

Prophets and Loss

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Prophets and Loss

by [Gibraltar](#)

Summary

Captain Sandhurst volunteers his ship and crew for a Federation mission of mercy led by Jean-Luc Picard of the Enterprise-E. They are headed back into the Briar Patch in order to stop the slaughter of the Son'a and Ba'ku at the hands of the Alshain. This once powerful race, recently allied to the Federation during the Dominion War, is now bent on ethnically cleansing their newly acquired territory. The crew of Gibraltar discover that the situation is both more complicated, and more tenuous than anyone had imagined.

Cover: Artwork by Pundus. Lettering by Lord McCovey Cove.

Chapter 1

The cover for Prophets and Loss



Planet Ba'ku - The Briar Patch (Klach D'Kel Brakt) - Sector 441

Anij of the Ba'ku stepped from her house into the bright midday sunlight, roused from her afternoon siesta by the inexplicable sound of thunder from cloudless cobalt skies. Around her others exited their homes, staring skyward as they muttered questions in hushed tones to one another.

“Has the Federation returned?”

“Have more Son'a come home?”

The Ba'ku had eschewed technology in order to live a simpler, agrarian lifestyle on their idyllic world. Anij and her companions had no way to determine the nature of the disturbance, no sensors with which to identify whomever was intruding upon their serenity.

An oasis of peace for centuries, the Ba'ku's tranquil existence had been disturbed by an attempted revolt two generations earlier. A small cabal of youngsters who had become enamored with the idea of exploring the cosmos had rebelled against their society's strict prohibitions against technology. They had gone as far as trying to seize power from their elders, and when their efforts failed, they were exiled from paradise by their friends and families. Thus banished, they called themselves the Son'a, and set out to utilize advanced technology in conquering a corner of the universe to call their own.

Reconciliation of a sort had come from an ill-fated collaboration between a rogue Starfleet admiral and his Son'a allies. They had attempted to capitalize on the Ba'ku world's innate healing powers, gifted by the metaphasic radiation emitted from the planet's rings. When an attempt to physically relocate the Ba'ku aboard a custom designed holoship was thwarted, the Son'a took it upon themselves to abduct their former kin by force. Only the efforts of the captain and crew of the starship *Enterprise*, acting against orders, managed to stop the Son'a plan and led to a rapprochement between a minority of the Son'a and their estranged families.

In past weeks however, greater numbers of Son'a had begun to return to their peoples' adopted homeworld. They had been driven back to the Briar Patch nebula by the inexorable advance of some nameless enemy made in their misguided efforts to build an empire for themselves. Their shameful homecoming had been as refugees rather than as the conquering heroes they had hoped to be.

Many were casualties, their wounds testing the Ba'ku's healing abilities as well as the planet's rejuvenating energies. Bodies and spirits broken, the Son'a had come seeking both shelter as well as the succor of their mothers and fathers.

Anij ran back into her house, locating in a dresser drawer the Starfleet combadge given to her by Jean-Luc prior to *Enterprise's* departure nine months earlier. She tapped the device hopefully, yearning to hear the confident timbre of her lover's voice. Instead, she found only ominous silence.

She wandered back outside to find Gallatin hefting a disruptor rifle. The repatriated Son'a general had been reunited with his people through the efforts of Picard and his crew, but still clung stubbornly to some of his more suspicious and militaristic ways. Anij touched his shoulder, causing him to startle. “I'm sorry, Gallatin, but you know such weapons are prohibited.” At that moment, the irony of her uttering such a statement while clutching a Starfleet communicator was lost on her.

Gallatin grunted, tilting his head upward. “Tell that to the Alshain.”

“The Alshain?” Anij frowned. “Aren’t they the enemy you’d spoken of?”

“Yes,” he hissed from between clenched teeth. The plasticity of the man’s skin had relaxed during the months since he’d returned, but his face still offered a troublingly distorted visage. Now, Anij read both anger and fear in his recovering features.

“Why would they come here?” she asked, dread beginning to clutch her chest like a vise.

Gallatin’s voice was determinedly calm though his hands grasping the rifle trembled slightly. “Because they make no distinction between Son’a and Ba’ku, Anij.” He turned to face her, his countenance haunted by regret. “And they have sworn to cleanse their captured territory of our kind, in order to restore the Greater Alshain of ages past.”

