek," Commander T'Rhiel ordered. "And Commander Glover will be piloting the *Securis*."

Glover smirked while the burly Romulan fumed. "Don't get too overconfident Mr. Glover, I want my men keeping their eyes on you and the others and not worrying about being swallowed by a subspace tear."

"Whatever makes you sleep at night," Terrence shrugged.

"I will admit, that I am...familiar...with your Academy accomplishments," T'Rhiel said, "Winning the Nova Cup in 2354; most impressive."

Terrence tried to play off how unnerving the woman's knowledge of his backstory. "When did you find the time to rifle through my personnel files?"

"How did she get those files?" Hudson grouched.

T'Rhiel's laughter was musical. "Oh, the Tal Shiar knows all manner of ways of obtaining information." That didn't make Glover feel any better.

T'Rhiel turned to Ehrek. A quartet of heavily armed men and women had formed behind him. All wore dark helmets covering their ears and body armor as well. Their battle suits were less padded than the standard issue Romulan uniform. Each also had a disruptor rifle slung across their shoulder, and Glover could only imagine all the weapons hidden in the recesses of their dark, glittery uniforms.

"Are your soldiers ready Lieutenant?" T'Rhiel's expression was now serious. Ehrek nodded. Gielo was already aboard, checking the *Securis*'s weapons and propulsion.

Valeris, who had been silent to this point, spoke. Her expression was impassive, but her gaze imploring. "See that no harm befalls Leta." She said to T'Rhiel.

"Or Admiral Uhura," Hudson added, but his words were more a warning than a plea. T'Rhiel took both in stride. She turned to Xinran, who looked coiled and tense, ready to strike, "And do you have anything to add Mr. Xinran?"

"I've nothing more to say to," The operative said. "I will do my best to save the *L'Nar*, my superseding my good judgment." T'Rhiel laughed again.

"Well, then all that's left is to see to it," The Tal Shiar commander said. She nodded to Ehrek who then directed everyone, his hand on his disruptor sidearm, for punctuation, into the Cornicen.

"Commander Glover, a word," T'Rhiel said. Ehrek paused, but the woman commanded him to continue herding the others. "I don't think Mr. Glover would be

foolish enough to jeopardize this mission to attack me.” Ehrek was skeptical about that. However after another glower, the man hustled everyone into the *Securis*.

Terrence was on guard. He didn’t know what to expect, what shoe was about to drop. T’Rhiel approached him and Glover took a step back. The woman smiled, which made more nervous. “I’m not going to hurt you,” she promised, and now Glover tensed, preparing for a blow, physical or mental. “Seriously,” she added, her smile dimming. “There is no time for this.” She reached into the fold of her jacket and Terrence balled his fist. The woman carefully pulled out a blade, wrapped in a purple handkerchief.

She stepped back but held the blade out to him, in both hands, as if it were a religious offering. He didn’t reach for it. Instead Glover looked at the proffered weapon as if it was diseased.

“I see, you don’t understand,” T’Rhiel said. “This is an honor blade.” She carefully removed the dagger from the cloth. She held it aloft. The short blade was not as elaborate as the other blades he had seen, including the one hanging prominently from the commander’s hip.

“I can see that,” Glover said.

“Yes, but I don’t think you understand,” T’Rhiel said, “Your father, he will. And I give this blade to you now, in the certainty that you will survive this ordeal and pass this honored weapon on to Admiral Glover.”

“Okay,” Glover said. She prompted him to take the dagger, but it took a few moments for Terrence to take the blade.

“I would advise you that you keep this between us. Ehrek will not understand,” T’Rhiel said.

“Why?” Was all Glover could muster.

“Your father will understand,” T’Rhiel replied confidently. “And now, I wish you the best of luck. Trillions are counting on what is to happen next. As Old Earthlings once said ‘Godspeed, Mr. Glover, or should I say Shamshuni,” the woman replied, turning and leaving Glover in his shock.

He was glad the woman had turned away from him. Glover was unsettled that the women knew his middle-name and said it with a kind of familiarity that she shouldn’t have had. Terrence didn’t know what kind of game the Tal Shiar agent was playing, but he had no time to be thrown by it. He would worry about T’Rhiel’s mind games later. Glover had a shuttle to pilot, in the maw of hell, and out again.

Romulan Imperial Shuttle Securis

“So you think they are just going to open the door for us and let us in nicely?” Cal scoffed. He sat opposite of Glover. Ehrek sat behind Terrence, and though Glover didn’t look back, he was certain the man’s firearm was out and pointed at Glover’s chair. Beside him sat a comely Romulan in the co-pilot’s console. The woman had

removed her helmet, and cutely kept blowing away errant strands of russet hair out of her emerald eyes.

"It doesn't hurt to ask," Glover said. He regarded his co-pilot. "What do you say Sublieutenant..." The woman smiled back, but before she could answer, Ehrek butted in.

"Sublieutenant is fine. The only person whose name you need to know among my troops is mine," the security officer declared. "And you will address *me*, not them."

"Sure makes flying harder if I got to go through a middle man, if things get thick," Terrence rejoined.

"I don't care," Ehrek said.

"Sir, ah, Commander Glover is right," the woman said. "It is tough enough navigating this sea of anomalies. We might encounter a patch that requires quicker reactions."

Ehrek snorted. "Fine, but just don't get chatty with the human. Remember these are our enemies, Rhean."

"Ah, Rhean," Glover grinned. "So that's your name. I didn't know there were redheaded Romulans."

Rhean smiled, her green eyes flashing with mischief. "I'm sure there are plenty of things about Romulans you don't know Commander."

Ehrek poked the back of Terrence's chair hard. "Keep your focus on getting us to the Arx," he barked. Glover rolled his eyes.

"Hold your horses, I'll get us there." Rhean raised an eyebrow. Terrence shrugged. "An Old Earth expression."

"You humans...are quite a curious species," the woman replied.

"Lady, that's an understatement," Cal chimed in.

RIS Securis

Traversing through the spatial anomaly wracked Chaltok system hadn't been the minefield Glover had anticipated, and he was a bit disappointed. He wanted to both test his skills and also to let off some steam. But thus far the subspace tears had been far enough away for him to easily avoid.

Perhaps fate was giving them a break, knowing what awaited them. Glover shuddered at the thought. To become one of the Borg, one of those things, was a nightmare he couldn't even fathom. To lose his individuality, his personality, that little spark that made him, well, him, and impressed and also annoyed so many others, for that to be stripped from him, and then he was lumped in with a mass of beings, all shorn of their sparks, of their desires, their dreams...

Terrence shuddered again. "Temperature not to your liking human?" The observant Ehrek asked.

"I'm fine," Glover brusquely replied. "If you don't want me to send us through one of the tears and back to the Vulcan Reformation, I recommend keeping quiet and letting me do my job. And you get back to polishing your boots or whatever."

The man's displeasing grunt was music to Terrence's ears. He glanced over at Rhean and saw that the woman's jade eyes were sparkling. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Cal grinning as well, but then his friend's expression crumbled. "My God," Hudson muttered.

Glover's head snapped forward. "How did our sensors not detect it?" Ehrek demanded.

"No time," Terrence replied as he pulled the *Securis* hard to port, just missing hitting the hull of the Arx. The shuttle's forward motion was arrested.

"They've locked on a tractor beam," Rhean said, trying to her best to remain calm. Glover thought the woman was doing an admirable job.

"Fire weapons," Ehrek commanded, "We've got to break their grip."

"No," Glover replied.

"No!" The large Romulan roared. "How dare you countermand my order, you Terran scum!" The man reached for his disruptor.

Glover drilled the man with a hard stare. "The point is to gain entry into the Arx isn't it?"

"Not as their prisoners!" Ehrek ripped his disruptor from his holster. He pointed it at Glover. "You will do as I command!"

"He will not," Valeris replied calmly. Suddenly the woman was behind Ehrek, her fingers at his neck. "I could drop you before you could pull that trigger," she said. "But I will not. I assume Commander Glover has something in mind to turn the tables back in our favor."

"That is correct Lady Valeris," Glover said, with a triumphant smirk. "Let them bring us into the Arx, and as soon as we are in, and that tractor beam is off, we fly through there, making our way as best as possible, providing a distraction while we beam a landing party to the propulsion system. That is if Subcenturion Gielo can locate the polaric ion generators."

"Can you Chief Engineer?" Valeris asked, not taking her hand off the stewing Ehrek.

"I think so...if I can get closer," the man replied. "I have a pretty good guess now, but I would prefer confirmation."

"We'll try to get you the time to do that," Glover said. "And in the meantime I suggest we sit back and let them reel us in." Terrence, Valeris, Cal, and Rhean all looked at Ehrek. The man cursed and then placed his sidearm back in its holster.

"Once this is done human, it's you and me," he declared.

"Now I do have something to live for," Terrence quipped.

The tractor beam gently brought the shuttle into the embrace of the massive space station, one of its openings resembling a gigantic mouth. The insides were lit with a greenish fire, like the gullet of a dragon. Glover had switched to shuttle's main

screen to the aft view to watch them being gobbled up. His heart thudded, but his hands were steady on the controls.

As the shuttle crossed the threshold, Cal grumbled, "Now I know how Jonah felt about that whale."

"Another Old Earth saying?" Rhean asked.

"Something to that affect," Glover smirked.

"Oh you humans," She smiled. "I'm going to hate it when we plant our flag on Earth's soil."

"First things first," Terrence said before the ship was overtaken by darkness.

RIS Securis

"Great Shade of S'task," Ehrek muttered, temporarily losing his composure, his face drawn and ashen. The shuttle hung inside the Arx, immobilized by several tractor beams, a fly caught in the deadliest of spider webs.

The big Romulan was hovering over Glover's seat, all in his personal space, but Terrence had other more pressing issues to deal with, they all did. Almost the entire contingent aboard the shuttle was in the cockpit, looking out of the view port.

"What have they done to the station?" Gielo whispered, and the fascination and revulsion in the man's voice was palpable. The station was vast, but now it was covered with menacing looking, dark technological splotches that seemed like growths over the typical brown-green interior Romulan aesthetic. And the most obscene growth was a partial Borg sphere, with a jagged chunk missing. The darkened sphere was also suspended by tractor beams.

"How many life forms are you reading aboard this station?" Ehrek asked. He pointed at the sphere, "And on that thing?"

It took Rhean a moment to break away. "Sir, I'm reading over eight thousand life forms aboard the station total, and five hundred of the total aboard that sphere."

"What is the standard capacity for a station this size?" Valeris asked.

"I can't be certain," Gielo spoke up. "But it is likely seven thousand."

The Vulcan raised an eyebrow and pursed her lips. Glover's stomach twisted. "How many of them are Romulan?" Valeris added.

Rhean consulted her instrumentation again. She scrunched her face. "One thousand, two hundred are reading as Romulan."

"Is it just as Romulan or have they been altered, turned into Borg?" Glover asked.

"I...can't say," Rhean replied. "My sensors are reading Romulan life-signs."

"It's a safe bet that the Romulans who were not...assimilated," Ehrek nearly spat the word, "were already killed. This is not a rescue mission." Terrence was almost happy to see that the man was back to normal brute self.

"It appears that the Borg on that sphere weren't so out of the picture as we thought," Cal surmised.

"Yeah, and they've likely increased their numbers with the personnel from the Arx," Glover added.

"And Commander Glover, I thought you said these Borg would release us from the tractor beam?" The security officer charged. "Your 'plan' depends on it." Ehrek scoffed.

"Not, necessarily," Terrence said. "Subcenturion Gielo, have you found the polaric ion generator yet?"

The man, among the crowd, jumped with a start. "Ah, ah, yes, yes I have. The readings... I have located the generator."

"Rhean, is our transporter still operational?" Glover asked.

"Just a minute, you don't give orders to my subordinates!" Ehrek bellowed.

Terrence riposted, "These aren't orders, they're questions."

"I've had about enough of you human," Ehrek reached for his disruptor again.

"Yes, Lt. Ehrek, the transporter is working," Rhean said.

"Good," Glover clapped his hands, "Because I've got a new plan forming."

Before Terrence could elaborate, a voice, or rather a multitude of voices speaking as one invaded the ship's communication system. "We are the Borg. You will be assimilated. Resistance is futile."

"About that plan," Cal prodded.

"We all beam to the location, and this shuttle becomes a very big firecracker," Glover said.

"And how are we then to get back to the *L'Nar*?" Gielo asked.

"Chief, this was a one way trip," Glover replied.

"Oh," the engineer's gulp was audible, as much as his fear was palpable. And it was contagious, but Terrence didn't allow it to cripple him. A soft green light swept over the ship.

"We've just been scanned," Rhean said. The ship shuddered as the tractor beams began to make it descend, and Glover didn't want to see what was waiting on them below.

"I've already set the engines for overload," Terrence explained.

"You what?!" Ehrek exploded, "Without my order?!"

Terrence shrugged. "Couldn't bet on you going along with my plan. Thanks for the vote of confidence by the way."

"Human, you better hope the Borg get to you before I do," Ehrek promised.

"Such a sweet talker you," Terrence said. "I suggest we beam the hell out of here, like, right now!"

Ehrek stanching his anger and began issuing orders. His soldiers formed up on the pad with Gielo, Xinran, and Valeris. "Beam them first," the security officer barked. Glover bit back a retort while Rhean activated the transporter.

The woman set up the transporter to beam automatically as the trio rushed to it. Glover eyed one of the disruptors still left in the shuttle's small weapon's case.

"You don't think I could grab one of those do you?"

"Not on your life human, or mine," Ehrek said, gesturing with his disruptor. Terrence stepped onto the platform. He touched the blade hidden within the folds of his tunic. At least he wasn't completely jumping into hell unarmed and he could have that small satisfaction that Ehrek had been outplayed again.

The shuttle rattled again and two greenish shafts of light began materializing near the cockpit. "Here they come," Glover said, as Ehrek took aim.

"And here we go," Rhean replied. Terrence had never been so glad to hear the whine of a transporter beam in his life.

The Arx

As Glover became solid again, he really wished he had taken one of those disruptors. There was an army of Borg, some of Alpha Quadrant species that he was sadly familiar with, and others, from species he hadn't heard of, or could barely imagine. Along the walls crawled insectoids, Borg-spider aliens, bathing them in crimson light from their eight-eyed heads. Their mandibles clicked in unison with their spidery legs. The deck trembled as Glover heard the explosion of the *Securis* in the distance. He tensed, expecting the Borg to swarm en masse at them, but the cyborgs didn't seem perturbed in the slightest. They went about their way, working on their tasks as if nothing had happened, as if there wasn't likely a gaping hole in the side of the station now.

However he saw no one scrambling, no klaxons blaring. Glover looked askance at the rest of the landing party. Ehrek crossed his arms, a smug look on his brutish face. "So much for your grand distraction."

"At least we aren't being attacked by those things!" Cal rushed to Glover's defense.

"It's only a matter of time," Ehrek replied, pointing in the direction of the generator. "We'll have to part a sea of them to get to that engine, and you think that they are just going to let us traipse over there without making a fuss?"

"I'm game to find out," Cal shot back. "How about you?" Ehrek's face greened with anger.

"Can we keep our focus on what we came to do?" Rhean prodded, gently, but firmly. That interruption brought even Ehrek up short.

The Borg stood between them and the polaric ion generator. The generator was nestled deep within what appeared to be a large, opened pyramid. There were stations surrounding the pyramid. Glover couldn't see the inside, but pulsing shafts of reddish, hellish light shot up from the pyramid. Each pulse made Terrence's neck hairs stand on end.

"How are we going to blow up that thing?" Ehrek shouted, though he didn't need to. In this instance, Glover could forgive the man for being high strung.

"If I can reach the controls I can attempt to overload them," Gielo said. Xinran nodded in agreement with them.

"Is that doable Lady Valeris?" Ehrek asked. He looked around and then glared at Glover. "Where is she?" He snarled. Terrence looked around himself.

"I don't know," he replied. "But I do have an idea."

"Damn it," Ehrek cursed. "I knew you couldn't be trusted." He aimed his disruptor at Glover. Terrence stood firm, not fazed at all.

"You need us, but he needs her," He said. Ehrek snorted. Rhean's eyes lit with understanding.

"Lady Valeris has gone to find her son," she said.

"She would risk this mission on such a hopeless errand?" Ehrek was disbelieving and his weapon was still aimed at Glover.

"It is a hopeless mission after all," Terrence replied. "Maybe she just wanted to see her son one last time."

"Foolish sentiment," Ehrek spat. "I thought Vulcans knew better."

"Maybe hanging around all you Romulans made her soft," Glover quipped. Ehrek roared and charged Terrence.

"We don't have time for this sir!" Rhean said. But Ehrek was beyond hearing. His mission was falling apart and he needed someone to take his anger out on. It had been building for some time. So Glover was happy to be the recipient.

Seeing that the Romulan was blinded by rage, Glover stepped out of the charging bull's way and used an ax handle chop, applied swiftly and devastatingly to the back of the neck, to drop the man to his knees. To his credit it didn't knock Ehrek out. The man staggered to his feet.

While the security officer was finding his footing, Glover was finding his dropped disruptor. He tested the heft as he aimed it at the simmering Romulan. "Good fit," he judged. "Now, let's get back to the task at hand shall we?"

"You don't give orders here!" Ehrek said. The other Romulan soldiers turned their weapons on the Starfleet crew. "Drop the weapon now, or you all will be vaporized!"

"Enough of this!" Xinran said. The man moved with preternatural speed, cupping the wrist of one startled Romulan guard, forcing the man to let go his disruptor. It fell into Xinran's hand, and for the gift the guard received an elbow to the face.

Xinran had already turned the gun on Ehrek before the guard had fallen to the ground. Ehrek grinned. "We still have three soldiers left, plus Rhean and Gielo. You two, draw your weapons, now!"

The engineer looked at Rhean. "You heard me!" Ehrek barked. "If you don't draw your weapons right now I'm going to...." His words became a scream as the man dissolved before them. Glover, along with everyone else, was stunned. Further, he was chilled by how easily Xinran had vaporized the man. He was nowhere near a fan of Ehrek, but the man was a sapient being, a patriot, and he was acting in part due to what he thought was right and proper, even if it was wrongheaded. And

Glover found himself missing if not Ehrek, the extra muscle the man might have provided when things were going to go completely sideways.

Xinran merely shrugged. "There is no time for typical Romulan arrogance. We have a mission to complete." He placed his gun hand by his side, but nodded in Rhean's direction. "I guess that makes you the commanding officer now."

"Yes," Rhean said. She took a look at the spot where Ehrek had once stood; perhaps saying a prayer for the man, but Glover wasn't sure. "Mr. Xinran, you will lead the remainder of the team to the polaric ion generator and then destroy it. I trust that your hatred of the Borg overshadows that for your own kind."

"Just barely," Xinran gave a hint of a grin.

"That's enough for this mission," Rhean said. "Commander Glover and I will retrieve Valeris."

"Why?" One of the guards grumbled. "She's a lost cause."

"I'm not as fatalistic as you all seem to be," Rhean replied. "We're going to destroy this station, but we're getting off this barge of the dead too."

"How are we going to do that?"

"You'll think of something Mr. Glover," Rhean grinned. "Come on, let's go."

The Arx

"Isn't searching for a Vulcan among a station filled with Romulans a waste of time?" Glover asked. He had learned quickly, though reluctantly, not to reach for his weapon when the occasional Borg ambled by. They passed right by them as if they didn't exist, their glowing red eyepieces the only thing that seemed alive on the Borgs' uniformly slack faces.

The woman waved her tricorder aloft along the shadowy corridor, intent on her search. "No," she eventually answered. "There are slight physiological differences between Romulans and Vulcans."

"And you trust Xinran with your men while we search for Valeris?"

"Do you trust Xinran?" Rhean pointedly asked.

"I...don't know, I thought I did, but the way he executed Ehrek," Glover shook his head. "I really don't know much about him. All I have to go on is Admiral Uhura's word and her trust in him."

"Do you trust Admiral Uhura?"

"Of course," Terrence said, perhaps a bit too loudly. He didn't like being questioned in that manner; about someone he had long seen as a hero. "And I also trust Cal. He won't let Xinran get out of hand, or jeopardize this mission."

"Yet, here we are, looking for the Lady Valeris, who has jeopardized his mission." Rhean pointed out, the sting of her comments softened just a bit by a wicked smile.