She gaped at him in disbelief. “You’re saying they’ve come to relocate us as Ru’afo meant to do?”

As he shouldered his rifle, Gallatin grabbed Anij by the upper arm and pulled her along with him. Together they headed for higher ground and the dubious cover of the surrounding forest. “No, my friend. They mean to slaughter us all.”

Starbase 12 - Executive Lounge - Office of the Admiralty

Vice-Admiral Edward Jellico clutched his mug of coffee as he stared across the table at his two colleagues. The three flag officers had met to eat breakfast while establishing Starfleet operations protocols that would affect a region comprising twelve sectors of Federation space. Jellico had been appointed the new Assistant Chief of Starfleet Security only weeks earlier, after his predecessor had ascended to the top post in Security following the quiet ouster of Admiral Samson Glover from that august assignment.

Jellico had taken the opportunity to familiarize himself with his new position by embarking on a first-hand tour of the Federation’s trouble spots to better assess the UFP’s overall state of security. What he’d found was troubling. Not enough ships, too few people, and far too many critical missions to perform, all of them seemingly vital to Federation security.

Seated across from him in the Starbase’s executive lounge were Rear-Admiral Bryce McCormick and Vice-Admiral Thiv’ala, the regional heads of Starfleet Operations and Logistics, respectively.

They had just tabled the discussion of repealing the Federation Council’s stop loss order that prevented Starfleet personnel from resigning or retiring from service. Jellico was worried McCormick might suffer a stroke due to the emotional spike the conversation seemed to engender in the man. At the moment, Starfleet was still churning out ships at wartime production rates in order to fill the numerous vacancies caused by the war’s staggering attrition. Staffing these craft was another matter, as it took substantially longer to train a Starfleet officer or enlisted person than it did to build a starship. Changing tacks, the vice admiral broached the subject that had really brought him to this place.

“So, what do you think of Picard’s proposal?” Jellico baited the hook as subtly as he could. He had already decided to green-light the captain’s plan, but he’d rather talk these officers into supporting it rather than shove it down their throats. He would force the issue if he had to, of course, but Jellico would at least give them the appearance of hearing them out.

McCormick snapped at the offering. “I think it’s a load of crap, Edward. I’ve already had to divert a dozen starships away from this theater to bolster anti-insurgent operations along the Cardassian border.” The rear admiral’s face reddened with frustration. “I know things over there are rough, and Bill Ross has his hands full, but I’ve got my own priorities to worry about. If Picard wants a public relations coup, tell him to look for it elsewhere.”

Jellico shrugged. “Jean-Luc’s got a point, Bryce. The Alshain are hunting down the remaining Son’a like animals. They’re our allies, and a pogrom against the Son’a, however reviled they are, makes us look bad.”

McCormick threw up his hands. “And I care because...? Damn it, Edward, you know what a proud people the Alshain are. They’ve suffered Son’a plots and intrigues for generations, not to mention outright invasion of their territory during the war when the Son’a signed on with the Dominion. If you ask me, a little payback is in order.”

Jellico quirked an eyebrow and gave McCormick a disbelieving look. “Payback is one thing, Bryce. Ethnic cleansing is something else entirely.” He raised his glass of orange juice to offer a mock toast, “My friends, to genocide.”

That took some of the wind from McCormick’s sails. He grabbed the linen napkin from his lap and tossed it onto his plate in a gesture of exasperation. Jellico gave the man a few moments to recover his composure while he looked to the Andorian admiral to his right. “Opinions, Thiv’ala?”

The cerulean-skinned man appeared thoughtful for a long moment before forming his reply. “McCormick is correct insofar as our available ships and personnel are concerned. At present, this command is supporting three planetary relief operations, coordinating sector patrol assignments along the Klingon and Romulan borders, overseeing the establishment of several refugee settlements for displaced Tarlac and Ellora fleeing the conflict, and combating a significant rise in interstellar piracy brought about by the perceived weakness of Starfleet assets in this region.”