Still the jibe rankled Glover. "Her emotions have gotten the best of her...I can't blame her," he paused, thinking of his mother. What would he do, what would he give, to see her just once more? "And with this being such an impossible mission, perhaps she wants to be with him when it all completely goes to hell." His thoughts shifted to his father and his friends. Terrence hadn't really accepted the idea that he would never see them again, that the universe would, could somehow go on without him.

"Perhaps your right," Rhean let up, waving the tricorder again. "I lost my brother during the last Gnawing outbreak a few years past now, and now I am the only one...." She let the sentence trail off, and Glover left the woman to her own sad reflections. He didn't want to intrude upon her remembrances.

The two continued walking deeper into the Arx, and it felt like traveling along the River Styx. The Borg influence grew stronger. Glover saw that the Borg had begun refashioning Romulan technology for their twisted purposes. The dark incongruous Borg technology looked like blotches, lesions spread along the walls and consoles they walked past. Glover made sure to give each a wide berth.

He didn't know if the Borg technology also could assimilate people like their drones did. As for the people, he noticed more alcoves, like standing coffins, with closed-eyed Borg stuffed inside them, their eyes twitching every once in a while, as if they were in communion with the ship or likely the dark intelligence that had enslaved their minds and warped their bodies.

It was a fate he had to prevent from happening to any more planets in the Alpha Quadrant, even the Romulans.

Terrence also noticed that their sojourn into Hades was taking them deeper into the ship and away from what Glover felt, though he really didn't know, felt like where a command center or where the action on this monstrous station would be. And the clock was steadily ticking to doomsday. As if sensing his thoughts, Rhean said, "We are here."

She pulled up beside a door. "She's in there," Rhean said. Glover instinctively stepped in front of the woman. He pulled out the honor blade from the folds of his tunic. Rhean's eyes widened and then narrowed. "Where did you get that?"

"You didn't think I would enter a slaughterhouse not prepared to do a little slaughter of my own did you?" Glover smirked. "I'll take the lead."

"This is a *Romulan* station," Rhean pointed out.

"Not anymore," Terrence said darkly. Before she could protest, he accessed the door panel, and rushed in. "What the..."

The disruptor poked him in the small of the back. "I'm sorry," Rhean said, and Glover believed her. "Drop the honor blade." He didn't do it until she jabbed him harder in the back. The honor blade clattered dishonorably on the deck by his boots.

Before them were rows of shuttles. "I-I thought you said we were all getting off this station?" He asked.

"That was a lie, and you had to have known that," Rhean replied. "This was a hopeless mission, but I had to take it, it was my only chance."

"Only chance to do what?"

"To escape."

"But, but you're Tal Shiar, I thought you guys were the fanatical patriots."

"I am *not* Tal Shiar; just a member of the Imperial Fleet. The Tal Shiar often have Fleet members operate their vessels. There aren't as many of them as they would have you believe. There's a lot of the things the Empire would have others believe that isn't so."

"Such as?" Glover asked, hoping to both learn what was behind Rhean's betrayal but also to distract her until he could figure out a way to disarm her.

"There is no time for that right now," Rhean said. "I can explain it on the way."

"The way?"

"We're getting out of here," Rhean said. "You're going to fly us to the Federation."

"No, I'm not."

"Yes, you are."

"We have a mission."

"A doomed one."

"The fate of the galaxy, of the Romulan Empire, *your* people, is at stake!"

"I don't give a damn about the Empire! It's taken everything from me! And as for my people, there are Romulan exiles and refugees in the Federation, like the aforementioned Mr. Xinran. I won't be alone."

"Don't do this Rhean."

"I-I don't have a choice Terrence."

"Yes, you do. We all have choices. They might suck, but we deal with the cards we're dealt."

"Curious. Another human expression?" He could sense a smile in the woman's voice. Glover sighed. A different time, a different galaxy, and he would've liked to have met this woman at a bar or lounge somewhere. The conversation would've been good, and what came afterward would've been great.

"I'm sorry," he muttered.

"What?" Glover turned quickly, so fast he strained a back muscle. But he ignored the pain and followed through, smashing an elbow into the woman's cheek. She stumbled back. Unfortunately she didn't drop the disruptor. She aimed it wildly, a green beam arcing just past Glover's face, damn near singeing his cheek, as it cut into a bulkhead hanging above.

Terrence grabbed the woman in a bear hug, squeezing her hard enough that she let the disruptor go. Between clenched teeth, the woman got out, "I did imagine being in your arms Terrence, but not this way."

"Same here Rhean," Glover admitted. The woman head butted him. Her forehead ridges cut into the flesh above his eyes. Terrence dropped her. He tried to

keep the blood out of his eyes while diving for the disruptor. Rhean was ahead of him. The two rolled around on the deck, both gripping the weapon. "Rhean, please, we don't have time for this!" He huffed.

"I-I have nothing left to lose."

"Then go, just go. I won't stop you."

"I need you Terrence," she replied. "I need a skilled pilot."

"I am not leaving." He declared. "You can shoot me," he said, as he gave up the fight. He rolled away from the woman. Glover slowly got to his knees. He dusted himself off. "My best friend is still onboard. This mission can still be a success, and if I leave...Cal's chances dwindle severely. How could I live with myself if I didn't do everything possible to make sure he got back home, to his wife?"

Rhean was now on her feet. Her eyes were wet. "Sorry about the head butt," she said. Glover wiped more blood from his forehead.

"I'm sure there is an infirmary somewhere on this bucket. I'll be alright. I'm more concerned about you." He pointed to the woman's bruised cheek. "Sorry," he added.

Rhean handed him the disruptor. "You're going to need this." Glover took and slid it into his belt.

"You're still going aren't you?"

"Yes," She said. "I've got to."

"I understand," Glover said. "We all have our reasons." He opened his arms and the woman rushed into them. They held each other tightly. Rhean's lips found his and they shared a hungry, desperate kiss.

Glover did his best to quickly give her some piloting tips. "Be careful out there Rhean."

"How could I not?" She grinned, breaking Glover's heart. "I've just gotten instructions from one of the best pilots in the galaxy."

"*One* of the best?" Terrence took mostly mock offense. Rhean laughed.

"Thank you Terrence, I needed that." She picked up his honor blade, wiped it with her tunic and handed it back to him. "You've earned it."

Glover dipped his head in respect before placing the blade back into the folds of his tunic. The woman trotted off to a shuttle, a small green avian-looking number. The Romulans certainly did love their birds and the color green. "Godspeed Rhean," Terrence called out as the woman walked up the gangplank.

She turned around and asked, "Another expression?"

"Yes," Glover replied. "It means..."

"I think I got the gist of it," she cut him off, "And thank you. We're both going to need it," she said before disappearing into the shuttle. Glover wanted her to be free, but didn't want her leave.

With those two desires warring within him, he picked up the fallen tricorder and left Rhean to her fate.

The Arx

As Glover ran through the station, he tried to keep his mind on his mission, on finding Valeris, but his thoughts kept swirling around Rhean and their last kiss. He hoped the woman made it out, that someone would. And then he thought of Leta, and wondered if what they had briefly shared was real, or just one of her games? Or Commander T'Rhiel who surreptitiously gave him that honor blade. And Lady Valeris who had seemingly just thrown away a century of service to the Federation. Or Admiral Uhura, who plucked him and Cal from all the people in Starfleet just for this mission, a likely doomed one from the start.

And then there was Pell, Susan, and Captain Scott...Glover shook his head. Women. He grinned. He guessed he just had a way with them.

Terrence held up the tricorder. He knew rudimentary Romulan, courtesy of his dad, and he just hoped the device was leading him in the right direction. He trusted that Rhean had set the scanner up to look for Vulcan biosigns, even if she misled him to the shuttle bay.

He felt a familiar, and dreaded tickling in the back of his mind, and then a voice called out. "Commander Glover!"

Terrence swung around, the disruptor up and ready to fire. "Put the gun down," Valeris said, with a tone that didn't brook debate. Still Glover slowly lowered the disruptor.

"Lady Valeris, where have you been?" He demanded. He looked over the woman. He noticed the strap she held in one hand and the bag hanging off her back. "What's that?" Terrence pointed with his empty hand.

"There's no time for an explanation," Valeris replied. It was then that Glover noticed the woman was slightly out of breath and that a patina of sweat was on her brow. "Where are the others?"

"What's going on? Did you find Taev?"

The woman raised an eyebrow. "Why would I inquire about my son?"

"That's who you dashed off to see right? Perhaps to...be with when we destroyed the Arx," Terrence said, though he now doubted his own words, if not his sanity as Valeris's expression was perplexed.

"It's time to leave," Valeris pressed.

"No," Glover planted his feet. "Not until I get answers." The deck trembled and Valeris closed her eyes.

"The landing party has succeeded in overloading the polaric ion generator," she surmised. "It is imperative that we find them."

"This...this isn't over," Glover said as the ground shook beneath him. His concern about Cal overrode his refreshed suspicions about Valeris.

"Lead the way Mr. Glover," The Vulcan said. Glover turned around to point toward the way he had just ventured. He heard a quick, metallic skittering, and he

turned back to catch fine green mist sprayed directly into his face. Unwittingly, he tasted the copper on his lips as the metallic tang filled his nostrils.

"Lady Valeris!" He gasped as the woman was hoisted aloft, a wickedly sharp pincer sticking through her sternum. The woman was twitching, gasping, and struggling against the intruding metal. The pincer belonged to a gigantic, metallic spider-thing. Some kind of Borg arachnid! Glover began firing at the Borg, his first few blasts punching through its body, even taking out one of its eight legs. The alien stumbled but still maintained its death grip on Valeris.

Glover aimed for the head, but this time the shot bounced off a square force field now protecting its head. The force field emerged as Terrence sought to find purchase elsewhere.

"It's...adapted," Valeris spat, thick green blood now pouring from her lips. Eight red soulless eyes peered beyond the dying woman, directly at Glover.

"Commander Glover!" Valeris said with surprising strength. "Take this!" She ripped the bag away from her and tossed it him. "Don't let the Borg have this! Don't let them discovered what's inside."

Momentarily taken aback by the woman's show of strength and her command, Glover awkwardly rushed to catch the bag. He missed.

It smashed against the ground and fell out of the sack. Glover reared back. "Take it Mr. Glover!" The Vulcan commanded.

"No," Terrence said. Before him, looking surprisingly innocuous in the middle of Hell was another Pandora's Box.

"That's what you broke off to retrieve," he realized. "This wasn't about your son, was it?" He glared at the woman.

"Taev...lost," the woman said, both her voice and strength fading. "Nothing...I could do. Had to...think of... the future."

"This Section 31 of yours....in possession of a Pandora's Box?" Glover shook his head, his expression hardening. "I don't know if that's not as frightening a prospect as these Borg."

"Do...you really want to find out?" Valeris sputtered.

"No," Glover said. Behind the arachnid, he heard other skittering. There were more of those things coming. He bent down to recover the box. The spider threw Valeris at him, knocking Terrence backward.

The woman shivered, her blood soaking Glover. He carefully moved her off him, wincing as the woman groaned in pain. She was whispering, muttering; her eyes open but no longer seeing. Glover could not make out the words. It was mostly in Vulcan, but he also heard bits of Romulan. He imagined it was a prayer.

"Leta," was the last word the woman said before she went still. Glover dipped his head in respect for her passing before making another dash for the box. He dove under the unsteady arachnid. Glover was pleased to see he had inflicted some damage on the beast, making it move awkward.

Terrence reached the box, and pushed down his fear in order to touch it. His hands wrapped around it just before fiery pain flowed throughout his body. He didn't have to look to know that he had been speared, just like Valeris, and that the fire rushing now rushing through him was driving his lifeblood out.

The Borg held him up. Glover desperately held on to the infernal box. The creature would have to pry it from his dead hands, and Terrence knew it would not be too much longer now before it would get its prize.

The fires had subsided and he felt the encroaching, final cold. His vision started to dim, but in his mind he saw his life unfold before him. So many friends, such enemies, all of it, now, meaning little and amounting to nothing. In the distance he saw a dimming light, a snuffed fire, and he imagined that that must have been his future, or how he had conceived it, but he would never have that future now. He would never sit in a command chair. He would never get married nor have children. He would never become a Starfleet legend.

No, he would die here, in the literal bowels of Hell, this mission never spoken of; if that was that the Romulans or Federation could somehow defeat these Borg.

But....perhaps there was something he could at least do about that. It was something he vowed he would never do again, but fate, like women, had a funny way of working in his life.

He grinned, more blood pouring out of his mouth, his darkness almost upon him. With his remaining strength, Glover laughed as he opened Pandora's Box.

Elsewhen....

"Where? Where am I?" Glover asked. He squinted at the blinding white light all around him, suffusing him. Glover threw his hands over his eyes until they adjusted. Even after, he squinted at the intensity. He felt no pain, he felt...almost normal. Terrence patted down his body, and the hole the Borg's pincer had surely made, wasn't there. Wherever he was, he was wearing his proper Starfleet uniform again.

He had been restored. By who, or by what? And where was he now?

"I am certain you have a lot of questions," a resonant and very familiar voice stated with an envious certainty. The white light's brightness receded into a more comfortable, but still blanketing whiteness.

Glover looked down and saw there was nothing before his boots. He was suspended in the air...or rather, something. "Who are you?" He asked the ether.

"You know," the voice took form before him, resolving into the shape of a man. A very familiar one. A friend at that. One of his closest.

"Ben?" Terrence didn't mask his confusion.

"What are you doing here?" He asked. It was Ben Sisko alright, but he appeared older and far more austere. He was bald and wore a goatee. His uniform

was different too. It was black, with a bluish-gray stripe along the shoulders. It was stately and severe, somber to match the man's gaze and Glover's likely circumstances. Terrence wanted to reach out to his old friend, but there was something unapproachable about him, untouchable...there was a chasm between them. Not in distance, but in something else...intangible...but there all the same. And his old friend seemed so very lonely upon his island.

Ben gave a small smile. "My being here...it's a long story," he intoned, the rich baritone sounding just like the friend he remembered. "And one that is not as important as why *you* are here."

"Why am I here? Am I dead? Is this Heaven? Or some kind of afterlife? Are you really Ben, some other being, or just a figment of imagination?"

Sisko smiled again. "Perhaps, all three."

"Really, if you are Ben, you know I don't like being coy or cryptic, and neither does Ben."

"Things change old friend," Ben's smile faded. His expression grew sad. He held out a hand and within it materialized the box.

Glover shrank back. "Ben, drop that thing. You don't know what it can do!"

Sisko grew more morose. "I do Terrence," he shook his head sadly. "From my...perch, I have seen all of time, forward and backward. I have seen this device's construction. I have seen it consume countless worlds, a multitude of vain, avaricious, and power hungry species...in the future, and in the past. It is not...of our time...yet it is here. Left here for the damned to find, to discover its mysteries or be seduced by them, to learn how to use it as a tool of improvement, but yet...none have passed that test."

"I-I don't understand Ben," Glover said. "What are you saying? Who built those things? Why are they testing us?"

"What else do gods do, when they get bored?" Ben looked at him. The bemused expression was back. "It's like scientist studying insects," he paused, and then added, "It's like children playing with toys."

"So you're saying those things are divine? That gods really do exist?"

"From a certain perspective," was all Ben would say. Glover could feel his anger rising and was glad for it. At least he could still feel something familiar.

"What role do I have to play in any of this?"

Sisko pursed his lips. "Now, that is a mystery," he admitted. "One that my perusing of the time stream has not yielded an answer for." He looked down at the box. "Sometimes, it feels like just yesterday that I was with Kassidy...then Jennifer....and at other times, like that was a life lived by someone else, someone much lesser and yet much greater than I....a million years ago...or million years in the future."

Kassidy? Glover had never heard that name. But Jennifer. That was Ben's wife. And also a close friend, though Jenn didn't approve much of Glover's catting about.

"Ben," Glover ventured, "What about Jennifer? Where is she? How are she and Jake?" Maybe mentioning Ben's family would center the man and get him to answer questions more straightly.

Sisko blinked. "Jennifer," he gasped. His expression crumbled and Glover's chest constricted.

"Something happened to Jennifer? When?"

"You will find that out...in time," was all Ben said.

"What about Jake?"

"Jake..." Sisko's expression softened. "Jake...I miss him. He is a much better man that I ever could have imagined."

"Why are you here, and not with them?" Glover asked. "Did you encounter one of the Pandora Boxes? Aboard the *Okinawa*?" Though Ben was wearing an entirely different uniform and was older, Terrence couldn't think of anything but to reference the ship he knew Ben was serving on currently...or rather the last time he had spoken with him, before this damnable mission.

"It is my destiny, my penance," Sisko said, his expression severe. "And I must bear it, for the good of the galaxy, for all of creation."

"Ben, I don't understand."

"Neither do I...Terrence," Sisko spoke the name with such familiarity that it almost made Glover cry.

"My time here, among the Prophets, at the gateway of time and space," Ben went on, "has taught me many things. But there are greater riddles to the universe, and you," he pointed at Glover, "and this," he looked down at the Pandora's Box, "are two of them."

"There is a great darkness coming, a Cataclysm," Sisko intoned, "And you are to play a part in it...one of you, at least."

"One of...me?" Glover asked. *Prophets? Cataclysm?* Glover having a role in it all, what the frinx did any of it mean?

"Yes," Sisko said. Behind him, cracks appeared in the whiteness like cracks in glass. "Our universe is not alone. There are infinite alternate timelines, parallel universes including those composed of antimatter, quantum realities and divergences, a dark galaxy, even a realm of fluidic space."

But Glover was barely listening to his old friend now, or whatever being bore his likeness. Instead he was following along the spidery cracks, each a vein of space-time, showing him, but yet not him....

...There was Glover, standing on a darkened, shattered bridge. He wore command red, in a uniform not much different than the kind the Fleet wore now. But there was a metallic Sam Browne-belt running across his shoulders. The holster it led to was empty. The phaser was in his hand, while in the other hand he held a dagger as bloodied as his face. Bodies littered the bridge's floor.

"I will not be as easy to defeat as that old *grishnar* K'Tan!" The young, red-haired Klingon leading the party that had intruded upon the bridge, boasted. The crimson lighting bathed the glinting *mek'leth* he gripped in his hand in the appropriate color.

The other Glover glared at the circle of Klingons advancing on him. But instead of cowering, this Glover grinned. "Commander Konall, what is it your kind say, 'Today is a good day to die!'"

And with that, Glover leaped to his fate....

.....A different bridge. Though still dark, it was burnished metal. Cold. Hard. As was the man commanding the center chair. It was Terrence again. But different. Head clean shaven, sporting a goatee, this Glover sat like a king on a throne, his arms rippling from a sleeveless blood red vest, with a golden sash at the waist. A vicious scar ran the length of Glover's cheek. But the man's smirk was more menacing.

At his feet was a man on his knees. But not there by choice. Beside him stood two formidable guards, both holding him down. The pallid man's face was colored by a violet mass of welts and bruises. "Lar'ragos, we showed your people kindness, and this is how you repay us?"

"Kindness?" The battered man spat at Glover's boots, leading to another round of pummeling. This twisted version of Glover eventually held up a hand.

"At ease Mr. Donar." The larger of the guards, a swarthy man whose face was a mass of scars, immediately restrained himself. Terrence chuckled. "See how well trained some of our subjects are. You should've learned from them. Your kind was given every opportunity."

The mirror Glover pursed his lips. "Now, Pava, I took you in, I promoted you to my security officer! Think of it? An alien serving aboard an Imperial vessel in such a capacity!" Glover looked around, drawing knowing sneers from his hostile looking crew. "You can't imagine the flak I took for that! I put *my* career on the line, my *life*, for you."

"No," Lar'ragos strongly shook his head. "You were just keeping me quiet, because I know how you really gained command!"

Bin Nadal cuffed the man, beating Donar to the punch. Once Lar'ragos could pick his head back up, the man glared at Glover. The captain continued talking, "But you betrayed my generosity. Seducing Science Officer Leitjen, conspiring with her and Commander Hobson to assassinate me. And you almost succeeded. If Chief Rojas hadn't been there to shield me, I would've been exposed to a lethal dosage of delta radiation. But you failed, and now you'll watch your pitiful little allies in the rebellion do so as well." Terrence was somewhat heartened to know that even in this twisted mirror version of his own life that Pedro Rojas remained a friend.

"What did you do to Susan?!" Lar'ragos demanded. Glover looked at his guards and then at his crew. They all laughed.

"I couldn't wait to wipe away the stain of treachery. Her atoms are spread among the Tantalus field."

"No," Lar'ragos bowed his head, and muttered what Terrence took to be a prayer.

"Empress Saavik took your kind in and even after her regrettable reign and the old Empire was reorganized into the United Order of Planets thanks to Grand Admiral Terrell, we didn't expel or eradicate the El-Aurians."

"You-You kept my people alive because you just wanted our knowledge about the Ocampa!" The other man charged. Even though he was now being held by the arms to keep from falling to the deck, Lar'ragos still remained defiant.

"Yes," the reverse Glover nodded with relish, "And your kind supplied it. And we thank you for that, and for your information on their adversaries, the Borg. The idea that anyone would peacefully join their Cooperative, to merge with them and become something beyond one's self is obscene. Power must be taken, it can never be shared! When the Borg eventually seeks our aid in their war against the Ocampa, we will be ready for them," Glover promised.

"You think enslaving the Alpha Quadrant will keep you safe?" Lar'ragos asked. "It's a fools' security."

Donar raised a meaty hand again. Glover told him to stay his hand. He stepped down from his throne and crouched down. He grabbed Lar'ragos roughly by his stubbly chin.

"I thought your kind were Listeners?" Glover scoffed. "Yet you couldn't hear the chimes at midnight. You threw in with the rest of the alien scum, preferring a disorganized, discordant mass instead of an organized, unified empire to destroy these Ocampa."

"You, your *United Order of Planets*," Lar'ragos spat at Glover's feet again, this time a glob of blood splashed against his boot. Glover planted said boot into Lar'ragos's midsection. The guards pushed him roughly to the deck. Terrence detached a small device from his belt.

He grabbed the downed man roughly by the hair and shoved the small device into his face. "Dr. Katanga loves cutting on aliens and inserting pain receptors in them. He placed several subcutaneously across your body, as you are already well aware. And they are oh so receptive to this agonizer. One day I might forget myself and leave the agonizer on too long..."

"Do it," Lar'ragos challenged.

"Don't tempt me alien," Glover threatened.

"Captain, Captain," Both Terrences' attention was drawn to the alluring woman standing at the captain's chair. One hand fondled the back of the chair. She was tall, dark brown, and statuesque, with warm caramel colored eyes that were incongruous with the cruel expression on her face. "If you kill the traitor now, he'll miss the show," she cooed. Glover grunted before driving the man's head into the deck.

She wore a black and gold uniform, cut at the midriff to reveal toned abs. Her golden sash was synched tight over promising hips, in painted on skintight black trousers. Both a phaser and a dagger were tucked into the sash. Long, black cornrows hung nearly to the woman's waist.

Glover stepped over Lar'ragos and swept the woman into his arms. He kissed her hungrily, without modesty, for all the bridge to see. And Terrence watched as some crewmembers leered while others burned with envy.

"You...would...be weak enough to be swayed by a Captain's Woman," Lar'ragos laughed. "You forget that she was Akinola's before she was yours."

The woman smiled devilishly, while Glover glared. Donar went in for the kill. "Stop Mr. Donar," Glover commanded as he pulled reluctantly away from the intoxicating woman. "Prop him up. I want him to have a good front row seat. Jasmine is right," the evil grin returned. "We are now at Tenaria Prime."

The screen filled with the lush world. The idyllic panorama was marred by the wreckage of the rebel fleet that had made their last stand here. The alien fools Astar and Ja-Inrosh and the human traitor Owens had led their miscreants to an ignoble defeat. The evil Glover frowned. Terrence could see the hate rolling off the man. "I knew the Tenarians were nothing but trouble makers. All their talk of 'peace' and 'neutrality', nothing but a cover to mask their true intentions. Sovereign Leyton had been a fool to tolerate them."

"Sovereign Shanthi is wiser," Jasmine replied, slinking up to the other Glover. Her hand snaked over his bare arm, her fingers insinuating themselves into his opening hand. She nibbled one of his earlobes, and Terrence could see the woman had his doppelganger wrapped around her pretty, manicured fingers.

"Captain Sandhurst didn't leave us any ships to mop up," Pedro Rojas whined as he stepped forward. Seeing his old friend, in such a twisted mirror house reflection, was more shocking to Terrence than seeing himself. This Pedro had a blocky frame, but was more muscular. He wore command red, though not a sleeveless vest. He sported a patchy beard, and also a bald head. Though Terrence wondered if by choice. Half of the man's face had been contorted, with one eye translucent and sightless. The side of his face that looked damn near seared off accounted for the patchy beard. Terrence surmised that the man had just shaved his head, but for some reason kept the dicey beard.

This Pedro dragged a deadened leg and slack arm along with him. Despite the cruel gleam in the man's remaining good eye, Terrence still felt sympathy for him. He was glad his Pedro had not experienced such a fate.

"I know," Glover grouched. "Grand Admiral Awokou allowed that sniveling glory hound to lead the assault to smash the last bit of resistance."

"But he left *you* to deliver the killing blow," Jasmine reminded him, blowing into Glover's ear.

"That he did," Glover grinned again. "Prepare the Genesis bomb. And now *Mister Lar'ragos*, watch as we cook Tenaria Prime and the last embers of defiance against us!"

...Terrence turned away, not wishing to see the triumph of evil, especially an evil with his face....But he ran right into perhaps an even worse nightmare....

.... "Elizabeth," another Terrence said, his voice choking on tears. He brushed the bloodstained blond curls away from the woman's smudged face. But she was beyond his touch anymore. Regardless Glover cradled her. He rocked her and sang their favorite song.

The world was crumbling around them. The small dank ship they were on was taking fire, and Glover was bathed in showers of sparks as yet another console went up in flames.

"Terrence, we have to go." It was Justine Haas, his old Academy rival. But now the woman had nothing but concern in her eyes. Her blond hair was pulled back into a tight bun and she wore roughhewn clothing. A disruptor hung limply in one hand. "The Alliance will be boarding the ship any moment. We've got to get out of here."

"She's right," Glover swung around to the other speaker. It was a man Terrence didn't know, but the other Glover did. The dark-haired man had an elaborate forehead tattoo

"Justine," the other Glover said, "you and Chakotay get out of here."

"I'm not leaving without you Terrence," Justine said. Damn, that woman was stubborn in any reality, Terrence realized.

The ship rattled again. There were cries of pain off in the distance. "Shelby's gone," Chakotay said, with an apologetic look. "We have got to get to the escape pods. We have to get these plans to the resistance!"

"Go on, without me," Terrence said. "I'll hold them off."

"No," Justine declared again.

"You don't need me!" Terrence could feel the raw pain in the other Glover's voice.

"Elizabeth," Justine said slowly, carefully, "Shelby doesn't need you anymore."

"She...she was pregnant, with my child!" The words poured out of Glover like lava.

"Oh God," Justine replied, touching Glover's shoulder. "I didn't know."

"That's how Elizabeth wanted it," Glover replied. "It was going to be a surprise."

The ship rattled and off in the distance the angry buzz of disruptor fire could be heard. "We're running out of time," Chakotay pressed.

"And that's why you're leaving now," Terrence said. "I'll hold them off."

Justine glared at him, refusing to budge. "My fight is over Justine," Glover said softly, looking down at Elizabeth's cooling body. "Let me do one last thing for the resistance."

She nodded and gave him a quick hug. Glover and Chakotay exchanged terse nods. "Tell Solok, I'll have to kick his ass at *Kal-toh* again some other time."

The raven-haired man chuckled. "He's still smarting about that one." His expression grew serious. "Take care Terrence."

"You do the same Chakotay and make sure to get those plans back to base." With nothing else needing to be said, they left.

Glover rooted around the cockpit and armory, finding what he needed. Then he knelt back beside his wife.

The man closed his eyes, centering himself. It wasn't long before the shadows fell upon him. Looking up, he saw the Alliance soldiers, trigger happy Klingons and Cardassians, and one Bajoran woman.

Terrence gasped. The woman was Pell Ojana!

The other Glover didn't recognize the woman, but she recognized him. Her eyes widened just slightly. "You...you look familiar...there was another like you, I met him, if you can believe it, in another quantum reality." That made her soldiers laugh, until she glared them all into silence.

"But you...are not him. He was...a warrior, a soldier...for his misbegotten empire," she said. "But you, you're nothing more than a traitor."

"Where are the other rebels? Where are the plans?" An overeager Cardassian woman stepped forward, the butt of her rifle primed to connect with the other Glover's head.

"Restrain yourself Panar," Pell said, almost bored. "He'll tell us," she stared hard at Glover. "You're not like the other one from across the stars. You'll break."

"I'm, I'm already broken," Glover said, opening his tunic, revealing the bomb strapped to his chest.

"No," Pell just got out before everything went white and then faded; the string evaporating.

"That timeline...for you...is finished," Sisko solemnly intoned.

"But what, what about all the others?" Terrence asked. And there were so many others...

...And blessedly many were happy....

...Glover on a white beach, with his parents and a beautiful Trill named Nya. A rambunctious little boy running around them, between them...

....A graying Glover meeting a tall, striking, athletic woman in command red, though in a uniform style different than he had seen before. In fact the full red tunic reminded him of an earlier era in the Federation. This Glover was in civilian clothes.

He smiled as he stood to greet the woman. "Captain Dryer," he dipped his head respectfully, "of the renowned *Starship Dauntless*."

Her grin was equally as large. "Defense Minister Glover," she said in return. The woman looked around. The restaurant was buzzing. *Sisko's Creole Kitchen*, in New Orleans, Terrence knew it by heart. And he was glad to see it existed in another universe or time.

"It's good to know you still know where the party is at," she replied.

"You've been gone a long time in the Delta Quadrant," Glover replied, "But not *that* long. I will always know where the night life is." Both of them shared a laugh.

"It's been a long time since I've heard that laugh Nyota", this Glover said. He reached for the chair across him, pulling it out for her. "Too long."

"Sometimes, it takes a long time for things to line up just the way you need them to," Nyota replied, accepting the proffered chair....

....There was Jasmine again. But this time the sneer was gone. She was dressed in a black uniform like Ben's. She sat on a couch, cradling a Cardassian infant in one arm. Glover sat across from her, swinging around a gleefully squealing Cardassian girl....

.... "Don't you think we're too old for this Admiral?" A salt and pepper Glover joked. His voice sounded muffled to Terrence. The other Glover was wearing a dark blue helmet.

"Not on your life," a graying Tryla Scott replied, grinning. Scott was also wearing a helmet and heard the other Glover just fine. "And who are you calling old Admiral?" Terrence recognized both were in silvery blue outfits, which only meant they were preparing to do one thing.

"I can think of better ways to celebrate peace with the Gorn," the older Glover huffed.

"You know damn well that's not what this is about," Tryla pursed her lips.

"Heh," Glover shrugged. "Well, the peace treaty is worth celebrating *too*."

The hold for whatever ship they were on opened, revealing the planet far below. "What a way to spend a 75th anniversary huh?" Scott laughed, before jumping. The other Glover dove after her....

....Glover leaned back just far enough to miss the sweeping arc of the *bat'leth*. But unfortunately too far and too quickly to keep upright. Glover fell over one of the many corpses littering the ground.

The one-eyed Klingon leered over him, raising his wickedly curved blade, preparing to deliver a deathblow. Glover moved quickly, jabbing his old blade into the man's midsection. The man doubled over as a large shape jumped on his back driving him into Glover.

There was a mass of limbs as Glover struggled to get out from under what Terrence knew must surely be a crushing weight. He pushed the dead man off him.

Crouched in front of him was a fearsome Klingon warrior. She smiled before leaping at Glover. Terrence winced; afraid the woman had the advantage. And he quickly realized she did. The woman pinned the other Glover against the dead warrior. Her head dove down, her black hair going everywhere, covering the other Glover's face. The woman lifted her head back and laughed in exultation. "You're blood tastes like fire, the blood of a warrior!"

"Eh, Krastil, don't you think this is not the best time for *seloh*," the other Glover ventured. "Our forces have yet to take Lorath's Villa." In the distance the clash of arms and disruptor fire could still be heard.

"Lorath!" Krastil spat. "He was a fool to side with the Duras, and he shall suffer a fool's fate!"

"That is all well and good," Glover tried again. He hadn't even tried to remove himself from under the woman.

"Aren't you glad you didn't go back to the Federation?!" Krastil said. "That you resigned your commission to join this glorious crusade. The fate of the Empire and the Alpha Quadrant rests with us, with Gow'ron! The Duras and their Romulan masters will rue the day they set their designs on the Klingon Empire!"

She took another kiss and ripped at his armor to get to the man inside. Glover's hands grasped the woman's back and then rooted deeply in her hair. He yanked on it hard, pulling the woman's head back. While distracted, he used his hip to toss the woman off. And then Glover jumped on top of her.

"What the hell was I thinking?" The other Glover asked. "This is the perfect time for *seloh*."

.... "Seloh? At a time like this? You've got to be kidding?" Glover said, this time in gold, chancing another look behind the corrugated piece of wall. He was greeted by several disruptor shots.

"I can't help it Commander Glover, the tang of battle always gets me in the mood," the woman sharing the wall with him replied. "The Tholians are on their last legs, and in their desperation, fighting with more honor than when they snuck onto Vulcan." Terrence glanced at the attractive, cinnamon-hued woman, with the spots running down her face reminding him of chocolate chips. He knew the other Glover was contemplating the same thing as well.

"How about we wait until Vulcan is liberated, and then...we'll see Captain Kojo," a bemused Glover offered.

"To arms then," Kojo replied, stepping out from behind the wall, firing double-handed. Glover shrugged and joined her. Terrence could read the man's mind. He didn't know which he would survive, the next few moments...or the night with a woman like Kojo....

....Glover was in a different uniform again, this one gray with red across the shoulders. Rank insignia were on the right breast lapel. This Glover sported a neat

mustache and goatee frosted with gray. He stood on the spacious bridge of a ship, and Terrence knew for certain it was his.

Terrence looked around at the other Glover's crew, some were familiar faces, others he had never seen before, or had yet to meet. Terrence's eyes lit on the Cardassian and Tzenkethi officers on the bridge, both standing proud in their Starfleet colors. He didn't think he would ever see a day when either race had members in Starfleet, or their nations would join the Federation. But they, like all the rest, were brimming with relief and hope that even Terrence felt across space and time.

On the large wraparound view screen was a slow moving procession of large, heavily armed ships streaming past. If not for the beaming expressions from Glover's crew, Terrence would've been suspicious.

"Can you believe it sir?" asked Juanita Rojas, with a commander's rank, and gray streaks. "The Iconians are actually withdrawing to their own space."

"That's right, they are tired of getting their ass kicked," Smirked a muscular Andorian. Rojas rolled her eyes.

"Stow it Mr. Faltyne," she said, with a grin.

"This *is* a time for celebration," the other Glover said, "This is a victory for the entire Quadrant, but one that was not without loss...terrible loss."

The attractive, brown-skinned woman standing at Glover's side, dressed in sciences blue, hugged him. He placed his cheek against the top of her head, before saying, almost so softly that Terrence could barely hear his counterpart. "To our son," he murmured. He paused a moment, and then said louder, "To President Sullivan, Fleet Admiral Leone, Admiral Donners, Fleet Captain Hiroko, Ambassador Deen, Captain Shon, Captain Erasia...."

"To Admiral Aurelia, Commodore Forester, Captain Ridgeway, and Captain Ramirez" the woman added. Terrence noted her clipped British accent.

"Solly Brin," Juanita added with a sad smile. "Captain Amarin." Several more bridge officers spoke names of friends, colleagues, and loved ones lost to this terrible future war.

"To absent friends," Glover said after the naming had stopped. The woman in blue kissed his cheek and pressed against him. Together, both placed hands on the shoulders of the young girl, who Terrence figured was around ten-years-old. Glover looked down at him, his expression softening. "I want you to pay close attention Deitra, you're witnessing history..."

...Terrence had to tear himself away. There were so many other universes, other possibilities for his life. He could spend an eternity gazing into the cracked mirror Ben had provided for him.

"Enough," he said, nearly pleading. He lowered his head, and shut his eyes. Glover felt dizzy, his head spun, his heart both lifted and broke, at all the variations he had seen of his life. "How was that possible? How is any of this possible?"

"It is the vagaries of time and space," Ben said. The window into the other lives disappeared, suffused and covered by the gentle whitescape. "Even I have not spent enough time among the Prophets to ascertain the why, or the when, of existence. I am not even sure they comprehend such things."

"You keep referring to these 'Prophets'," Glover said. "Who are they, or what are they? Are they the *Bajoran* Prophets?"

"In due time," Sisko smiled again.

"Well, seems like we, or rather you, have all the time in the world!" Terrence charged. Ben merely nodded.

"I do," he admitted. "But you do not." He held the box aloft. It hovered over his outstretched palm. "When you first came into contact with an artifact like this in the Pandorian system, its technology was imprinted upon you, on a cellular level."

"Excuse me?"

"You have the ability to be much more than you have been Terrence," Sisko said. "Like me, though in a different way. And believe me; I didn't take the news any better than you are doing right now."

That last sentence sounded more like the Ben he knew than anything else the man had said. "So, what's going on, what is that thing?"

"A relic of the past, and the future," Sisko began, but he paused at Terrence's confused look. Ben smiled, this time it felt more full and genuine. "Temporal travel can be...headache inducing."

"Yeah, I'm starting to see that," Glover replied.

"Many millennia from now, the Federation will be no more," Ben said, "It will...reorganize...it will evolve...into a superorganism...into...Galactic Civilization."

"We already are a galactic civilization Ben," Terrence pointed out.

"You don't understand," Sisko replied. "Not 'a' civilization, simply Civilization. This Civilization will come to encompass all of this galaxy, all the old empires and nations and sovereign political bodies melded into one vast monoculture."

"That doesn't sound like a bad thing to me," Glover admitted. "I think that's what many of us are striving for, a peaceful coexistence with our neighbors, strengthened by a shared respect for diversity and united in common purpose."

Sisko paused. "Once again...perhaps my words are inadequate to describe what it is our Federation is to become."

Ben turned away from Glover. With a flip of his hand the whiteness behind him became translucent, like a viewscreen. A viewscreen into the future.

Terrence stepped back. He was stunned. "It's...beautiful." He could only marvel at what he was viewing. It was worlds he had never seen, ships, and species the Federation had yet to encounter, and likely wouldn't for thousands of years.

Large, graceful biomechanical constructs that sailed through space, though when Ben pulled back the curtains on one world, Glover saw that the gargantuan ships weren't even needed by some species. Instant, sub-quantum teleportation had

been perfected, and beings teleported not only from planet to planet, but across quadrants.

"Where are the humans?" Terrence finally found his voice again.

"Humanity is...no more," Sisko replied.

"What happened to us?"

"Humanity evolved, Earthlings ascended and other humanoids did as well," Sisko explained, "many thousands of years before what you are seeing now. There was a technological singularity, the merging of the organic and synthetic, into something more, something greater. The Federation gave way to a galaxy-spanning Civilization, guided by the Artilect, a gestalt of minds."

Terrence shuddered as the image shifted to what had once been Earth, though it was far more advanced than even today, a level of technological architecture that was mechanical, cold, and very much missing the human touch. Just beyond the still standing and now quaint looking Golden Gate Bridge, was a massive humanoid face, floating above the synchronized world. The face wasn't quite human; it was amalgam of many species. There was a look of complete serenity on the large, near human face, its eyes half closed, though Glover could just make out beneath the half-lidded gaze streams of data flashing across the orbs.

"The Artilect," Glover realized, shivering again. He turned to Sisko. "So, this is what we're to become? This is what all our efforts lead to?"

Sisko nodded before replying, "On the present course," he said.

"What does that mean?"

"Time...is not immutable," Ben answered, which confused Terrence even more. "Time can change, even for those of us that travel its corridors. One must not become too certain that time will go as one has seen it."

"I-I don't understand any of this," Glover said. "And that...thing...that Artilect, it's like we are no different than the Borg!"

Sisko cocked his head, his smile cryptic. "Or you could say the Borg is no different than...you." It was telling that Sisko didn't say 'us'. Just what had Ben become?

Glover really wanted to shake his friend right now. Sensing the man's building frustration, Sisko turned back to the screen. The images had changed again. Now they were looking at one of the massive space ships, a technological marvel. Sisko took them inside.

Terrence gasped again. It was *him*. Sitting at the center seat, and dressed in a black one-piece suit, accented by a large, silver-gold delta running across the torso. No other crew or consoles for that matter were present. "I'm alive, thousands of years from now?"