McCormick gestured to the Andorian while looking at Jellico, clearly enjoying that the other admiral appeared to be taking his side. Thiv’ala shot McCormick a self-conscious glance that the human failed to see before turning back to Jellico to finish his assessment. “That being said, Admiral, any opportunity to stem the violence taking place in and around the Briar Patch would prove welcome. We have our hands full as it is without the added burden of tens-of-thousands of refugees from the Alshain encroachment into Son’a territory.”

McCormick’s eyes shot daggers at Thiv’ala who pretended not to notice as he spooned a scoop of *yulta* fruit into his mouth. The man turned to face Jellico. “I can’t spare any more ships. I just don’t have them. I’ve got Border Service cutters and runabouts pulling patrol duty posts that should be occupied by cruisers. Border defense is practically laughable right now, and Picard’s little mercy mission will only serve to make

matters worse.”

“Be that as it may, Bryce, President Santiago is a believer in image dictating reality. He feels this mission is of vital importance in the post-war playing field, gentlemen. If the Federation doesn’t move to bring its allies under control, we’ll only be inviting trouble from the second-tier powers in both quadrants.”

McCormick rolled his eyes. “I know Picard’s got a thing for these people, Edward. But Santiago’s standing in the polls is low enough already. Does he really need another foreign affairs fiasco just before the election?”

“I’m aware of the risk we’re running with this operation, and failure is always an unwelcome possibility. But imagine the media disaster we’d face if we’re seen to be tacitly supporting Alshain atrocities?” Jellico frowned. “And I’d remind you that I’m not Picard’s biggest fan, either. Despite that, his relationship with the Ba’ku and the Son’a make him the best man for this particular job.”

McCormick sat forward to grab his coffee mug and take a draught. “We turned a blind eye to the Klingons’ actions at Lakesh. They butchered the civilian populace trying to dig out the insurgency on a world supposedly under Starfleet supervision. Where was our moral indignation then?”

Jellico’s eyes narrowed and he leaned forward, his voice taking on a dangerous edge. “That wasn’t our fault. How were we supposed to know the Cardassians in that system were sitting on top of a hidden arsenal? Ceding the Crolsa system to the Klingons was our only recourse.”

McCormick eyed Jellico sullenly, having realized the true nature of this meeting. “This is going to happen, isn’t it? My protests be damned, you’re going to stage from this starbase and bleed me dry.”

He nodded regretfully and said simply. “Yes, Bryce. I am. This one has presidential authority behind it.” Jellico tried to soften the blow by adding, “Besides *Enterprise*, I’m contributing four ships tasked from other commands. Six ships are all I need from you.”

As he shook his head angrily, McCormick finished his coffee in a single quaff and stood abruptly. He collected his padd from the tabletop and placed it inside a briefcase. He gave Jellico a final heated stare as he inquired, “And which heads roll when this whole operation falls apart and our people start coming home in flag draped coffins?”

Jellico’s smile reminded McCormick of a Terran shark. “If that happens, President Santiago takes another ten-point hit in the polls, and Picard loses credibility and forfeits his chance of ever making admiral. I, on the other hand, walk away smelling like a rose.”

McCormick gave him a saccharine smile. “What about me?”

“You? You get the right to begin each sentence for the next year with ‘I told you so.’”

Planet Ba’ku - The Briar Patch (Klach D’Kel Brakt) - Sector 441

Anij had cried herself out by the time the Alshain arrived on foot to examine their handiwork. The shattered remains of the Ba’ku village, home to their people for ten generations, smoldered in the valley below. Unlike the Son’a, who had at first tried to forcibly relocate their alienated families, the Alshain had made no such attempts to minimize the loss of life. A brief but effective orbital bombardment had reduced their community to scattered cinders, killing all but the handful of the Ba’ku who had joined Gallatin and Anij in their flight from the village.

Her dear friend Sojef and his young son Artim, who had both survived the harrowing pursuit and capture at the hands of the Son’a less than a year before were now dead. Anij’s entire world had been crushed in a matter of minutes, her society annihilated with casual ease by an enemy she had only heard rumors of prior to this dark day.

Gallatin and two similarly armed former Son’a stood guard over their distraught Ba’ku hosts. Drav’in approached the ex-general and knelt beside him as they observed the lupine Alshain strike team. The enemy soldiers sorted through the embers of the village, looking for any sign of survivors.

“Gallatin, we should go. We can follow the kelbonite deposits into the mountains, just as the Ba’ku did to thwart us. It should mask our life signs as effectively.”

Gallatin lowered his field glasses, pushing back from the lip of the overhang they were using as an observation point. “That will safeguard us from their sensors only. These are Alshain. They’re a race of hunters, and once they have our scent, it will only be a matter of time before they find us.”

“Then what are we to do? Where shall we go?”

The general was considering his reply when they heard the muffled crackle of snapping twigs behind them. The traumatized Ba’ku survivors did not notice the sound, for none of them had been forced to develop the kind of situational awareness that helped one to survive in a combat environment. Before Gallatin and Drav’in could turn and raise their weapons, the enemy was upon them.

Executive Officer’s Quarters - Deck 5, USS *Gibraltar* - Docked to Federation Starbase Deep Space Nine

Commander Liana Ramirez stepped from the sonic shower and wrapped a towel around herself as she padded quietly through her cabin’s sleeping alcove so as not to wake her slumbering guest. She donned her uniform slowly, burdened by thoughts of their upcoming assignment. It was a troubling mission that she had been made aware of only the day before. A mission that Captain Sandhurst had *volunteered* them for.

As Ramirez donned her uniform, she reflected that would have to confront Sandhurst about the mission, and it wouldn't be easy. Ramirez had bent over backwards to be accommodating to her commanding officer in the weeks since his return from neural-psychiatric reconstructive counseling on Betazed. On their last, ill-fated assignment, the captain had been held captive and tortured by a madman for weeks, and the resulting psychological scars ran deep. He hadn't been the same since his return, and she felt naïve and more than a little guilty for having hoped that he would come back as his old self.

Suddenly someone grabbed hold of her hand and pulled her off balance. She toppled clumsily onto the bed. *Great*, she thought angrily, *six months ago I'd never have let someone surprise me like that. I'm losing my edge.*

"Good morning, Lia—" Commander Jeffrey Thorpe's voice caught in his throat as Ramirez reversed his grip on her arm and took control of his limb as she rolled to a position of advantage. She pinned him to the bed with a painful joint-lock, and he hissed, "Ahhhh! Woman, what's *wrong* with you?"

"Good morning to you, Mister Grabby Hands. And exactly what leads you to believe that you can have your way with me on this fine morning?" Her tone was mostly playful but contained a hint of genuine irritation.

Thorpe fought to control his breathing as he struggled against the pain of a shoulder pushed to the limit of its range of motion. "Just— just playing around, Lia. Please, let go."

She released her grip, climbing off the bed and leaving Thorpe face down on the rumpled sheets as he massaged his now aching limb. "I'm yours when the uniforms are off, Jeff. I thought we'd established that rather clearly." She made a show of smoothing out the wrinkles in her jumpsuit. "As you can see, the uniform is most definitely *on*."

Thorpe rolled over to eye her warily. "We've been seeing each other for a month, and I still haven't even begun to figure you out." He sat up and placed his feet on the floor. "You're not big on subtlety, Liana. I'm picking up on some mixed messages here. You keep saying this is all merely recreational, but that's not how it feels when we're tangled up in the sheets."

Ramirez stepped back into the bathroom to run a brush through her long black hair before starting to tie it into a low-maintenance bun in back. "Playful canoodling in the morning smacks of an actual relationship, Jeff. We agreed that this was purely physical."

He pulled on his shorts and stood, then walked over to lean against the doorway to the bathroom alcove. "So, you're eliminating the possibility of it being anything but?"

She spared him a withering look while fiddling with her hair. "I'm nobody's fallback girl."

He crossed his arms defensively. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"The Haliian woman, Jeff. I'm not blind, or stupid. When we ran into her at Quark's the other night, you acted like you'd been caught with your hand in the cookie jar." She smirked at his evident discomfort with her observation and added, "Well, maybe not your hand..."

Thorpe winced and moved behind her, his hands up in a gesture of supplication. He looked into her eyes through the reflection he shared with her in the mirror. "I'll admit that I have feelings for Aquiel, that's true. But we've decided against risking our friendship by taking it to the next level." He turned on the charm, conjuring up the devilish smile that Ramirez found so oddly irresistible. "The fact that I'm attracted to her doesn't mean that I wouldn't be open to a genuine relationship with somebody else." He raised his eyebrows, "If a certain someone would lower their shields."