"No," Sisko replied. "The Artilect had never completely jettisoned its organic forebears. The gestalt used photonics and algorithms to create holographic recreations of some of its former officers and other notables. That simulacrum is a composite of your mission profiles, your recorded engrams, but also similar data

culled from many other Starfleet members. When Civilization encountered other organic beings that they wished to incorporate into the gestalt, they had found it best to communicate with them in a humanoid form." The other Glover's face was as serene as the Artilect floating over San Francisco. The placidness chilled Terrence.

"Where is the rest of the crew?"

"The ship creates the photonic command crew as needed," Sisko explained. "And the pre-ascended member worlds also still piloted ships and served on Civilization vessels."

"Why are you showing me this?" Glover asked.

"You asked of the Borg, you want to know why you are here," Ben answered. "By this time Civilization had discovered how to use dark matter energy to propel its vessels and power its systems. It was more plentiful and less dangerous than polaric ion and Omega particles."

"Omega particles?"

"In due time," was all Sisko said about that matter. "There was a cost to this usage of dark energy however. Civilization discovered a dark galaxy, composed almost entirely of dark matter, enough not to allow them to preserve the dark matter existing in their galaxy. However, this dark galaxy had inhabitants."

"This doesn't sound good," Glover shook his head.

"That...is an understatement," Sisko replied. "The dark matter species attacked Civilization's dark matter mining operations at the Stygian Gate, absorbing the entire operation, with hundreds of humanoid workers and denizens within its dark depths. There likely would have been more casualties, but Civilization soon discovered that the nature of our space was inimical to the attacking species, henceforth designated the Stygians."

The other Glover cocked his head, similar to what Sisko had done moments earlier. "This Captain Glover had been sent to negotiate with them for the release of the hostages and to offer reparations for any damage done to their species or space. He entered their space via the expanse."

The bridge on that future vessel lightened as waves of misshapen, contorting, howling beings, in obvious agony and rage poured in. Writhing, pulsing black splotches were moving on their skin, *within* their bodies, coating their eyes, dripping from their nostrils and mouths. "One of Civilization's eminent non-ascended scholars, an enthusiast for Old Earth cultures, called them Revenants. The Artilect deemed it a worthy description."

The infected, or maybe the better word was possessed, swarmed the future Glover whose impression remained impassive, inquisitive even. "The Stygians could only enter our realm of space via beings that already existed here. What Glover uncovered and what Civilization would soon discover is that the Stygians had not taken hostages, but husks. The Stygians had collected host bodies for them to invade our galaxy."

"My God," Terrence breathed as he watched the Revenants mob his future counterpart, overtaking him. It was then that Terrence noticed that some wore sleek black biomechanical armor with blades that looked like dewclaws protruding from their wrists. They drove the dewclaws into the future Glover and the man started dematerializing. "What's happening?" Terrence asked Sisko.

"The Revenants not only infected organic life but could use the dark energy powering the Civilization's vessels and planets against them." Ben said. "It was a danger Civilization had not encountered since the Amon, Inth, and H'Iranthians."

"Never heard any of them," Terrence replied.

"You think the Borg is the Federation's biggest challenge," Sisko said. "Surprisingly, not even close. The Dominion, Kothlis' Ka, Cha'lav, Species 8472, Vaadwaur, Aodh, Draï, Na'kuhl, cephalopods, and even the Sphere Builders a second time. There is no shortage of threats to the Federation, but yet Civilization had never encountered anything like the Stygians or their Revenants, no adversary that could use Civilization's own power against it."

"So how did Civilization defeat them?" Glover asked as the images shifted to gargantuan ships clashing in space above burning planets.

"They didn't," Ben answered solemnly. Terrence blinked.

"What?" He asked, not sure he had heard Sisko correctly.

"The Revenants spread like a contagion, corrupting member species of Civilization, raising a great army against Civilization forces. The climactic battle was in the Gluum Nebula. Civilization was routed, all Civilization ships were destroyed."

"My God," Glover repeated.

"Not all was lost," Sisko said. "Civilization had not only mastered space, they had also mastered time. To preserve Civilization, aspects of the Artillect was taken by various captains and spread throughout space-time, even in parallel universes."

"These fragments of the Artillect, those shards are what you encountered in the Pandorian system, the Tigon sector, and the Arx, or perhaps they encountered you."

"Why me? Why do I keep finding these things?"

"My best hypothesis is that the fragments are drawn to you. You being one of the subjects whose engrams the Artillect used to fashion their explorers, it seeks you out in this time, to restore it, to jumpstart Civilization this century, and not countless millennia from now," Ben answered. The answer astounded Glover. That this thing, from the future, that used what was left of his essence thousands of years from now, had some kind of connection, or thought it did, to him. Way beyond creepy.

"The Pandora's Boxes contain this superintelligence?" Glover asked, not wanting to dwell on the ties the Artillect thought it shared with him.

"What you call 'Pandora's Boxes' are containers, specially designed to safeguard the fragments," Sisko explained. "They were seeded across space and time, insuring that the Artillect would survive in some manner. I speculate that each

seed, or fragment, is capable of producing a fully functioning Artilect, under the right conditions.”

“And what were those ‘conditions’?”

“The nascent Artilect would test the beings that found them to deem them worthy of ascension.”

“And if they failed?”

Ben lowered his head. Behind him Glover saw how the Artilect seeds cut a great swath through universal history, as failed beings and species misused its dark gifts. Some came close though, and some used the Artilect to traverse space and to move planets, but all failed, and they all were destroyed before the screen showed Glover another distant world, home to a species of humanoids afflicted with a great disease.

“They called it the Scourge,” Sisko said softly. “It didn’t start out that way. It was meant to be a panacea, a nanite elixir, given to every member of this species that would theoretically cure all illness, and maybe even grant them immortality. But instead it brought the species to near extinction. Desperate scientific parties raced across their system in hopes of finding a cure. They found the Artilect instead.”

The image shifted to a pale, hairless female holding a Pandora’s Box in her hands. It was amazing the pallid, emaciated woman could still stand to hold the box. It opened before the woman, bathing her gaunt face in a greenish glow. Her grin was rictus-like....

“The origin of the Borg,” Sisko replied. “One of them, anyway.”

“What does that mean?”

“I think by now you grasp that there are infinite possibilities,” Ben said.

“Why do I even bother?” Glover shrugged and blew through his teeth. “I’m never going to get a real straight answer out of you about what any of this is all about.”

“If I told you, you wouldn’t find out for yourself,” Sisko said, “And where would the fun be in all that?” The jaunty question did remind Terrence very much of his old friend.

“So why tell me this much to not tell me the rest?” Glover challenged.

“I will return you to the timeline at a time that you can prevent your fate on the Arx, and stop the Borg or Romulans from gaining control of the Artilect,” Sisko said.

“I thought the Borg already had one of them?”

“You’ve seen what they became under one Artilect’s guidance. Do you want them to have two?” Ben asked.

“Good point,” Glover replied. “I have to ask, is it right to alter the timeline this way? Don’t get me wrong, I do want to live, but is this my time to die?”

Ben looked at him, his dark eyes boring straight through him. “No,” he declared firmly. “You were not supposed to die...yet, but the extradimensional

nature of the Artilect fragments affects temporal mechanics. I don't know if I am supposed to reset it, but so far none of the Prophets have intervened," Sisko shrugged. "It is neither your time...nor Cal's."

Glover stopped himself from inquiring when either man was supposed to die, or how. "And what of you Ben?"

"It's not my time either," he gave a small smile. "Nor have I ventured to find out when that time will be. Somethings even a person who has all of time and space to explore likes to keep a mystery."

"Thank you," Glover held out a hand. Sisko looked at it, but didn't shake it, reminding Terrence of the gulf separating the men.

"What you have learned here, you will not retain forever. It will slowly leave your mind as you readjust to the restored timeline, so you must act quickly," Ben admonished. "You must save the Federation *and* the Romulan Star Empire."

"Sounds like a piece of cake," Glover tipped an imaginary hat.

"I do miss you Terrence," Ben said, just before universe winked out.

PART FOUR: MIST OF PROPHECIES

Dagarth Spaceport Spaceport Hold-987 Romii IV

All of it came back at him at once, nearly throwing him from the seat. "Are you okay?" He heard a concerned voice ask at the rim of the very long tunnel he had fallen down. Glover opened his eyes, not seeing where he was, but where he had been, and where he would be, or rather, so many versions of him across time and space.

"Shall I call for the admiral?" Glover heard the voice again. Terrence closed his eyes and focused on that voice, grasping it like rope, and climbing from the pit, back into the present, back into this one reality, *his* reality, and leaving all the others behind.

Still disoriented, Glover placed a shaky hand on Leta's shoulder. "I-I'm okay," he rasped.

"You're sweating," Leta removed his hand gingerly, her nostrils twitched like she smelled something awful. "And your hand is clammy. Did you eat something that didn't agree with you? I know that humans have delicate stomachs."

"And where did you hear that? The Tal Shiar?" Glover asked, as his hands rambled over the console, as if seeking purchase to keep him upright.

The woman's eyes narrowed. "That's a poor attempt at humor Commander," she tried to play it off, though there was a tremor in her voice.

"I know," he nodded, his glare hardening as he focused on her. His voice gained strength. "I know you're a member of the Tal Shiar, *Major* Leta." The woman's mask crumbled and she reached for the disruptor at her hip. Glover placed his hand over hers. "I know," he repeated, softer, yet insistent. "If you lure us to the *L'Nar*, it will result in all of our deaths."

"How?" Leta demanded. "How do you know these things?"

"I-I," Glover struggled to answer the question. He was there, with her, aboard the ancient Bird-of-Prey, yet spread across time and space. A deluge of images and emotions surged through him. "I-I can't explain."

She shrugged his hand off, but she didn't pull out her sidearm. "Do the others know? Does my mother?"

"No, not yet," Glover said, as he grasped that Ben had saved his life and throttled him back in time, to right before the fateful five lifted off, before Valeris's revelation and Leta's betrayal. "Why are you doing this? Why are you deceiving us?"

"Says the man who has illegally infiltrated Romulan space?" Leta scoffed. "You Starfleet types are so hypocritical it's nauseating."

"I get why you would feel that way about me," Terrence said, "But what about your mother?"

"She's misguided, a fool, one who it appears never respected the welcome she received from the Empire, the chance at redemption. Where my mother failed, I will not. I will prove myself a loyal patriot, and a worthy protector of my father's memory."

"Your father wasn't all that you think he was," Glover riposted.

The woman reached for her weapon again. "Do not speak of my father," she warned.

"If you shoot me, your cover's blown," Terrence replied.

"It's already unraveled," Leta said, pulling the disruptor from its holster.

"Lower the weapon Leta," Valeris's voice was cutting. Leta head swiveled in its direction. Glover chopped down, knocking the sidearm to the deck. Snarling, Leta turned around and backhanded Terrence, nearly uprooting him from his seat.

"That's enough," Xinran pushed past Valeris. He held an old-style disruptor in his hands. One he had likely pilfered from the ship's armory. "Leta, don't move." He aimed it at the roiling young woman, daring her to defy him.

"Lower your weapon Mr. Xinran," Valeris said calmly, but in a voice that would not countenance debate.

"Valeris you don't give me orders," Xinran said. "Never have, and never will."

"Are you going to say the same thing about me?" Admiral Uhura entered the room, with Cal trailing along. Hudson also brandished a sidearm, though his was pointing down. "Stand down Xinran," the woman repeated, with duranium hardness.

Xinran muttered a curse before reluctantly lowering the weapon. Leta whipped around to Glover. The man was still covering his stinging cheek. Her gaze burned like a supernova, making Terrence feel inexplicably guilty.

"You said they didn't know!"

"That's what my little piano playing was for," Glover chuckled one thumb back at the console, "After you removed my hand. I opened the ship wide channel."

"You're a member of the Tal Shiar," Valeris said. It wasn't a question. And though the Vulcan did her best to hide her emotions, Glover could detect them roiling just beneath the surface. "When? And how long?"

"That really doesn't matter now," Xinran said. "She's been exposed, and that means the Tal Shiar know we are here. They are likely waiting for us either at this spaceport or above it."

"Is that true child?" Uhura gently asked. Leta sat up in her chair, her expression closed.

"I will not answer your questions," she declared.

"You will answer *mine*," Valeris approached her daughter.

"Leta isn't the only one harboring a secret though is she Lady Valeris...of Section 31?" That brought Valeris up short. The woman blinked at Terrence and then raised an eyebrow.

"How did you ascertain that information?" She asked calmly, but Glover could see the woman was rattled.

"See how I feel," Leta muttered.

"Valeris, you're Section 31!" Uhura produced a disruptor and pointed it at the woman. Xinran aimed his weapon back at Leta. "Anyone else got a secret?" The admiral asked.

"Valeris not only is Section 31, but she wants us to go to the Hectori sector," Glover said, wanting to pour out the information because he could feel it slipping from his mind.

Valeris raised another eyebrow. Uhura's grip tightened on her weapon. "Is this true Valeris?"

"Yes," was all the woman said, her expression closing up like Leta's.

"Taev is not there," Glover declared. Valeris's calm exterior cracked. Leta boiled over.

"What do you know about my brother?!" She roared. "He's dead. Did the Federation have a hand in it?!"

"No," Terrence said, "Something far, far worse than any Starfleet armada. And the remnants of it are at the Arx, which your mother mistakenly thinks is in the Hectori sector."

"You know of the Arx as well?" Leta asked, though she wasn't as incredulous as before. Uhura's eyes narrowed.

"How do you know all of this Commander?" The Starfleet legend asked. The woman's hand wavered and for a moment Terrence thought she would put her weapon on him.

"Admiral," Glover shook his head wearily. "You wouldn't believe me if I tried."

“Son, I’ve seen a giant green hand grasp a starship and space amoebas,” Uhura quipped. “I’m pretty flexible in the belief department.” Glover nodded, exhaled, and then told them.

After he had finished, Glover felt exhausted, physically, mentally, and spiritually. Valeris, her expression reflective, said, “When Ambassador Spock and I were on much more collegial terms, I remember one of his oft repeated sayings, attributed to one of his ancestors...”

Uhura’s eyes brightened. “I know that one,” she smiled wistfully, “If you eliminate the impossible, whatever remains...”

Valeris smoothly interjected, “However improbable-must be the truth.”

“In short Commander Glover, we believe you,” the admiral replied, and Terrence sighed with relief. He wasn’t crazy, or at least his tale didn’t sound as crazy to the others as it had believed it would, even as he was concocting it as he went along. He told them about the Chaltok system, using the very real spatial anomalies there and the polaric ion energies of the Arx to tell them that he escaped on a shuttle after the polaric engine was destabilized, but instead of making it back to the *L’Nar*, he had been gobbled up by a subspace tear that sent him back into time. He was certain Admiral Uhura, Valeris, and Xinran knew that polaric ions could produce temporal effects, so encountering an anomaly created by them conceivably could fling him through time.

Terrence didn’t tell them anything about the far flung Civilization, the Stygians, Pandora Boxes, his multiple lives, or Sisko. He didn’t know how that would affect Cal and he couldn’t risk it troubling him and distracting him from their mission, nor could he risk Hudson not telling Ben when they returned.

From the first run, Glover knew that his compatriots harbored secrets and had multiple agendas and he wanted to keep some things as close to his vest as he could, and if he was able to still retain the memories, he would reveal them if necessary for maximum gain or effect.

Cal whistled. “Wow, Terrence, so you just time traveled. Temporal Investigations is not going to be pleased.”

“I’ll handle the DTI,” Uhura winked.

“Besides, none of that will matter if we can’t stop the Borg from taking over the Arx,” Xinran said, just having to splash the cold water.

Valeris regarded Glover. “I can see the wheels spinning behind your eyes Mr. Glover. You’ve got a plan.”

“What are thinking of Commander?” Uhura asked.

“Yeah man, spill it,” Cal was less decorous.

“Well,” Glover sighed. He looked at Leta. The sulking woman sensed his attention and turned to him, a mix of emotions on her face. “I’ve got the inklings of a plan,” he admitted. Glover paused and looked directly at Leta, into the woman’s eyes. “But in order for it to work I’m going to need buy-in, from everyone...”

Imperial Bird-of-Prey Odaus

The waiting was the worst part. Glover tried to comfort himself by looking out at the stars winking past, the ancient ship at full impulse. He wanted to make it look good, like the ship was really trying to make it to the Hectori sector at a good speed before the *L’Nar* materialized from the ether to swoop down on them. Terrence was alone in the cockpit, the other members of their band off making preparations for what was to come.

Generally he was a social person. He liked parties, or rather being at the center of them, but for now he was glad for the quiet, for the solitude. Just him, his yoke, and all of the cosmos before him.

It gave Terrence time to think. He began to wonder if any of what he had encountered with Ben and all those parallel universes had been real at all, or some kind of space psychosis. He almost wished it was a touch of madness instead of some of those nightmare realities he saw being real.

The idea that it had actually occurred, that he had died, and been given a second chance...it was a lot to absorb. It made Terrence feel even more driven to make something of his life now, but in doing so, would it lead him to being chosen by the soulless minds of the Civilization for their composite captains, which in part led to the fragments of the Civilization spread throughout time to feel they had some kind of kinship with him?

It was damn near too much to contemplate, when all he wanted to do right now was fly.

“Care if I join you?” The question both annoyed and relieved Glover. It annoyed him because he really did want some time alone, but relieved him because he really didn’t need to be alone right now. But most of all, the question intrigued him because of the questioner.

Terrence half-turned in his seat. “Mr. Xinran, have a seat, the more the merrier.”

Xinran took the empty co-pilot’s chair. The man stared out at space a moment, before turning to Glover. “I hope this plan of yours works,” The Romulan said.

“I think we all do Mr. Xinran,” Glover replied.

“Though I was voted down, I still think we should make a stand,” Xinran said.

“Against a *D’deridex-class* warbird, in a two century old bird-of-prey?” Terrence didn’t hide his incredulousness. “Listen, I’m a great pilot, but even I would not take those odds that I could evade a *D’deridex* for too long. This is not the best plan,” Glover admitted, “But it’s the best plan we’ve got.”

“We’ll see if you’re right Commander Glover,” Xinran’s expression hardened. The man sighed and looked back out at the stars. “I have a confession to make,” he began.

“Are you sure I should be the one hearing this?”

"Why not? You're hearing, while not of Vulcan or Romulan capability is sufficient," Xinran said.

"Why thank you," Glover rolled his eyes. Xinran smiled at that before returning to gazing out at the void. Terrence could tell that the man didn't want to make eye contact as he spoke, that he just had to get it out.

"I hate my people, yet....yet I love them to," Xinran lowered his head. "Just...just being back in the Empire, on Romii IV, the sights, sounds, smells of a Romulan world. It has been a lifetime since I've experienced it. I was just a child when I left with my father to study the great Alpha and Beta Quadrant religions. As much as my father enjoyed living among our Vulcan cousins on P'Jem and studying their ways, learning the commonalities that still existed between our people, he had informed me that we would be leaving P'Jem to travel to the planet Bajor. My father was intrigued by the Prophets of the Bajoran religion and the mystical artifacts they called orbs which were allegedly given to them by these said Prophets. Do you know anything about the Bajorans and their Prophets Mr. Glover?"

The question rattled Glover. It brought him right back to Sisko. Were these the same Prophets? He had asked his old friend, but the man had demurred. Had the Bajoran deities plucked Ben from the time stream, from his life, had they turned into such a morose watcher of pan galactic calamities?

"I-I have scant knowledge of them," Glover coughed up, his throat drier than Torothan desert.

"More than knowledge it would appear," Xinran's dark eyes narrowed and he studied Glover like a math problem. Terrence chafed under the scrutiny.

"You were saying Mr. Xinran?" He pressed.

"Yes," Xinran nodded tightly. "My father wished to leave, and so did I, not to Bajor but back to the Empire. I missed my friends, my life there. Then the Klingons attacked...changing everything. My family had been influential in the Empire; I remember hearing talk that he might even be placed in succession to become Archpriest, the highest spiritual honor among my people. But Romulans being Romulans, my family's prominence provoked envy, particularly among the Old Lines, the great families established during the Sundering and Worldfall. My family had only become prominent after the Earth War, and partly due to their ties to the Klingons.

I'm sure those ties were the main reason that my father's enemies sent Klingon brigands to abscond him. I came to find out later that the hostilities at that time between the Klingons and Romulans were used as cover for my families' true enemies to strike at us. My father wasn't the only casualty. Many more of my kinsmen died within the Empire, some branded as traitors for 'colluding' with the Klingons even though relations were patched up with them only months afterward.