Ramirez met his eyes and took the implied offer into consideration. She and Thorpe shared a great deal in common, but those commonalities were based on a shared pain that had brought them together during *Gibraltar's* refit at DS9. Both she and Jeffrey had lost ships under their command in the Crolsa system, ships that by rights had belonged to other men. They had been the stand-in's, the acting captains, and ultimately both had been found wanting. Now, Thorpe was acting CO of DS9's dedicated warship, *Defiant*, while Ramirez was nearing the halfway point of her yearlong obligation to *Gibraltar's* XO's billet.

He slowly lowered his hands to her shoulders, maintaining eye contact as he leaned in to nuzzle her neck. She closed her eyes, her body electrified with the sensation. Liana couldn't remember the last time she'd let anyone even this close. She firmly believed that relationships were a luxury someone on the fast track to command couldn't allow themselves. She desperately enjoyed sharing a bed with him, but they were too dissimilar in disposition and ambition for their coupling to be anything other than an enjoyable diversion. Ramirez was driven and focused, while Jeffrey was a feather on the wind, an explorer at heart who had stumbled into the command division purely by accident.

Ramirez sighed as she reached up and placed her hands atop his. He paused, sensing she had raised her defenses once again. "Jeff, I'm truly flattered, but this is as far as it goes."

Her communicator chirped. "*Sandhurst to Ramirez.*"

Thorpe turned away, his expression one of disappointment as she tapped the pin. "Go ahead, sir."

"*Commander, just a reminder that our briefing in the station's wardroom is in thirty minutes.*"

"Acknowledged, sir. On my way."

She found him slipping on his civilian clothes in the bedroom. "Tonight will be our last in port before we head out," she said, trying to sound upbeat. "If you're not too busy, I'd like to see you again before I leave."

He stared at her calmly as he buttoned his shirt. "I thought you made your feelings... or lack thereof perfectly clear, *Commander.*"

She liked him, she really did. She didn't want to hurt him and had made every effort to establish that the only thing this could possibly be was

a brief dalliance. "Let's just let this be what it is, Jeff. It's not that I don't want a relationship eventually, but it can't be right now, not while I'm on this ship. Later, when I have a command of my own, circumstances might be different." She stepped forward and placed a hand on his chest as she looked up into his face. "If we try to force this, someone's going to get hurt. And right now, odds are that it'd be you."

He nodded reluctantly then dipped his head to meet her brief kiss. Then she was gone.

Chapter 2

The Plevlian Squalls - The Briar Patch (Klach D'Kel Brakt) - Sector 441

The Alshain heavy cruiser *G'Shrora* slalomed wildly between the thundering columns of energetic plasma that had been whipped into frenzy by the deep gravitational footprint of a nearby proto-star cluster. The warship was seriously damaged, and its desperate gyrations were a last-ditch attempt to evade its pursuers. A squadron of small, compact attack ships of unknown origin matched the larger ship move for move, darting through the billowing fumaroles with practiced ease and making a mockery of the heroic efforts of the cruiser's helmsman.

On the bridge of the Alshain vessel, Sutahr Vacquin R'Vor snarled with displeasure as he observed the persistence of his unidentified enemy. The flotilla of attack ships had ambushed them just outside the Ba'ku star system as *G'Shrora* had departed with its cargo of captured Son'a and Ba'ku prisoners. What had begun as a routine clean-and-sweep of newly annexed territory had quickly deteriorated into a running battle to save their own lives.

As he turned to his weapons officer, R'Vor inquired heatedly, "Can we ignite those columns?"

The younger male's ears flattened in subservience under the withering scrutiny of his captain. "No, sir. You're thinking of metreon gas. There are pockets of that material throughout the Kla—" he was flung against his console as the ship rocked from yet another well placed torpedo hit. He gathered his wits and replied with a hopeful volley of swarm-missiles that fanned out behind the ship as he continued, "...throughout the Klach D'Kel Brakt, but none are found nearby due to the plasmoberic currents—"

R'Vor waved away the rest of the explanation, baring a mouthful of formidable teeth. "Status of weapons?"

"Disruptors and exciser cannons are still offline, sir. Their aim with their opening salvo was impeccable."