Even if I could've gone back to the Empire, there was no one of my blood to go back to. I would've been surrounded by enemies. I hadn't wanted to hear that at first, but eventually I came to understand the precariousness of my situation,"

Xinran paused, his expression crumbling. Terrence wanted to ask how he had learned that, but decided not to press the Romulan, to just let him get it off his chest in his own time and manner.

"A Vulcan couple, their children already grown, took me in. It was...a difficult adjustment period. Though we share the same appearance, the same blood in many respects, the cleavages between our peoples now is too great. I actually found more affinity with the humans. And I rushed off to Starfleet as soon as I could.

But that was not to last. Humans were fine with me...until they learned of my true heritage and then I saw how their gazes would cloud over, how they would create distance, tiny, yet to me it was a gulf, between us. I would find no peace in Starfleet, nor any trying adopting Vulcan ways. I was an outsider, and eventually I decided to make that work for me, or at least to pay the debt I owned to the Vulcans for taking me in. I joined the V'Shar, yet requested assignment in Cardassian space.

It was there, among all places, among the secretive, paranoid, cryptic Cardassians, and their totalitarian regime that reminded me of Romulus more than anywhere else. I came to actually enjoy my time there. I took on the identity of a trader, in kevas and trillium, among many other things. My Romulan heritage did not arouse suspicion. In fact I came to find out that the Cardassians admired the Romulans quite a great deal.

I found great success in the Avenall system, forging ties with many local Trade Ministry officials, even engaging in an affair with one of them, the widow of a Cardassian officer lost during the Betreka Nebula Incident. We had to keep our relationship circumspect due to Cardassian interspecies fraternization laws. However it was an open secret among the Ministry of Trade.

Once war broke out between the Cardassians and the Federation, and my position became tenuous, I begged her to leave with me, but she wouldn't. She stayed." Xinran's skin paled. His expression became hollow. "I have not heard from her or anything about her since. Their Obsidian Order is just as ruthless as the Tal Shiar. The idea that I caused her to fall into their clutches forever haunts me."

Glover wanted to say something to the man, to comfort him, but he didn't know what to say. And really, Terrence knew there was nothing to say. The man had to carry that grief like a lodestone around his neck.

"Leta's olfactory sense wasn't too far off," Xinran said. "I am involved with a human female. A literary scholar who lives in Vulcana Regar. I attended one of her lectures about Iloja of Prim, a Cardassian who had lived on Vulcan in the 22nd century. I had learned of him while I was in Cardassian space, and his story, of being an exile, resonated. I conversed with this scholar and things became more. She thinks I am a member of the Vulcan National Merchant Fleet."

Glover merely nodded, not sure where this was going. Xinran caught on to the man's confusion and smiled. "I'm telling you all this because if I do not return to Federation space, I want you to find her and tell her how much I cared about her."

Terrence placed both hands palms up, "Whoa, Mr. Xinran. Let's not get too morbid here. We're going to make it back. All of us."

"The...future...you saw did not portend that," he replied.

"Yeah, well we're changing that," Terrence smirked, though it was forced. "We've already changed that."

"And that does not concern you?" Xinran asked.

"No," Glover shook his head. "Why should it?"

"Perhaps we've only made things worse," the Romulan surmised.

Terrence hadn't thought of that, but now he couldn't think of anything else. "I- I think you should get ready Mr. Xinran. We're almost at the location where Leta said the Romulans would be lying in wait for us."

"Yes," Xinran stood up. "I will be ready for them. I do not like this plan Mr. Glover, but I trust Admiral Uhura. She has faith in you, so I will extend you that courtesy."

"Thank you, I guess," Terrence replied.

"The admiral," Xinran's expression was wistful. "Is always several steps ahead of everyone. In many respects, she thinks like a Romulan."

"And that's a compliment? Coming from you of all people, with your dislike of Romulans?"

Xinran looked down at him, his expression growing serious. "In this case it is." He clapped the back of Terrence's chair. "Be steady when you steer us into the clutches of the raptor awaiting us Mr. Glover."

"Is that like a Romulan good luck saying?"

"No," Xinran plainly answered, "Just a hope that this plan of yours doesn't get us all killed."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence," Glover quipped, though he wished he didn't feel the same way as Xinran.

Glover only opened his eyes after the nudging became insistent. "Does he need another hypo?" He heard a voice far off in the distance.

"No," he caught another voice. "The effects of the gas affect everyone a bit differently."

"We don't have time for this," a cutting voice said. The nudge was harder this time. "Wake up human!"

Terrence's eyes fluttered open. He squinted as the harsh light flooded his eyes. He opened his mouth. His tongue felt swollen, his throat parched.

"What, what happened?"

"Heh. The human has forgotten his own plan," the cutting voice scoffed.

"Help him sit up right, that might clear his head," the first voice said again. Glover focused on it, and the blob resolved into a person, and the kindly visage of Admiral Uhura.

"Admiral," Glover tried to stand, but found his legs useless.

"Come on buddy," arms gently locked under his and sat him up. It was Cal. Hudson propped him against a bulkhead. "I bet you're thirsty as hell. I know I was." His old friend produced a canteen and held it to Terrence's lips. Glover wanted to drink it all down, but Hudson moderated the usage to keep Terrence's thirst from choking him. The other members of their team circled around him, with varying looks of either concern or impatience.

"I'm sorry Mr. Glover," Valeris said. "The anesthetic gas used aboard Romulan starships does leave after effects, some more severe than others."

"It certainly isn't Anesthizine," Uhura said, rubbing her temple. "I have a headache something fierce."

"So," Glover croaked. "It worked?" He looked at Leta. The woman glared at him.

"Leta," Valeris said gently, "Answer the commander."

"Yes," she said through clenched teeth. "You've just made me a traitor to the Empire."

"We're trying to save your Empire," Uhura rejoined. "God help us."

"Help me up Cal," Glover said. Hudson grabbed him again and gently lifted him up. Glover leaned back against the wall, testing the strength of his legs. He pushed off the wall, his legs wobbly, but he willed them to not to collapse.

"Damn it, it actually worked," He grinned. Glover's plan had been for the *L'Nar* to capture the *Odaus* and then have Leta, who the Tal Shiar still trusted, flood the ship with an anesthetic gas, incapacitating the crew, and allowing them to take command of the warbird. And that was the easy part.

"Alright," Terrence clapped his hands. Up until being woken up, he wasn't sure if Leta would go through with it. But she had. He smiled at her. The woman's returned a frosty glare. Glover ignored it and just hoped she would come around in time. "Now, here comes the hard part."

Imperial Warbird L'Nar

Main Bridge

With Leta's knowledge of the ship's systems, the team had beamed the crew to either holding cells, cargo bays, or locked them in their quarters, all confined by force fields. But they would need more access to the all of the ship's systems than what Leta could provide.

"Get out of that chair!" The dark-skinned Romulan woman fumed. If she had a disruptor on her, Glover knew that he would be atoms by this point.

"He's earned the right," Uhura said. The admiral was at an aft console, overseeing the last transporting of the crew. Terrence thought the Starfleet icon got a kick out of locking up so many Romulans.

While for this mission Glover would've preferred being at the helm, he thought it best to address T'Rhiel from a position of strength, and nothing connoted that more than sitting in the command chair of a warbird.

Before, T'Rhiel had revealed an interest in Glover, beyond the normal, and he hoped to play on that this second go round.

"We've taken command of this ship Subcommander T'Rhiel," Terrence said. The woman cut her eyes to Leta at the weapon's terminal.

"You traitor!" She said, charging the woman.

"Stop right there," Xinran said. The man had been at the helm, but he moved quickly, and tackled the woman. They struggled, giving the rest of the crew enough time join in.

Once the woman had been subdued, Glover addressed her again. "Subcommander T'Rhiel, we don't want your ship, nor do we want to make you or your crew Federation prisoners. We have taken such drastic measures to save both our nations!"

"More lies, more Federation propaganda!" She snarled, still struggling, even at the bottom of the pile.

"We know what Colonel Crassus's intentions were, and we know that the Arx is in the Chaltok system," Glover said.

T'Rhiel's fires dimmed. She darted her eyes at Leta. "But no, you were not privy to that information."

"Get her up," Glover said. "I won't talk to her while we've got her held down."

Xinran and Cal helped the woman up. "You think this earns you some trust?" T'Rhiel asked.

"No, but what I do think is that we need to speak...privately," Glover replied.

"Terrence that's a bad idea," Hudson said.

"Cal, honestly, does it sound any crazier than anything else I've said recently?" Glover asked.

"Well, when you put it that way," Hudson shrugged.

Glover turned to Uhura. "Admiral," he dipped his head respectfully, "You have the conn." He gestured to Xinran. The Romulan reluctantly handed over his disruptor. Glover motioned for T'Rhiel to go to a door off to the side of the bridge. "Subcommander you know where the ready room is."

"I do," she said, scowling, "but how do you?"

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you," Glover said, "But I'm going to tell you anyway."

Imperial Warbird L'Nar

Ready Room

Glover sat at the desk. He kept the disruptor trained on T'Rhiel, who stood primly in front of the desk. "This is preposterous!" The woman thundered.

"Yeah, believe me, I know it's a lot to swallow, but I did enter one of the temporal anomalies in this system and it sent me back through time."

"You really expect me to believe that?"

"No, but what I do expect you to tell me is your interest in me. Before, when you were interrogating me, with one of your mind probes, you...saw things about my past. You had questions about my mother. When we left on our fateful mission, you handed me an honor blade."

"I would never do anything of the sort."

Glover ignored the woman's protestation. "You told me my father would understand."

"This is insanity."

"What do you know about the Norkan colony?" Terrence asked. The woman blinked.

"My mother was from that colony," Glover said, not hiding his bitterness. "For years she was a prisoner of the Romulans."

"You-You're mother was a Norkan survivor?" T'Rhiel asked, her indignation ebbing slightly.

"Yes," Terrence said. "And what does that mean to you?"

"This-this is some trick?" T'Rhiel began looking around wildly. "Some holographic scenario or some drug induced deception to test my loyalty to the Empire."

"I don't give a damn about your loyalty to the Empire!" Glover said. "I want to know why you care so much about my mother!"

The woman continued looking around, trying to find the seams in the artifice, the holographic projectors weaving this lie. She cursed when she didn't find what she was looking for. Eventually she turned back to Glover, and regarded him, squinting.

"What do you want human?"

"That's not the answer to my question," Terrence replied.

"What are you doing here?"

"You're in no position to ask any questions," Glover said. "I've already explained what happened before, and why we need to do things differently this time if we are to have any chance at success."

"You think that tale you concocted is anywhere near believable?"

"No," Glover said, "But nonetheless it is the truth. If I didn't have knowledge of what had happened before, how could we have taken this ship?"

"Major Leta," T'Rhiel's face contorted with rage. "The traitor!"

"She was just as believing as you were," Glover said. "At first."

"I will not help you," the Romulan declared. "So you might as well kill me now."

"Deitra Khumalo was my mother," Terrence said. The woman took a step back.

“Was?” Was all she was able to say.

“Yes,” Glover nodded sadly. “She was lost in space some two years ago, on the *USS Tombaugh*.”

“This is another lie, more fiction,” T’Rhiel said. She threw her head back, as if talking to any voices listening beyond them. “But if the Empire demands all of me, if the Tal Shiar wants the very core of me, it shall have it. I will enter the Halls of Erebus with no lies in my heart.”

“I’m not following,” Glover admitted. “I don’t understand.

T’Rhiel looked at him squarely. “Deitra Khumalo was *my* mother!”

Imperial Warbird L’Nar **Engine Room**

Glover had feigned helping Cal check on the status of the forced quantum singularity powering the warbird but really he needed some space, and time to process it all.

“The Romulan subcommander is your sister?” Hudson didn’t disguise is incredulity. The man split his time between checking the black hole trapped within the rectangular engine core and Glover, who also had a maelstrom raging inside him.

Terrence shook his head as he absently inspected the nullifier cores. “Half-sister, but sister and blood all the same. Damn it, Valeris confirmed it.”

“You think Valeris can be trusted?”

“Yeah,” Terrence shook his head. “I mean, everyone has an agenda on this boat it seems, except you and me, but yet I don’t see what Valeris would gain from lying to me about this.”

“Well it does help bring T’Rhiel over to our side,” Cal pointed out.

“I hadn’t considered that,” Glover admitted. “T’Rhiel had demanded we awaken the ship’s chief medic, but I’m not taking that risk. She’s dangerous enough to have awake on the ship. We don’t need two senior officers about.”

“So, what’s the story?” Hudson asked, “But listen man, if you don’t want to discuss it.”

“No, it’s okay,” Terrence said, smiling at his friend. “I need to discuss it, and I would rather do that with you than anyone else aboard.” Hudson nodded in understanding.

“After the Romulans attacked the Norkan colony, my mother spent years as a prisoner. My father was part of the mission that rescued her from Romulan space. She never talked much about her time as a prisoner. And now I can see why. It appears one of the Romulans forced himself on her, and she conceived a child, a child taken from her. Though T’Rhiel sees it differently.”

“How so?”

"Her grandfather only told her of her true parentage on his deathbed. He told her that it had been a romance, one doomed by race and station. He told her that his son had loved my mother but that the family, including the grandfather, would not allow him to rescue her from bondage. Yet the son had compelled them to take T'Rhiel. That deathbed confession also revealed that they had surgically altered her appearance to look more Romulan." Glover touched his forehead. Cal nodded in understanding.

"That's sick," Hudson said, "All of it."

"Yes," Glover replied. "It is. But it has left T'Rhiel searching for her mother. Deitra was one of a handful of candidates. Before, when they ripped out details of my personal life, the truth was confirmed for T'Rhiel."

"But this time she's not buying?" Cal asked.

"No, not yet, but I think the evidence is working its way to that for her, but it will take time."

"Which is something we don't have much of," Hudson elbowed Glover playfully. "We're not all time travelers."

"Very funny," Glover said. He looked back at the nullifier cores but wasn't seeing them at all. "Having T'Rhiel's buy-in would be great, but even that might not save us."

"We've just got to have faith," Hudson clapped his shoulder.

Glover smiled. "You've always had that in spades. I wish I could be more like you."

"Now, that's one from you I've never heard before," Cal winked.

"No, seriously, I mean you and Gretchen. You share something I have yet to find."

"You're not really looking. You're still finding your place and the right woman for you," Hudson rejoined. "And I'm not judging. Gretchen was a godsend, and I know Ben feels the same about Jennifer. It'll happen for you one day, but only when you're ready for it. If you rush it, it won't turn out good for you."

"I'll keep that in mind," Glover smiled. "Man, what would I do without you?"

"Admiral Uhura was wise to put me on the team," Hudson joked.

"If only Ben were here," Terrence said.

"Then we would be unstoppable. The Borg would sue for peace," Hudson chuckled.

"If only that were so," Glover said.

Hudson glanced back down at the terminal. "Everything checks out with the propulsion system as best I can tell."

"That's good enough for me," Glover said, glad that some of the weight had been lifted from his shoulders. He really was glad that Cal was here; it gave him even more incentive to get everyone out alive. "Let's get back to it."

Imperial Warbird L'Nar

Main Bridge

Glover had ceded the command chair to Admiral Uhura. He was content at the helm, using the rudimentary knowledge of the Romulan language that his father had taught him to pilot the ship. If the situation wasn't so dire he would take a moment to revel in the fact that he was the first human to ever be behind the controls of a *D'deridex*. It was a heady experience, in spite of what awaited them. Or perhaps more so because of what lie in the depths.

This might be the last ship he flew. Leta was sitting beside him, at the weapon's console. He glanced at her, trying to get her attention, but the woman's eyes were glued on the screen in front of them. As Glover's should have been. But he had seen the Arx enough for a lifetime.

Instead he glanced back over the bridge. Though his decision had not gone over well, Terrence had convinced the group to awaken Subcenturion Gielo and Sublieutenant Rhean. Though he trusted Cal, Glover felt better with the ship's actual engineer in control of ship's propulsion. Hudson was watching the lanky man like a Banerian hawk though.

There had been no good reason to awaken Rhean that Glover was willing to share. He just knew the woman's desire to leave the Empire and he hoped to help her. Of course T'Rhiel hadn't complained. She wanted as many Romulans awakened as possible when she tried to retake the ship, and having a security guard on her side, would increase her chances.

But Glover doubted that T'Rhiel would get far with Xinran watching her while he was manning the operations station. Glover had placed Rhean at communications, hoping that would keep her safe enough from making any misguided attempt herself to fight back.

Valeris was close enough, at environmental controls, to stop Rhean if she had any crazy ideas.

T'Rhiel stood beside Uhura, with her arms folded tightly behind her back. The admiral wisely kept a disruptor in her lap.

Reluctantly Glover looked at the screen. The darkened tetrahedron nearly blocked out the stars. He knew it was just his imagination, but the Arx exuded evil.

"Lady Valeris," he said.

The woman cleared her throat, before addressing Rhean. "Open the channel."

"Channel open." The security guard replied.

"Taev," Valeris called out gingerly at first, like she was dipping her toe into an ocean and wasn't sure of how cold it would be. Glover just hoped that they had arrived before Taev had been completely consumed by the Borg.

They waited pensively for minutes, hearing nothing but the crackle of static. Without being prompted, Xinran offered, "Ship's sensors are detecting no weapons or propulsion changes with the Arx, for what it's worth, but the shielding for that monstrosity is impervious to *L'Nar's* sensors."

"M-Mother," the voice was scratchy, hesitant. Beside him, Leta's eyes widened. She turned to her mother.

"That's his voice," she said, half-disbelieving. "That's really him?"

"Taev," Valeris reached out again, ignoring her daughter. "Taev, it is me. It is your mother."

"M-Mother," the voice said again. The main viewer wavered, and the Arx's exterior was replaced with the image of a dark room. Inside it sat what was once a man, but half of his body had been replaced by machinery that was connected to the walls, or were the walls surrounding him. Taev looked different than before, as if he was being consumed by the infernal machinery, or being transformed by it.

"You have come for me," he shook his head. "Mother, why?"

"How could I not," Valeris said. She rushed to the main viewer and placed her hand there, as if to touch his face. "What have they done to you?"

"Oh Taev," Leta was at her mother's side. Taev's one working eye blinked and then refocused on Leta.

"Little bird, I-I have condemned you both to a fate...worse than death."

"We can save you, we *will* save you!" Leta promised.

Taev managed a smile. To see such a personal gesture coming from a being losing their individuality made even Glover's heart ache.

"It...it is too late. The song I hear it. It is an old song, an ancient one, far older than our history, and I hear it, and I am to be...one with it. I-I do not wish the same of you. Turn around and leave now."

"Not without you!" Leta pounded both hands against the viewer, with such force that it caused the screen to rattle.

Valeris tried to pull her back. "There is nothing we can do you son," the woman said, her emotion control slipping. Tears poured from her eyes as she laid her head against the screen. But she held enough of her composure to say, "We can't do anything for you, but...there is still time for you to do something for us, for the Empire and the Federation."

Taev's one eye narrowed. "What...is it?"

"Enough of this," T'Rhiel snarled. Before anyone could react, the Romulan had taken the disruptor from Admiral Uhura. The older woman was slumped in the chair. "I don't know what's going on. It appears that the Federation and the Borg are in collusion and have taken over the Arx. This is an act of war I will not abide." She waved the disruptor around. "Subcenturion Gielo and Sublieutenant Rhean disarm the enemy. If any of you resist," she jabbed the weapon into the insensate admiral's ribcage, "She dies."

Imperial Warbird L'Nar

Glover stood up slowly. He nodded at a creeping Xinran and Cal to stay their hands, while he placed both his own hands in the open, so that T'Rhiel could see that

he wasn't reaching for his firearm. "We don't have time for this Subcommander," he said slowly, looking directly at the Romulan.

"Gielo and Rhean, you heard me," she barked. Either had yet to move.

"Belay that order," Glover replied.

T'Rhiel's laughter was harsh. "Though you stole an imperial warbird, which I admit is impressive, you dare to command officers of the Imperial Fleet?!"

"Rhean," Glover turned to her. "I know you. You don't know that, you likely won't believe it, but I know you. I know what you want most, and I can get it for you."

The woman's face was a storm of emotions. She bit her lip, hope, fear, suspicion, and hate roiling in her gaze. "I know you want out," Glover pressed. "I can get you asylum."

"Don't listen to this drivel!" T'Rhiel commanded. "Both of you, I am ordering you to do your duty!"

"Their duty should be to save the Empire," Valeris turned away from the screen to face T'Rhiel. "That is what we are all trying to do, except you."

"Now a traitor to the Empire, a Vulcan at that, dares to tell me my duty?" T'Rhiel scoffed. "Once I vaporize this long-time thorn in the side of the Empire I should atomize you."

Leta stepped in front of her mother. "You'll have to go through me first."

"Certainly traitor," T'Rhiel leveled the weapon at her.

Uhura moved quickly for a one hundred twenty-five year old woman. She thrust an open palmed hand up, knocking off the Romulan's aim. The shot cut through the bulkhead as T'Rhiel stumbled back.

Xinran leaped at the woman. Sensing it, she turned quickly and fired. The blast seared the air just above the flying Romulan as he crashed into her. Even Glover winced as he heard the sound of T'Rhiel's head crack against the command chair. She fell to the deck, copper-scented blood quickly pooling around her head.

"We got to get her to sickbay," Glover ran to her.

"We should let her bleed out," Xinran said coldly. "She would do worse to us."

Terrence glared at the man. He wanted to bark back at the man, but if this were a Tzenkethi or Cardassian lying before him, would he feel the same way? Instead he said, "Someone beam us to the medical bay, quick! I won't lose my sister!"

Imperial Warbird L'Nar

Medical Bay

Dr. N'Ral pulled off his gloves. He took a towel from the tray of surgical equipment and wiped his sweaty brow. "I work much easier without duress," he said. Glover didn't remove his finger from the disruptor trigger.

"Is she going to be alright?" The woman was unconscious in a stasis unit, a sheet pulled up to her shoulders. Her head was wrapped in bandages.

"Yes," the medic answered. "Subcommander T'Rhiel suffered a linear skull fracture as a result of blunt force trauma. It was worse than it looked. The blood came from a vicious cut she received courtesy of hitting the command chair."

"Thank you Doctor," Glover nodded.

"Why? I've patched her up only so you could torture her all over again!"

"I did no such thing!" Terrence said, forcing himself not to point the weapon at the man.

"Really?" N'Ral huffed. "Then what are you doing here? And how did T'Rhiel get injured, and in such a manner?"

For a second Glover was going to refute then man, but then thought better of it. It might go easier on T'Rhiel if N'Ral thought she had been tortured by Starfleet marauders. "To reward you for your work, I'm going to put you back to sleep Doctor," Glover put on an evil grin. "And if you resist, I'll make it a permanent rest." He wagged his disruptor at the medic. If he was going to be a bad guy, might as well have fun doing it.

Imperial Warbird L'Nar

Main Bridge

When Glover got back to the bridge, he saw that Valeris and Leta were speaking with Taev again. Valeris turned to him. "Commander Glover, Taev will grant us access to the Arx."

He nodded tightly before looking at Rhean and Gielo. "I revived Chief Medic N'Ral to attend to the subcommander. She will be fine, though I placed her in a stasis chamber. She will not be causing us any more trouble. Will either of you?"

"No," Rhean said. "Somehow, you knew what I wanted, and now the subcommander knows as well. There is no safe place for me in the Empire now." And the woman didn't look as mollified by that revelation as Glover had assumed.

"I will not abandon my duties," Gielo stated, after swallowing the lump in his throat. "I'll face the consequences later, but right now, whatever is happening aboard the Arx is a greater threat to the Empire than the Federation poses."

"Fair enough," Uhura spoke up. The woman's voice was more weathered than usual. The sucker punch from T'Rhiel and the admiral's reaction might have been harder on her than Uhura was letting on. Glover, Cal, and Valeris, even Xinran had suggested the admiral at least undergo a medical scan, but she refused. "But if either one of you so much as look like you're going to sabotage this mission I'll place you in the airlock myself."

Hudson looked over at Glover with a troubled expression. The admiral's words had chilled his marrow as well. The velvet had just been taken off the iron glove. And Terrence had no doubt that Uhura would carry out that threat. The stakes were too great to be sidetracked now with petty political gamesmanship. The very fate of the Alpha and Beta Quadrants were at stake.

Imperial Warbird L’Nar **Main Shuttle Bay**

Glover passed by the *Securis*, hardly giving that tainted shuttle a thought. He did find another shuttle, of the same class as *Securis*, but he hoped this time their luck would be different.

Glover ran his fingers along the name stitched into the hull. “*Cetratus*, a proud name,” Rhean replied as she walked up to him. The woman was decked out in the black combat uniform that the rest of the landing party also wore. Rhean, like the rest, had left the helmets in the armory. But a disruptor rifle hung from the woman’s shoulder. Glover’s rifle was latched to his back by a strap running across his chest. Rhean had made certain they all carried small and sharp, double shadow knives. Of Reman manufacture the woman had told them. “The only good thing those people produced,” she had added with a disquieting derision.

“I hope this shuttle lives up to the name and does us proud,” Admiral Uhura said before walking past them and entering the shuttle. The woman seemed weighted down by the combat suit’s armor. Glover suppressed a frown. He didn’t want the centenarian coming with them, but the admiral had insisted and she was way too formidable to resist. He also couldn’t argue with her rationale that changing up the lineup this time might better their odds.

And to that, they had left Leta in command of the *L’Nar*, though she had put up one hell of a fight to join them, and Gielo keeping the engine running so they could escape quickly if things went sour and warn the Empire. Glover had wanted Cal to stay onboard the warbird but his old friend was insistent. Hudson was ready to face what was inside the Arx than potentially becoming a Romulan prisoner. The *L’Nar*’s crew was fully awake now and doubtlessly plotting to free themselves from their confinement. Valeris had advised that they couldn’t keep gassing the crew, because the effects of the gas could kill them. Leta had been more sanguine about taking that chance. However, Glover didn’t want the needless deaths of over a thousand Romulans. He just hoped that Leta could keep them at bay long enough for them to stop the Borg.

Perhaps the story Glover had told him about his mother’s horrendous experience had shaped Cal’s decision.

“Everything is ship shape,” Hudson said, poking his head out of the shuttle’s opening. It was as if Cal could read his mind. Terrence hoped Hudson couldn’t sense what he was thinking about right now.

Uhura and Valeris were already aboard. Glover bowed and gestured gallantly to Rhean, “After you milady.”

The woman chuckled. “Humans,” she muttered, shaking her head. She moved quickly up the gangplank, but not so quick that Glover didn’t receive a pleasing hip swing. Terrence smirked. He hoped he got to see where that sashay might lead to.

Romulan Imperial Shuttle Cetratus

Glover brought the *Cetratus* down gently among the multitude of shuttlecraft in the Arx shuttle bay. This time he had convinced Valeris to have Taev, who seemed to have some control over the functions of the massive station to allow them into the shuttle bay instead of the front door.

When the shuttle landed with a gentle clang, Terrence looked back at Valeris. The woman's eyes were closed and she was muttering something too softly for his human ears to decipher. Rhean, sitting across from him, dipped her head in respect, and even Xinran, sitting at the very back of the shuttle was appropriately solemn.

Glover and the other humans gave Valeris her moment. The woman opened her eyes, startled for just a second at being watched, before an impassive wall came down over her emotions. "According to Commander Glover's plan, I will proceed to meet with my son, to convince him to overload the polaric ion generators. Mr. Xinran and Sublieutenant Rhean will accompany me."

Terrence nodded. "And Admiral Uhura, Cal, and I will proceed to the polaric ion generator chamber to set plasma charges." Hudson held up a bag stuffed with the circular explosives. "This station is going to go boom one way or another."

"As humans are wont to say, 'Sounds like a plan'," Valeris actually smiled. This had the opposite effect on Glover than the woman likely thought it did. It was more disconcerting than reassuring. When the Vulcan dropped her adherence to a logical remove that told him she didn't care anymore about appearances, and to Terrence that meant she had lost hope and maybe had already given up. Not a good sign, he thought, but Glover did return her smile.

"Go see to your son Lady Valeris," Terrence encouraged. "Free him from the Borg and we'll take care of the rest."

The Arx

Hudson wasn't winded even though he lugged the bag of plasma charges on his back. Admiral Uhura was game, but the older woman was sucking wind. Glover wanted to stop, but there was no time. Around them full Borg and unfortunate Romulans was some Borg implants milled about, seemingly aimlessly, directed by commandments Terrence never hoped he would hear. The nearness of the Borg didn't bother Glover because he remembered some of his first experience aboard the Arx. And to their credit, neither Cal nor the admiral got their nerves under control fairly quickly.

"Where is the polaric ion generator chamber? I thought Taev had given Valeris the layout of his place?" Cal eventually asked. Glover had been dreading the question.

"Yes," the admiral added, between gulps of air. "Shouldn't we be there by now?"

Glover pulled up. He looked at them both. "We're not going to the polaric ion chamber."

"What?" Hudson looked confused, while Uhura raised a Vulcan-like eyebrow.

"Oh?" Was all the admiral said.

"Yes," Glover said. "I can't explain it all now. But I didn't tell you the whole story about what happened the first time we were here. There's something aboard the Arx, an artifact of immense power, that could be more dangerous even than this Borg incursion. I don't think the Romulans fully realize what they possess, but Valeris and Section 31 does. And we've got to stop her from obtaining it."

The Arx

Glover didn't know exactly where the Pandora Box was stored aboard the massive space station. So he concentrated and tried to open himself to it. Ben had told him the infernal things had a connection to him, and Terrence reached out to it.

It didn't take long before he felt icy tendrils in the back of his mind. He did his best to keep them there, to stop them from spreading across his consciousness, of taking deeper root inside him. Terrence didn't know what might happen if that occurred.

"Terrence I sure hope you know where you're going," Cal was now huffing. They had had to stop several times to allow Uhura to catch her breath. The legend was impressively only a few steps behind both men now.

"See if you are in this good a shape when you're past 120," she had quipped the last time they checked on her.

Terrence rounded a corner. "We're here." He said. He pulled out his disruptor pistol. Cal grasped the two-handed disruptor rifle. He tried to get in front of the admiral, but she was having none of it. Uhura brandished a disruptor as well.

"Do you really think these weapons are necessary?" Uhura asked.

"You know more about Section 31 and its operatives than either of us," Glover said. "Do you think we need to go in armed and prepared for a fight?"

Uhura held the pistol up. She nodded her head, her expression sad. "Yes," she replied. "I-I had just hoped, after all this time, things could be different with Valeris. That she could be redeemed."

"Sometimes, some people are beyond redemption," Glover intoned, "But Valeris, in the past, she did this only because she realized that she could not save Taev. She claimed taking control of the artifact would be a good thing."

"Well, if this is some all powerful weapon, do we really want the Romulans, or my God, the Borg, to have it?"

Uhura squinted at Cal. "And you think an unlawful group of fanatics, without official sanction, is really going to work in the best interests of the Federation or galactic peace?" She rejoined.

"Well, now that you put it that way," Hudson said, shrugging and looking sheepish.

"I am hoping, that since the timeline was changed that Valeris is attempting to save Taev before going for the artifact and we can secure it ourselves. But if that isn't the case, we have to be ready to take it from her."

"What about Xinran, or the sublieutenant?" Cal frowned.

"Valeris has killed before to further her mission," Uhura said, regret clotting her voice. "I just hope she hasn't turned down that road again."

Terrence approached the door and stood by it. He put his back to the door and used his free hand to activate its release. "We're about to find out Admiral."

The Arx

"I wasn't expecting this," Glover's stomach dropped.

"After such a long nap, I'm positively famished," Colonel Crassus held Leta in front of him, the emitter from his disruptor pressed hard into the woman's forehead.

A group of soldiers, including the brutish Lt. Ehrek, fanned out around him. There were no Borg in the room. Perhaps the Borg infestation of the Arx's systems had not catalogued this room.

"How?" Uhura asked.

"It was Gielo," Leta said, clenching her teeth as Crassus squeezed her arm. The woman's face was a patchwork of varying green bruises. Her cheeks were swollen and her lips split, and dribbled blood. It was all Terrence could do not to lunge at Crassus. "The little *veruul* tricked me," the woman added. Crassus ground the pistol deeper into Leta's temple. The woman winced.

"Enough talking," he commanded. Glover moved toward the colonel, drawing several weapons in his direction. "I wouldn't take another step if I were you Commander Glover."

"Subcenturion, no, *Centurion* Gielo is a loyal soldier of the Empire," Crassus explained. "Unlike this...*mongrel* here," he spat, throwing the woman to the deck in front of Terrence. "I should've known you can't trust a half breed."

"Where is the rest of your band?" Crassus inquired. He nodded for some of his soldiers to go out, in search of them.

"I'm not telling you anything," Terrence answered.

Crassus stroked his tuft of black chin hair. "Perhaps all you need is the right motivation. A mind probe generally works. And if that fails, the mind-sifter never does."

"At least there is one Romulan that admits Klingon technology is better," Glover quipped.

Crassus frowned, and then he smiled. "Nice attempt to goad me Lieutenant Commander. I'm going to have a lot of fun with you. I have so many questions, many about your father. His knowledge of the Romulan Empire and my people is impressive...and troubling. I will find out how he has come by this knowledge."

"But first," the man chanced to take his eyes off the Starfleet officers. He picked up the container resting on a stand. Glover's chest thudded. The Romulan held the box in his gloved hand. "This is what you came for, isn't it?" He waved it in the human's direction and it lit with an unholy glow.

"How-how did you know about the artifact?" Terrence asked, doing his best to keep his fear at bay. He prayed that the container didn't open, even for Crassus's sake.

"I'm a colonel in the Tal Shiar," Crassus said, as if that explained everything.

"I'm sorry Terrence," Leta said, still on her hands and knees. Her head was down, her hair covering her battered face, and she refused to look at him in the eyes. "Mother confided in me about the artifact...Colonel Crassus subjected me to a mind probe," the woman shuddered and then fell to the ground.

The colonel looked at Ehrek. "About Major Leta's condition, well, she wasn't the most cooperative interrogee, and Lt. Ehrek can be quite exuberant in his duties." Glover glared at the man, and Ehrek grinned, eager for the challenge.

Crassus glanced at back at the major dismissively, as if Leta was a piece of trash. "More importantly, how did *you* know about this artifact Mr. Glover? One of our science vessels discovered it among Debrune ruins on Yadalla Prime. So far the scientists here have not been able to ascertain its secrets, or even unlock it to see what's inside."

"And you should be grateful for that," Glover said.

"Is that so?" Crassus pondered that for a moment, savoring his position of authority. "And how would *you* know that?"

"We've...encountered similar artifacts before," Glover admitted. "They are extremely destructive."

"Weapons you're gathering to strike at the Empire," the colonel charged.

"No," Terrence protested. "I didn't say that!"

"You didn't need to," Crassus's expression hardened. "You were attempting to collect another one of these weapons to use against us. You didn't care about the Arx or this Borg threat. As far as you were concerned, these cybernetic demons could consume the whole of the Star Empire!"

"I didn't say that either," Glover hotly rejoined. "I would never want that!"

"Perhaps everyone should calm down," Uhura suggested.

Crassus aimed his disruptor at the admiral. Uhura looked at it without blinking, her expression impassive. "Ah, the great, vaunted Admiral Uhura. For you to fall into my clutches is the accomplishment of a lifetime. I could ride that victory all the way to the Chairmanship of the Tal Shiar," he paused to admire the alien

script on the box, "But now, with this artifact in my possession, you seem so small bore."

The green beam spit out of the disruptor, catching Uhura squarely in the chest. The woman died silently, here one moment and then dissolved into green-tinged atoms a moment later.

"My God! Admiral Uhura!" Cal rushed forward, prompting the Romulans to aim at him. Glover threw an arm up in front of his friend. Terrence marshalled his own anger and grief, which was helped by the numbing shock he felt.

"Not only have I discovered a great weapon for the Empire, I am now the slayer of Admiral Uhura. She's been an impediment to our plans for a long time, nearly a century," Crassus was extremely confident. "Commander Charvanek is avenged."

"You bastard!" Hudson roared. Glover held his friend back.

"No, Cal," Terrence said, trying to hold it together himself. His emotions were surging. Uhura had been a hero of his because she had been a personal hero and role model for his grandmother. She had regaled him with tales about the legendary *Enterprise* and Uhura. And seeing the woman, in the flesh, reminded him of his grandmother, and Deitra, and Glover felt all of their losses at once.

Terrence staggered, overcome with grief and shaking with rage. He was trying to keep the red curtain from covering his eyes and tossing his life away in a vain attempt to choke the life out of Crassus. Even if he could reach the smug Tal Shiar colonel, Ehrek would cut him down before he could touch the *petaQ*.

"I find Lt. Commander Glover useful," Crassus said, turning his disruptor to Cal. "But Lt. Hudson on the other hand..."

"No," Glover demanded. "Don't!"

"The lieutenant is a long way away from the embassy," Crassus said. "Plenty of dangers in space travel. What do you think Lt. Ehrek, should a transporter accident suffice?"

"Certainly sir," Ehrek smirked. Hudson pressed against Terrence, prepared to go down fighting. Glover wanted to let the man go, but he couldn't. If there was a chance of survival, for Cal to see Gretchen again, Glover had to figure it out and quickly.

"You'll have to kill us both," Terrence declared.

"Don't tempt me," Crassus pointed his pistol downward. "Hudson lives...for now, but certainly you have no further use for the *mongrel*; or rather I hope you got some use out of it."

"No!" Terrence broke for the colonel. He yanked for his disruptor, anticipating being vaporized at any second. But instead of the whine of disruptors, the room filled with the whine of transporters. Several green shafts appeared throughout the room, materializing into Borg drones.

Stunned, Crassus stepped away from the downed woman and aimed his weapon hurriedly back at Glover.

It was then that Leta struck. The woman lunged at Crassus, tackling him at the knees. She unintentionally saved the man's life as the Romulan soldiers cut loose, the room seared and filled with the smell of disruptor fire as they attacked the drones. They took down the first wave easily, but not the second, and then the third.

Crassus kicked wildly, smashing into Leta's face. The woman let go and the colonel pulled roughly away from her. The Tal Shiar agent reached for the box that had skittered across the floor.

Glover took immeasurable pleasure in hearing the bones crack in Crassus's hand when he stomped down on the man's hand. Crassus glared up at him, holding one hand. Glover aimed his disruptor at him. "This is for Admiral Uhura," he said.

"Down!" Cal shouted, knocking Glover to the ground, seconds before several disruptor beams would've sliced through him.

Momentarily disoriented, Terrence looked around. "The box," he muttered. "We've got to get the box."

Hudson was crouched over him, firing at the Romulans. "Another time buddy. I'll be damned but I think these Borg are on our side!"

Glover looked up and saw the drones marching on the Romulans. Glover caught Crassus, still cradling his hand, running behind a barricade the Romulans had constructed. Thankfully the man wasn't holding the Pandora Box.

If he didn't have it, then who did? Cal tapped his shoulder, "Let's find some cover."

"Leta," Glover remembered. He saw the woman was stirring, with beams flying over her.

"I'll get her," Cal pledged.

"No," Glover said. "You find us some cover. I'll go get her."

"But you're out of it," Hudson wouldn't budge.

"That's an order Lieutenant!" Glover snapped.

"Damn you for pulling rank at a time like this," Cal replied after firing off several shots. "Just take care out there buddy. I'll cover you as best I can."

"We're going to make it out of here Cal," Glover promised. "I've been in worse situations."

"Name one?" Hudson challenged.

"Now is not the time to test my veracity," Terrence said. He lifted his pistol and took out a Romulan setting up a sniper's perch on a second level of the room. The woman fell to the ground, within a swarm of Borg.

Glover ran to Leta. "It's me, Terrence," he said quickly as the woman whipped around, ready to strike him. He held out a hand. "Come on."

He grabbed her under the arms before she could protest and half-dragged her to the crates Hudson had set up shop behind. "What the hell is going on with the drones?" He asked.

Now, the remaining Romulans, including Crassus, had brandished their honor blades and were hacking at the Borg, their disruptors now useless against the drones' personal shields.

The colonel caught Glover's gaze. He drew his blade across a drone's throat, the dark liquid showering his face. He didn't blink once. His glare could've burned through tritanium.

Before other drones could attack him, the colonel pulled out a communicator and barked into it.

"Damn it!" Glover said, tossing caution as he lunged from behind the crates and began shooting at Crassus. But it was too late. Crassus, Ehrek, and several other Romulans were teleported away.

Once the Romulans had dematerialized, the Borg ceased fighting. The stood quietly, among a pile of dead Romulan soldiers. Hudson and Leta cautiously joined Glover from behind the crates.