He grunted with grudging admiration for his enemy's prowess. R'Vor then scanned the navigational display at his station for any other anomalies in the vicinity which might serve to either hide them or slow their pursuers. He found nothing.

The helmsman announced, "Clearing the columns, Sutahr. Shall we swing around for another run?" The man's voice was tight with fear, and despite R'Vor's hatred of that particular emotion, the sutahr found that he could not judge him too harshly under the circumstances.

"Status of the enemy craft?"

"Eleven of the original twelve threat craft are still intact, sir. One of them appears to have collided with a plasma column."

R'Vor's hands clenched the forelimb rests of his command chair. There were no other alternatives. His ship was crippled, so prolonged flight was not an option. His shields were failing, his most potent weapons disabled. They would have to turn back and brave the raging tendrils once again. *Better a quick death by plasma storm than capture at the hands of an unknown foe*, R'Vor thought soberly as he recited a quick prayer to his ancestral lineage. "Helmsman, bring us about!"

The pilot's response was drowned out by thunderous weapons impacts as their opponents, who had themselves just passed out of the squalls, executed a concentrated attack on the cruiser. Primary lighting died and the sole illumination on the bridge came from the strobing death throes of flickering consoles and the guttering sparks from shattered display screens.

From within the darkness a voice shouted, "Shields have failed! Sensors detecting transporter signatures."

R'Vor rose from his seat and drew a bulky disruptor pistol from its holster on his leg. "Battle stations, prepare to repel boarders!" Despite his best efforts, his enemies had pressed their attack and now a battle that had begun as ship-to-ship skirmish would end in close-quarters combat. He generated a feral smile as he anticipated what would likely be his final struggle. Let them come for him. They would enter his lair, defended by his people, where the darkness and confined spaces were his allies. *Yes*, he thought, *let them come*.

Federation Starbase Deep Space Nine - Ward Room

"...and in conclusion an eleven ship task force should suffice to underscore the Federation's resolve to see this conflict ended peaceably while not proving overtly threatening to the Alshain. All parties involved in this unfortunate quarrel are justly aggrieved, but we must make them see that peace is the preferable path." With that, Captain Jean-Luc Picard completed his brief on the mission that had consumed him these last months.

He resumed his seat next to Commander Will Riker as he scanned the faces of the assembled captains and their first officers, the men and women who had elected or had been assigned to follow him on this vital errand of mercy. A few appeared genuinely enthusiastic, but the majority had mustered their best poker faces for the occasion. A handful, Commander Liana Ramirez among them, looked openly dubious.

Although Deep Space Nine was some fifty lightyears from the Federation border with Alshain space, the core of the task force had assembled here largely due to the presence of two individuals. The senior Starfleet officer posted to DS9 was Rear-Admiral Monica Covey, the Federation's foremost expert on the Alshain, and the woman responsible for forging the UFP's alliance with them during the bleak days that marked the beginning of the war. Seated with her at the head of the table was Lt. Commander Seb N'Saba, Starfleet's only Alshain member, formerly of the late USS *Cuffe*.

The rest of the meeting went by the numbers, consisting of brief exchanges of tactical, logistical, and navigational data as the command staffs from *Lexington*, *Gibraltar*, *Zhukov*, and *Bellerophon* made preparations for operating within the unpredictable Briar Patch.

Covey had provided the task force with everything she knew about the Alshain as a species, consciously keeping her reservations with this mission to herself following Picard's impassioned speech to his fellow officers. Her objections had already been shared in private, and she had reiterated them to Will Riker, with whom Covey was previously acquainted. She had even gone as far as reassigning N'Saba to *Enterprise* for the duration of the assignment, praying his insights into his people's psychology and traditions might help prevent any unfortunate incidents.

The admiral called the meeting to a close with Picard's sanction, and the personnel filtered toward the exit, chatting among themselves as they collected padds and beverage mugs. Picard paused near the exit to the wardroom, waiting for Sandhurst and Ramirez to approach. He inclined his head towards his fellow captain, a man who had volunteered himself and his ship for the duration of this diplomatic intervention. "Captain Sandhurst, you're looking much improved since last we met."