"Lower your weapon Cal," Glover suggested. "Let's not provoke these guys."

"Seems like they've fallen asleep," Hudson replied, after giving them a once over. Glover retrieved the Pandora Box. Thankfully it was no longer glowing. It was almost like it was waiting, for what, Terrence didn't want to know.

"My mother," Leta said, with a start, "Where is she? What have they done with her?"

"I am here Daughter," Valeris's voice issued from somewhere above in the room. The trio looked up and around, but didn't see any speakers.

"Where are you?"

"I am with Taev," the Vulcan replied.

"Taev?" Leta smiled through the bruises. Her eyes wet with tears. "Taev is alive? He's okay?"

"Taev is with me," Valeris said cryptically. *"But there is not much time. You must leave. Xinran and Rhean are already at the shuttle bay. And you need to leave now."*

"But what about you and Taev?" Leta asked, a tremor in her voice.

"I am staying...with Taev," Valeris said, her tone unemotional, but Glover imagined he heard sadness underneath. *"There isn't much time for him. The Borg transformation is almost complete. The only thing keeping Taev my son, your brother, are my mind melds."*

"No!" Leta declared. "I'm coming to you! If you stay, I'm staying with you and Taev!"

"You are leaving," Valeris replied, her tone final. *"Mr. Glover, get Leta to safety. Clan Martius must continue."*

"No, not without you!" Leta shrieked

"It is too late for me," Valeris said.

"I'm not leaving!" The major declared.

"Taev can't hold back forever," Valeris replied, her voice starting to sound mechanical, "I've heard the song. It is powerful, intoxicating..."

"We've got to go," Glover placed his hand gently on Leta's shoulder. The woman yanked away from him.

"I'm not going anywhere."

"Please...Daughter...please," Valeris pleaded.

"Fly...Little Bird," Taev's voice boomed through the room, rattling. *"Taev...is disappearing. Discentis was lost, and the Collective needs a new speaker. I...have been chosen. I am being...changed...into...Canor. Canor...of Borg."*

"We've got to get the hell out of here Terrence," Hudson prodded.

Glover grabbed Leta and held on to her. "We're going and if I have to knock you out again, I'll do it."

Leta glared at him through the tears. "But my mother and brother..."

"They are holding back the Borg so that you can survive. To not go is to dishonor the sacrifices they are making," Terrence replied.

Leta lowered her head and shivered, grabbing herself. "Oh...okay."

"Let's go," Hudson turned toward the door.

"Farewell," Valeris said before three transporter beams snatched them.

The Arx

Glover stood in hell, or the closest thing he had ever seen of it. Slick, black, biomechanical tendrils ran from the floor and down the ceiling, all going into the pale figure hanging in front of him. The man's head was bald, the other side sprouted with electrodes.

"Taev," Terrence said, looking up. He stanchd his fear. The half-man/half-machine writhed before looking down at him. The bonds lifting him up moved as he moved down to look Glover in the eye. Terrence forced himself not to take a step back. The Romulan had one remaining eye. The other had been replaced by a crimson eyepiece that bathed Glover in an intense blood red light.

The human squinted, but still maintained his gaze. With his one remaining arm, Taev pointed at the Pandora Box.

Glover pulled it close to his chest. "No."

"Yes Mr. Glover," Valeris said, suddenly behind him. Terrence jumped, nearly tripping on the cords coiled around the room like serpents. The woman was deathly pale, her green veins showing across her face. She lurched more than walked, clutching her midsection, her hands curled into claws.

"Commander Glover, they know," the Vulcan gasped. She touched Taev's cheek with one clawing hand. The man closed his remaining eye, a serene smile replacing briefly replacing the machine coldness.

Valeris still stroked her son's cheek while she turned to Glover. "I've mind melded with Taev, I had to ascertain the Borg's plans for the Empire and the Alpha

Quadrant. But in our merging of minds, the call of the Collective was overwhelming. It scooped everything out of me, including what Section 31 had told me about the artifacts."

"I'm not handing it over, not to you and definitely not to the Borg," Glover declared.

"You have no choice in this," Valeris said, struggling to stand upright. "It is taking everything I have to fight the nanites inside me, calling to me, even with Taev's help. With what's left of me, let me help you, let me do my duty and save the Federation."

In response, the Pandora Box began to glow and Glover felt it thrumming. "Oh no," he muttered.

"Yes," Valeris replied. She straightened her fingers as best as possible and held out her hand. "Give it to me."

Terrence backed away. The cords wrapped around his legs, stopping him. "We...don't have much time left," Valeris warned. "Taev is becoming Canor...once that is complete, my son will be gone and all will be lost."

"Hurry...Mother," Taev gasped before coughing up greenish black spittle. "It's inside me, freezing my insides, deadening..."

"I know the artifact is connected to you, I know what happened in the Pandorian system," Valeris got out before both she and Taev convulsed at the same time.

"I won't give the Borg a weapon that can allow them to conquer the galaxy!" Glover roared. He fought against the tendrils sliding down his arms, snaking toward the box.

"Resistance...is futile," Valeris said, her voice replaced by something beyond emotion. "Your compliance is inevitable."

"The-the galaxy will fall to us," Taev said. "But-but Commander, you can choose *which* galaxy."

"No, no," Glover shook his head. "Don't make me."

"It is not me," Taev said. The spark of life left his one good eye before he was consumed by the tendrils.

"It's happening," Valeris fell to the ground. On her hands and knees, she looked at Glover. Naked fear was in her eyes. The tendrils slithered over her, up her legs and arms, merging her with the floor.

"You...decide."

"Oh God," Terrence muttered. He hated himself but he rifled through the parallel realities Ben had showed him, one rising above the rapids of thoughts. And that nanosecond was all it took for the artifact seized on it. "No!" He tried to reach out, but the cords were too strong.

The box floated from his hands. Inside it, the glowing grew with intensity.

"It-it's beautiful," Valeris said as she looked up. The woman was crying. She turned to Glover. Her face wet, she smiled. "Thank you." She lifted her arm, now a tendril at him. "Good-bye."

The Arx

Glover emerged with a disruptor in his face. His recent fear was replaced by a more welcome one, as his eyes focused on the barrel, momentarily transfixed.

"So you made it," Xinran said, dropping his pistol. Glover uncrossed his eyes.

"What the hell Xinran?" Hudson grouched. Cal ran to Glover's side and caught him as Terrence's legs gave out. Cal sat him down gently on the deck.

"What happened Terrence?" His friend asked. The deck trembled. Glover knew there wasn't much time.

"Where's my mother?" Leta pressed as she joined Hudson.

"Where's that container?" Cal asked.

"We-we," he looked up at them both, unable to explain what had just happened to him. What he had just done. "We...have to leave...now."

"Mother," Leta said, holding herself.

"We will grieve later," Glover said, using the closest bulkhead to push himself up. "I promise. But right now, we got to live this place...before..."

"Before what?" Cal asked, hanging close by in case Glover's legs collapsed again.

"Before...we disappear with this station," Terrence said. "It's...leaving this realm of space, and we only have moments before it happens!"

The Arx

The shuttle bay doors cracked open. Glover mouthed a silent thanks to Valeris and Taev. Whatever was left of them, they were giving their last bit of individuality to helping them escape. Terrence always felt better behind the yoke and with this vessel it was no different. If he had the time to marvel being at the helm of a *Vas Hatham* he would've wasted it, but there was no time.

"What's the name of this tug anyway?" Terrence asked.

"The *Vrax*," Hudson called out. Glover nodded in appreciation.

"Sounds like a good enough name to me." He smiled at Leta's snort behind him.

Rhean sat across from him, at the ops console. "Have you ever flown a *Vas Hatham* Commander?" The woman teased and Glover was grateful for the flirtation. That was one distraction that would always be welcome.

"I'm a quick learner," Glover promised. He was happy to have his mind taken off what had happened with Admiral Uhura, Valeris, Taev, and where he knew the Pandora Box was sending the Arx.

"This thing has a cloaking device?" Glover asked. He was pleased that the old bird-of-prey's internal systems had been retrofitted. The interior didn't look that different than what he saw on the *L'Nar*.

"Yes," Rhean said. "I've already checked."

"And the armaments?" Terrence asked. "What are we dealing with?"

"A full complement, disruptors, phasers, and photon torpedoes," Leta said from what had to be the weapons console.

Glover whistled. "Nice." Terrence noted that Cal and Xinran were huddled around what he assumed was the engineering console.

"We're going to need all of it," Rhean said as she took over the operations station beside Glover. "The *L'Nar* is still out there. Waiting on us."

"You don't think Colonel Crassus would've left to alert the Fleet?"

"He'll do that," Rhean looked at him squarely, "After he's finished with us."

Imperial Bird-of-Prey Vrax

Glover took the *Vrax* through the half-opened bay. The doors had stopped opening as the station began to tremble harder. The dorsal side of the hull scraped against the top of the half opened door. The screeching metal resounded through the ship. Glover winced and saw Rhean was doing the same thing.

"Fast learner huh?" Rhean asked, pursing her lips. Terrence shrugged and Cal chuckled. Rhean's console blinked and she directed her attention to it. When she looked up, the smile was gone.

"Sensors are detecting massive power fluctuations throughout the station," Rhean reported.

"What kind of fluctuations?" Glover asked.

The woman glanced at the instrument panel again, her face scrunching up. "The fluctuations are both temporal *and* extradimensional in nature."

"What?" Xinran asked.

"Yeah," Hudson added, "Come again?"

"We've got to leave now," Glover said. "Take us to full warp."

"But what about the *L'Nar*?" Rhean asked.

"Hopefully Crassus won't guess what's about to happen to the Arx and get caught in the wake," Glover opined.

"Spatial rifts are starting to open throughout the station," Rhean informed them.

"The propulsion system's a go. Punch it Terrence," Cal urged it, his voice on edge.

"You don't have tell me twice," Glover said as he took them to warp and the stars stretched into infinity as the Arx was pulled beyond time and space.

Imperial Bird-of-Prey Vrax

The bird-of-prey snapped back into regular space like a rubber band. The action threw Glover against the console, knocking the air from his lungs. He rubbed his sore sternum as she sat back up. Immediately he turned to Rhean. The woman was looking at him with a concerned expression.

Terrence's discomfort was mollified when he saw that Rhean was strapped in. "When were you going to tell me the seats were equipped with seatbelts?"

"You seemed to be so confident in your knowledge of the bird-of-prey I thought you would have figured it out," the sublieutenant shrugged.

"Funny," Glover replied before he swiveled around to check on everyone else. He pursed his lips. "Really guys?" Everyone was secured in their chairs. "Was no one going to tell me this boat had seatbelts?" Rhean, Leta, and Hudson all laughed. Even Xinran smiled. The levity was needed, even if it came at Terrence's expense.

"So, where are we?" Leta eventually asked. Glover looked to Rhean.

"On the edge of the Chaltok system," she said after a moment.

"Status report," Glover requested. Everyone quickly chimed in. He was relieved that the ship hadn't incurred any major damage beyond a few shorted circuits, which filled the control center with an unpleasant aroma. "Any sign of the *L'Nar*..."

"Or the Arx?" Leta added.

"No," Rhean said, but she didn't look pleased.

"What's wrong Rhean?" Terrence asked.

"The *L'Nar* could be out there. The *D'deridex*-class has a superior cloak. If the attack us we won't know until they are right up on us."

"Great," Hudson grouched. "We're still not out of the woods yet."

"We won't be until we cross the Neutral Zone," Xinran said.

"Let's proceed to the Zone," Glover said. "We've got to let Starfleet Command know about the Borg. There could be other Borg ships out there."

Terrence turned back to the helm. "This is going easier than expected," Cal muttered. Glover tensed.

"Why did you have to say *that* Cal?" Glover looked at the ceiling, but not back at his friend.

"Oh, sorry, I was thinking out loud," the man's voice was sheepish. Before he could say more, Rhean bellowed.

"Detecting massive tachyon spike!" The woman said.

"Hit our cloak!" Glover barked. "Initiating evasive maneuvers, now!" But before Terrence inputted the change in direction, the ship was knocked sideways and Terrence was thrown from his seat.

He scrambled to reclaim it, ignoring the aches running throughout his body. Though everyone else was still belted in, they didn't look any better than he felt. He sat back down, his board filled with ominous green markers.

The ship rumbled again as it was pelted by several more volleys. "Warp drive is down!" Hudson yelled. "We do have impulse engines!"

"Cloaking device inoperative," Xinran added.

"What about weapons?!" Glover called out. The ship rattled again, this time causing several consoles to spark as the room filled with smoke. He heard a sigh of pain and then a heavy thud. Glover swiveled around.

"It's Xinran Terrence," Hudson called out, "I got him!"

"Weapons?! Weapons?! Leta!" Glover demanded as he sat forward again. He looked over at Rhean. The woman's eyes were wet likely from the stinging smoke, but her glare was determined.

"Our shields are barely holding but still have full weapons," she answered after a moment. Her voice sounded odd, slightly gurgling. Terrence forced himself not to peer through the growing smoke to check on her. That would have to wait.

"What are we going to do Commander?" Rhean asked.

"The *L'Nar* just knocked on our door," he replied, "I think we should greet them."

He swung the ship around hard, testing the warship's already stressed structural integrity field.

In the main viewer he saw the proud prow of the *L'Nar*. The massive green bird was waiting for them, a lazy predator toying with its food. Glover didn't know if they would survive this, but at least he hoped to give that bastard Crassus a severe case of indigestion.

"Major Leta, prime our weapons at the *L'Nar*," Glover ordered. He hoped the woman was still conscious to carry that out.

"Primed...Commander," she sounded winded.

"*L'Nar* is hailing us," Rhean said.

"Screw him," Glover replied.

"Audio communication is coming in," Rhean said.

"I said," Terrence replied.

"*L'Nar* overriding our communication system," Rhean replied.

"Damn that *D'deridex* advantage," Glover grouched.

"Commander Glover, I can't see you, but I *know* it's you," Crassus's voice was light, conversational, and that infuriated Terrence even more. "Most impressive how you escaped from the Arx. And even more impressive that you destroyed it. Did you know that the station wasn't built by the empire? We altered it to fit our needs of course, but the Arx itself, it was a structure we discovered, long abandoned by some now forgotten alien species, who no doubt were a great power...in their time. But now they are not even memories, and I do everything within my ability to insure that the Romulan Star Empire does not suffer the same fate. And you can help me in

this noble endeavor. We lost that artifact unfortunately, but there are others...and you have a connection with them. I will divine why that is and use it to the benefit of the empire."

"Like hell," Glover spat.

"Well, it doesn't have to be like Erebus," Crassus replied, "Unless you are noncompliant."

"I would rather die than help you, or serve your empire!" Terrence declared.

"Don't test my patience," Crassus warned. "I spared the *Vrax* to offer you this proposal. You don't have just your life to consider, but those of your compatriots. I will let all of them go. The traitors can live in exile in your Federation, Lt. Hudson can go back to the embassy or wherever he prefers, but if you continue to defy me, I will slaughter them all and still capture you. Lower your shields and prepare to be boarded."

"Don't listen to him Terrence," Hudson said. The man was behind his chair now, like he had had Glover's back all along. "I couldn't live with myself if that happened. We got into this together, and we'll die together if necessary."

Glover looked at Rhean. The woman nodded. "I do want to escape the empire, but if they have some nefarious plan for you that would increase their reach, then there's really no escaping them."

"What about you Leta?" Glover asked. He was troubled when the woman didn't answer.

He looked up at Cal. Hudson scowled. "I'll go check on her." The man had trotted off before Glover remembered that Xinran had also gone silent.

"I've listened to your compatriots' prattle, but what is *your* answer Commander?" The colonel demanded.

"You already have it," Glover said. "All hands, brace for impact and prepare for ramming speed." Crassus's snorted before cutting the line.

"*L'Nar* is powering their forward weapons banks," Rhean said, "And increasing their forward shielding."

"Good," Terrence smirked. "That's exactly what I would do if I expected to be hit with a fast moving object," he input a course, "and that's why we're going under that beast."

Before Rhean could respond, Glover jerked the ship forward and under the *L'Nar*. Glover only had seconds to take in the massive bird itched into the ventral hull before Rhean unloaded, marring the artwork with nearly their full complement of weapons.

They were past the *L'Nar*, moving at full impulse. Terrence hit the aft screens. He saw the great starship listing.

Glover chuckled and Rhean clasped his shoulder and squeezed. "You did it Commander!" The woman beamed.

"No, we did it," Glover replied. "Now, let's see how talkative Colonel Crassus is now. Open hailing frequencies."

The main viewer switched to a smoke-filled bridge. Colonel Crassus was hanging on to his command chair. A jagged green cut ran diagonally across his face. Glover's heart pinched when he saw Subcommander T'Rhiel standing stoically behind him. Thankfully the woman had not been injured. He looked at her, and she met his gaze in response. Glover was hoping that something would pass between them, some spark or connection, but the woman's expression was impassive.

The idea that he had a sister out there, a Romulan sibling, and one that belonged to the dreaded Tal Shiar at that, was mind boggling, but it was down the list of fantastic things he had encountered on this mission. It would take time to process it all, but Glover couldn't wait to get back to Federation space to tell his father.

"It's not over," Crassus declared. "I will hunt you down. I will find you!"

"After hours of repairs," Glover said jauntily, "And we'll be long gone by then."

"The Tal Shiar's reach is vast," the colonel boasted.

"And you would admit your failures to the rest of the Tal Shiar?" Terrence challenged. "Under your watch you lost the Arx, the artifact, and you were bested by Starfleet officers in a century old bird-of-prey, I don't think you will be crowing about that."

Crassus pulled himself up right. He swayed, but kept his eyes locked on Glover. "This isn't over."

"Sir, we still have weapons," Rhean muttered. "We can hit them where their shields are weakest, maybe cause the singularity to lose containment, and destroy the vessel before it can warn others."

Glover knew that was the smartest thing to do, but he couldn't. He couldn't consign T'Rhiel to death.

"No," he shook his head. "There's been enough dying today. Let's just get out of here."

"It's not over!" Crassus shook his fist, enraged that Glover was already moving past him. Terrence had turned away from the braying Tal Shiar colonel to set a course for the Neutral Zone.

"It is over," Glover was pulled back to the screen at T'Rhiel's voice. Crassus writhed and screamed as the tip of the subcommander's honor blade poked through his abdomen, where Glover knew the Vulcan, and Vulcanoid heart resided. Crassus seized up, before T'Rhiel pulled the murder weapon roughly from the dying man.

She eyed Glover, her expression darker than the deepest depths of space. "We will meet again Commander." Was all she said before the image shifted back to the listing *L'Nar*.

Rhean made a sound close to a human whistle. "Commander Glover, Subcommander T'Rhiel is not to be trifled with. You've just made a formidable enemy."

Glover smothered his smile. No, not an enemy, a sister. T'Rhiel had just saved her life, and his.

Imperial Bird-of-Prey Vrax

Medical Bay

Major Leta reached out and cradled Glover's hand in her own. Terrence didn't know if it was the drugs coursing through the woman's system, but he enjoyed the gesture just the same. Leta had a serene expression on her face as she laid on the biobed. Rhean, who had some combat medic training, had done an admirable job stitching up the woman's chest wound. Glover could see just the tip of the stitching above the sheet Leta was under. During Crassus's attack, Leta's console had exploded, lodging a shard of metal into the woman's chest. Thankfully it hadn't been in her abdomen.

That made him think of Crassus's final moments, and Glover shuddered. Leta's smile spread. "I didn't take you to be the squeamish type." She had mistaken his shiver to the sight of her wound.

"I'm not, but I don't like the idea of you suffering any harm," Terrence said. Leta closed her eyes and purred.

"You have quite the golden tongue human," She replied.

"That's uh, silver tongue," Glover gently corrected.

"They're both tongues, does it matter?" The major challenged. And Glover was glad to see that she hadn't lost her old fire.

"I guess it doesn't," Terrence conceded.

"I like...tongues," the woman said, her eyes fluttering open, and her cheeks greening with embarrassment. "That came out wrong."

"Nah, I think you got it right, and I couldn't agree more," Glover said before bending down to kiss the woman's forehead. "Perhaps we can...explore that once you're recovered."

Imperial Bird-of-Prey Vrax

Main Bridge

When Glover entered the bridge, Rhean swiveled out of his chair and Hudson gave up the operations console for the Romulan. "How are they?" Cal asked.

"Leta is recovering nicely, thanks to the Sublieutenant," he nodded in her direction and the woman smiled. Glover's expression grew dourer, "But Xinran is still in a coma."

"I'm sorry, but his injuries were very severe," Rhean said, "I did the best I could. Inducing a coma was the best way to save his life."

"No judgment here," Terrence waved away her apology. "Cal and I couldn't have done any better and more than likely worse." Xinran had been nearly electrocuted in a feedback loop from his console to the adjoining bulkhead monitors, catching him in a net of electricity.

"Terrence is right Sublieutenant," Hudson added.

The woman looked at both of them, a pinched expression on her face. "Sublieutenant? I think it's safe to say that I'm not longer a member of the Imperial Fleet. I never belonged there to begin with," she added, and that made Glover think of how easily the woman had offered to destroy the ship she had served on.

"So what's our status?" Glover asked as he made his way over to the helm.

"We're an hour away from the Federation border," Hudson said. "I can't believe how easily it's been traversing Romulan space and crossing into the Neutral Zone since our tussle with the *L'Nar*."

Glover winced. "Why did you have to say *that* Cal?"

Hudson stood behind Terrence and clapped his shoulder. "Stop being so superstitious."

"I'll stop being superstitious once we are back in the Federation," Terrence rejoined. But as the *Vrax* neared their destination, Glover allowed himself to relax, as the adrenaline started to pour out of him and the dark memories of what he had experienced aboard the *Arx* flooded in. How was he going to explain the loss of Admiral Uhura, Lady Valeris, or sending the *Arx* into another reality? What had he doomed the denizens of that reality to? The Borg threat had been neutralized, but for how long?

The things were still heavy on his mind as they entered Federation space. "Hallelujah!" Cal pumped a fist. Rhean's swallow was audible. Now the consequences of her decision to defect got even realer for her.

Rhean glanced at her terminal in frowned. Glover's stomach tightened. The universe delayed getting them back for Hudson's assertion, but Terrence knew the pushback was coming.

"Sensors are detecting a Starfleet ship, approaching on an attack vector!"

Glover checked the information on his console. "*Griffin*-class," he replied. "Perimeter action vessel."

"Border Service," Hudson added, his brow wrinkling.

"Hail them," Glover told Rhean. "But I'll do the talking."

Before Terrence could speak, he was interrupted, "Romulan vessel, this is Captain Cicero Donners of the *USS Blackhaw*; you have illegally crossed into Federation territory. If you do not exit Federation territory and return to Romulan space immediately, this violation will be considered an act of war!"

"The *Blackhaw* is charging weapons," Rhean said, her voice even, though Terrence could sense the strain beneath.

"Lower shields and power down weapons," Glover ordered.

"What?" The woman was incredulous.

"We're among friends," Terrence explained.

"They don't seem too friendly to me," Rhean shot back.

"Just do it," Glover said tightly. The woman huffed but followed his command.

"The *Blackhaw* is still on an attack vector, with weapons primed."

"Hail them again," Terrence said.

"Hailing frequencies open," Rhean reported. Glover spoke quickly and persuasively enough that the *Blackhaw* skipper requested visual communication.

The dark-skinned man stroked his mustache, his grin beaming. "We'll I'll be damned. Lt Commander Glover eh? Welcome back to the Federation!"

Starbase 23

Early 2365

"What a way to ring in the New Year, eh Cal?" Glover held up his glass as he watched the fireworks display outside one of the lounge's many ports. The *Starships Essex, Valiant, Exeter, Odyssey, and Helena* were lighting up the void, eliciting cheers from everyone in the lounge. Hudson didn't look so enthused though.

He hadn't even touched his champagne. "What's wrong buddy?"

"I miss Gretchen," Hudson said. "They won't even let me talk to her. I'm surprised they let us join in these festivities." He glanced at the beefy guards keeping a respectful enough distance from them. Both Terrence and Cal had been given innocuous utility mustard colored jumpsuits to hide their presence there. No one paid much attention to the station's work crew.

"I know it's weird," Glover admitted. "I don't like it either. I can't even talk to my dad, and he's an *admiral* for goodness sakes. But the things that went down Starfleet rightfully wants to keep a lid on, and until the higher ups get their pound of flesh from us, we're guests here." Terrence glanced over at Rhean and Leta.

His heart was lifted to see that Leta was back on her feet. The woman was fighting her grief as ably as she had dispatched her injury. The starbase's commander had a few stocks of Romulan ale and both women held glasses filled with the blue fire.

Rhean was more into the party atmosphere. She seemed made for the lavender low-cut dress that revealed both ample cleavage and her shapely legs. She was shorter, curvier than Leta. The major's athletic frame was covered by a long, black dress, with just a slit running up one leg. Both women struck an alluring physical contrast.

Sensing his gaze, and likely his desire, Rhean walked over to him. She entwined her fingers with his and pulled him toward her. "Join us," she said, looking at Glover and Cal. Hudson shook his head.

"Thanks, but no thanks; I'm done for the evening."

"Ah, Cal, don't be that way."

"I'm sure you don't need me around anyway, being a Gloomy Gus." Hudson said. "I'm going to go check on Xinran." Terrence nodded in understanding. Xinran had been transferred to the base's infirmary where the station's experienced medical staff had aroused him from his coma and the man was convalescing.

“Let me know how he’s getting on?” Terrence said. Hudson looked over his shoulder and smirked.

“I’ll let you know...in the morning.”

Starbase 23

Guest Quarters

Glover turned to Rhean and kissed her passionately, the spicy taste of Romulan ale still on her lips. Then he shifted and fell into Leta’s embrace. The three formed one mass of writhing flesh, seeking, giving, taking, finding, releasing, and then emerging different than the night before.

As Terrence drifted off, he thought, what the three had experienced was almost enough, almost, to numb his pain and hopefully theirs as well....

Starbase 23

Lt. Commander Glover fell into step beside Cal. Like him, Hudson was also in a fresh Starfleet uniform. It felt good to be in uniform again. His old friend leaned close to him.

“So how was last night?” He whispered.

“Gentlemen never tell,” Glover grinned.

“That’s why I’m asking *you*?” Cal rejoined. Glover could only laugh.

“You know what this meeting is about?” Terrence asked.

Hudson sighed. “I don’t know, but I’m just glad Command is finally moving their rear end on this. Could be Internal Affairs, Starfleet Intelligence, Special Affairs, or Temporal Investigations for all I know. Whoever it is, I hope they are satisfied to commute our sentence.”

“Ah Cal, it isn’t that bad,” Glover replied. “Heck, we needed a vacation after all that we’ve just been through.”

“Fair point,” Hudson nodded, “But it all being the same, I would rather pick the venue.”

“I can’t argue with that,” Glover said. Both men had reached the room where the meeting would take place.

Cal gave an officious bow. “After you, *Lieutenant* Commander.”

“Now you respect rank,” Glover quipped. He crossed the threshold and into unreality.

Sitting at the head of the table, Admiral Uhura smiled, “What’s wrong Commander, cat got your tongue?”

Starbase 23

"How is this possible? How are you alive?" Glover's joy warred with shock.

"Yeah," Hudson added, equally stunned.

"Please, gentlemen," Uhura half-rose from her chair. "Please take a seat, and have some Altairian water," she gestured to the seats facing her chair and the glasses of water waiting for them. Uhura sat back down and took a sip from her own glass. The woman was dressed in simple gray civilian robes, but still held a regal bearing.

"I don't understand what's going on," Glover said.

"I will explain it to you," the admiral assured them, "*After* you have a seat." Glover knew an order when he heard one.

Once the two men had sat down and the admiral had pestered them into sipping some of the pure, fresh water, she imbibed herself before starting.

"I'm sorry for the deception gentlemen, *I* wanted to take part in the mission," Uhura explained, "But I am getting too old for that kind of stuff. One my old associates, a good person, a trusted friend, took my place."

"But-but how?" Glover asked.

"Yeah, they looked just like you?"

"They talked like you, knew things that only you should know," Glover pressed. He was starting to suspect that this "Uhura" was counterfeit. Perhaps even a hologram. "How do we know you are even real?"

Uhura held out a frail arm. "You can pinch me honey if you want."

"This doesn't make any sense Admiral," Hudson stated.

"The other Uhura was a Chameloid," she explained. Cal looked at Glover, askance.

"Chameloids are real?" He asked.

Glover shrugged. "Guess so pal."

"So you had a Chameloid shape shifter impersonate you?" Hudson asked, still incredulous.

Uhura took another sip. She encouraged them to do the same, but neither man was as thirsty for water as they were for answers. "It was not something I wanted to do, but other voices proved quite persuasive. We didn't know what to expect with Valeris, what kind of game she might play, and I was persuaded eventually by the argument that if I was captured by the Romulans it would be catastrophic for Starfleet, and that is no idle boast."

"No, we get it," Hudson nodded.

"You didn't seem to mind risking our lives though did you?" Glover accused.

"I'm sorry for the deception Mr. Glover," Uhura said. "But this mission was of paramount importance, or so it would seem, but we lost so much with not much tangible for the effort. So the knowledge you two men possess are all we have left to salvage this mission, to make the sacrifices incurred matter."

Hudson looked at Glover. Terrence reluctantly told the woman almost everything. Or all that he could remember. Some of the experiences with Ben, in that

other time, that other space, had faded more to impressions, feelings. But Glover told her about the Arx, and the Pandora Box within it.

He wasn't surprised that Uhura knew all about the other fragments that had been recovered by Special Affairs. Both men told her about the Borg and the threat the cybernetic menaces posed to the entire galaxy. He kept back the information about T'Rhiel. He wanted to share that with his father first.

When it came to Valeris and her fate, Uhura held up a hand. The woman placed her chin on her chest and closed her eyes. She whispered, and Terrence assumed the woman was praying. When she lifted her head again, Terrence saw wetness ringing her eyes.

"Now I wish I had been there," Uhura shook her head. "Oh Valeris. You died, with me thinking you were nothing more than a traitor, and that you were leading me into a trap. But you were much more, so much more, and I-I..." She closed her eyes again. A sob escaped her lips.

Both Glover and Cal sat back and gave the venerable woman a moment. It was Hudson who gently pressed. "Valeris said she was part of Section 31. The Chameloid posing as you claimed to know about this organization. Is there a Section 31?"

"You shouldn't ask that question," Uhura eyes hardened, the shift in her demeanor unsettling.

"Ma'am, with all due respect, I think we've earned the right to ask that question, among others," Hudson pressed.

"You have," Uhura gave a cryptic smile. "But that doesn't mean I have to answer."

"I will get answers," Cal wouldn't drop it. His doggedness had always impressed Terrence.

"He's right," Glover joined in. "We will get answers. My father is an admiral."

Uhura winked. "Oh, I know."

Glover didn't know what to make of the gesture so he pushed ahead. "My father has many friends at Starfleet Command."

"I have more friends, believe me," the admiral rejoined.

"We're not going to let this go," Glover promised.

"Son, it's already gone," Uhura said, holding up her glass. The two men exchanged confused glances.

"The water was laced," the admiral explained. "A slow acting sedative. First physical paralysis and then you'll nod off to sleep."

"W-Why?" Glover's eyelids felt weighted down by bricks. He tried to get out of his seat, but felt bolted to the chair.

"It'll make the surgery easier," Uhura explained. She didn't convey the news with any joy.

"Surgery?" Hudson asked, alarm in his eyes.

"Yes," she nodded. "We are going to erase your memory engrams of this mission, of the Borg, the Arx, all of it," she said.

"No, no, you can't do that," Glover was finding it harder to speak.

"You've got...no right," Cal added.

"I don't," the admiral's expression was morose. "But I am going to do it anyway. Besides," she focused on Terrence. "No person, especially a promising a young man like you should have to carry the burden of what you were compelled to do in the Chaltok system."

"Leta...Rhean...Xinran?" Glover forced out. T'Rhiel! He thought, but kept to himself. *Don't take my sister away from me, just after I found her!*

"All will undergo the same procedure," Uhura said. "All will go on to live productive lives as Federation citizens, none the wiser. You all will receive implanted memories to account for your time on this mission."

"Thi-this isn't right," Hudson marshalled his anger to fight through the drug. "We-we're better...than this!"

"Not necessarily," the admiral replied. "But we are better than *them*...and them, take your pick, the Tal Shiar, Obsidian Order, *So'taj*, the Borg Collective, you name it, and that makes all the difference."

"You...are...legend," Glover eyes shut as he felt like he was sinking into his chair. The last words he heard were the admiral's somber reply.

"Legends aren't what they're cracked up to be."

USS Renegade

Transporter Room One

Glover materialized on the platform feeling refresh. He didn't know why, especially after the ordeal he had just endured.

Captain Holmes and Lt. Commander Rocha were waiting for him. Both men's eyes were pregnant with questions. Terrence enjoyed keeping them in the dark.

Instead he stood at attention and asked for permission to board the starship. Holmes granted it.

Stepping off the platform, the taller Holmes fell in beside him. Rocha was on the opposite side. The most unappealing sandwich Glover could ever imagine. "Good excursion Mr. Glover?" The acting captain drawled.

"You...could say that," Terrence gave a little smile.

"I heard rumors that a high-level Tzenkethi defector was extracted from M'kemas III," Rocha ventured. "Using the Rolor Nebula as an escape route. Take quite a pilot to pull that off."

"You don't say," was all Glover would give the man.

"After your...assignment, I'm certain you're tired," Holmes said.

"If it's all the same to you sir, I'm ready to resume my duties." Glover replied.

"About that...." The captain began.

"If I might sir," Rocha dared. Holmes scowled at him.

"Gone on Mr. Rocha, you seem more excited about it than I am."

Glover looked at each man. "What's going? What's happened?"

Holmes looked morose. "Captain Scott has resigned her commission."

"What?" Glover stopped walking. He needed a moment to catch his breath. He forced himself not to reach out for a bulkhead to steady his legs. He didn't want to show any more weakness around Rocha.

"Yes Commander," Holmes dipped his head, regret etched on his face. "She told me the Nyberrite Alliance had offered her a position and she was seriously mulling it over."

"I can't believe this," Glover said. He wanted to break free from both men and run to his quarters, call up Tryla and hear the news from her directly. As if sensing his thoughts, Holmes said.

"Before our conversation ended, she told me she left a message for you."

Glover's world was reeling. "I-I..."

"That's not all," Rocha could no longer restrain himself. "Captain Scott's moving on is an unfortunate loss for Starfleet, but there is one silver lining."

Glover wanted to pulverize the man right then. "And what is that?" He demanded.

"Captain Holmes is no longer acting captain," Rocha answered. "*Renegade* is fully his."

USS Nagasaki

Private Quarters

Three Weeks Later...

Terrence was glad that the ship that had taken him from *Renegade* was crewed mostly by Vulcans. They would keep their distance and allow him to stew in his emotions. The most contact he had had with any of the crew once the first officer had been on hand to welcome him aboard was the intense Ensign L'Nira. The wiry woman was the ship's helm officer and she had escorted him to his quarters and given him an overview of the *Galaxy*-class ship as they had made the journey.

The ship's captain logically-of course-thought that Glover would be able to communicate more effectively with a fellow helm officer, in light of Glover's well known piloting prowess. Though in their awkward discussion, Terrence got the impression that L'Nira would make a better fit in security.

And L'Nira had gotten the memo as it were and given him his space after their discussion.

It was a long way back to Earth, back to Terrence's new life. Or rather the transition between the old and the new. Glover knew, particularly after reading Tryla's message to him, and with the reality of Holmes as captain of the *Renegade*, that that part of his life was over. Now he waited to see where he would go next, what he would do next, who and what was he to become.

And Glover could think of no better place to reignite the flame of his career than when it was first set ablaze, at Starfleet Academy. He had even finagled a mentoring job for the current Nova Squadron.

Seeing those fresh young faces might remind him of who he had been, of old dreams that had been sacrificed or compromised to fit current realities, and get back to his first, best self. Or so the man hoped.

Gazing out at the stars, imagining Tryla on her way to the far off Nyberrite Alliance, he wished the same hope for her.

EPILOGUE: THE DOOR IN THE WALL

Sometime in some future...

Captain Glover stood at the edge of his bridge. He deigned to turn his back on his crew. He was confident that none would dare strike at the conqueror of Tenaria Prime, the last stronghold of the rebellion.

The little bit about Captain Sandhurst's role in smashing the rebel fleet had been jettisoned like Sandhurst had been out of the airlock of his starship. Glover had paid Sandhurst's woman handsomely to take care of that business. That's what he got for cavorting with a Bajoran, Glover thought, consigning his one-time rival to the dust.

Still not looking back, he barked, "When will we arrive at the anomaly?" The captain was not pleased to be diverted from collecting tribute from the Gorn. Collecting tribute from the empire's vassals was one of the things he enjoyed most about serving the United Order.

"Less than forty minutes now sir," Commander Shelby purred. Glover grinned as he looked back at the comely blonde. The woman wore a skin-tight sleeveless skant that left very little to the imagination. He made sure that Jasmine saw that he was ogling the *Reprisal's* newest first officer. By Jasmine's glower Terrence knew that she had gotten the message. The captain's woman was as replaceable as anyone else.

In fact Glover had made quite a few changes, befitting his new conquering status. Many of the crew that had not met his standards he had remanded to Dr. Katanga or granted them the mercy of the Tantalus field. He would only admit to himself that he felt some regret that Chief Rojas had been one of the eliminated. Glover also felt a pang of regret for dispatching the loyal Tai Donar, but he wanted his vessel purged of all alien taint. He was ready to be a Grand Admiral and had to act like it.

"Inform the chief engineer to meet me in my Ready Room," Glover commanded. He turned around to look at Jasmine. "She needs to account for... the

latest plasma relay diagnostics.” Jasmine kept her expression neutral, but Terrence was pleased to see the envy roiling in her eyes.

Glover strode to his office, brimming with the confidence that he had everyone where he wanted them.

United Order Starship Reprisal **Ready Room**

Glover nudged the younger woman away from him with his leg. The flushed woman still on her knees looked up at him, fear and hunger dancing in her eyes.

“Have I done something to...displease you sir?”

“Not yet Engineer Barrows,” Glover answered. He adjusted his pants. “Now, about the plasma relays...”

“*Captain Glover,*” Shelby’s melodic voice filled the speaker. “*Your presence is...desired on the bridge.*”

“Acknowledged,” Glover said. He looked down at the engineer. He took a moment to admire her bare voluptuous form. “Get dressed Engineer Barrows...slowly.”

Glover helped the woman get dressed. Despite the insistence underlying Shelby’s purr, Glover would not be prodded by anyone. People jumped to him, not the other way around.

He sauntered onto the bridge, with Barrows following a respectful distance behind. Shelby wasn’t looking so eager to see him this time. Instead her pretty face was marred with concern.

“What is it Commander?” Glover demanded. The woman didn’t answer. Instead she pointed to the main viewer.

Glover’s stomach twisted, but he showed no outward sign of distress. The main viewer was nearly filled by a darkened structure, shaped like a tetrahedron.

“What is that?” Glover barked.

“Science Officer Strauss,” Shelby smoothly shifted the captain’s ire to the equally blonde, though stressed, woman at the terminal.

“I-I don’t know sir,” she eventually admitted, flinching as if Glover would turn the Tantalus field on her that instant. “Our sensors are reading massive temporal and extradimensional energies.”

“This structure is from another dimension?” Shelby demanded.

“I am...not sure, but I think so,” Strauss replied, keeping her head down. The woman’s timidity did not sit well with Glover. She had been brought aboard *Reprisal* at Shelby’s recommendation. The talk aboard the ship was that Shelby and Inga Strauss were more than friends, with Shelby being the dominant partner. Glover had no interest to see that relationship play out on the bridge. Now, in his quarters would be another matter.

“Hail it,” Glover ordered.

"Hailing frequencies open sir," Communications Officer Tang piped up.

Glover waited a moment, seeing if whoever, or whatever, inhabited that structure would reach out to them. He grunted with displeasure after moments of silence. He didn't like reaching out first, it was a weakness.

But there was also an opportunity there. He had discovered an extradimensional structure that might yield great boons for the United Order, and more importantly for him. The tetrahedron might contain the means for him not only to become a mere Grand Admiral, but Sovereign of the empire entire.

Glover planted himself in the middle of the bridge. He stood upright, naked arms folded across his broad chest, impatient that these aliens had not already submitted. The captain snarled, "Alien structure, you have trespassed into the United Order of Planets. You will be boarded or you will be annihilated. Resistance..."

"...*is futile*," the chorus of voices finished the sentence.

THE END