Sandhurst smiled wanly. "Thank you, Captain." Sandhurst's recovery from his recent abduction had begun aboard *Enterprise* with Counselor Troi, before the ship had transported him to Betazed for more intensive therapies. Nevertheless, Picard was merely being polite. Sandhurst appeared a mere shell of his former self, and they both knew it.

Picard turned to Ramirez. "You appeared skeptical of my plan, Commander. I opened the floor to questions and concerns, but you didn't take the opportunity to voice any."

After she cast a quick glance at Sandhurst, Ramirez replied evenly, "It's not my place to question the necessity or the underlying assumptions surrounding this mission, sir."

Riker stepped up behind the *Gibraltar* officers, his mouth drawing into a frown as he picked up on the topic of conversation.

"If you have reservations, Commander, you should feel free to air them." Picard pressed the point, "I certainly wouldn't want anyone feeling they're held hostage by the circumstances of this assignment."

Sandhurst bit the inside of his lip, looking mortified as Ramirez smiled pleasantly at Picard. "Respectfully, Captain, I'm a Starfleet officer. I go where I'm told. But since you've asked for my thoughts, I'm more than happy to share them. In my professional opinion, we're biting off more than we can chew with this mission at a time when we can least afford such gestures. As for my personal opinion," her eyes clouded as she conjured dark memories, "I've danced to this tune before. It didn't end well."

Picard smiled tolerantly. "Healthy cynicism is a positive characteristic in a leader, Commander. I hope that by the time we've completed our assignment, you'll be able to see the value in such gestures, most especially when we can least afford them."

"I sincerely hope that's the case, Captain. I'll have to trust you're not allowing your personal feelings to needlessly endanger these crews." She offered perfunctory nods all around. "Sirs, if you'll excuse me."

Ramirez stepped out into the corridor and had only made it a dozen meters before she sensed the fast approach of someone behind her. She turned to come face to face with an obviously irritated Will Riker. "Wait just a minute, Ramirez."

He outweighed her by over fifty kilograms and stood considerably taller, but Ramirez appeared unfazed. She looked up into Riker's face with iron resolve. "Something I can help you with, Commander?"

"You've got a lot of nerve questioning the motivations of that man," Riker said heatedly, pointing down the corridor towards the wardroom. "He's made sacrifices you could hardly imagine in the defense of the Federation, and I think you owe him the benefit of the doubt."

Ramirez cocked her head to give Riker an appraising look. "Picard's a very accomplished officer and diplomat, but he's not infallible. Sometimes even the most well-intentioned plans are built on foundations of sand."

Riker glowered and snorted derisively, "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"It means that I'm skeptical of this mission because Picard's too close to the players. His relationship with the Ba'ku is driving this, and no matter how genuine his humanitarian ambitions are, he's been blinded to the realities of the situation. Mark my words, we'll be at war with the Alshain before this is done."

Riker countered, "To be perfectly candid, your opinion really doesn't count here. Your captain's already onboard with this. All anyone's asking you to do here is your job." He shook his head in disbelief. "I can't understand why you'd object to taking part in a humanitarian mission, or why you'd disrespect Captain Picard like that."

Ramirez's forced smile turned frosty. "My job? Oh, that's right, I remember now. That's what I was doing on the bridge of the *Tempest* during the war. I was standing knee deep in bodies, surrounded by burning starships on the Bolian Front while *Enterprise* was playing diplomatic courier and flitting about on archeological surveys." She made a point of looking down at Riker's knees. "I hope your uniform didn't get too dirty hauling shovels around the dig sites for your captain."

Will's eyes widened and his face reddened as his outrage mounted. However, his anger was fueled by a kernel of shame he had carried since the end of the conflict. *Enterprise* had been considered too important by command to risk in direct combat. Instead, the flagship had been dispatched on vital diplomatic assignments, recruiting allies against the Dominion and engaging in routine good will missions, helping to preserve the image that the Federation was still functioning normally during the protracted struggle. He had yearned to be on the front lines, sharing the enormous burden with his comrades, but it was not to be.

Riker fought to control his rage at her impertinence. He pointed an accusatory finger at her. "The crew of that ship has—"

Ramirez cut him off mid-sentence. "Stow it, Will. I know you saved the Earth from the Borg, but what have you done for us *lately*?"

Riker practically recoiled at her attack, his expression conveying such shock and incredulity that it brought Ramirez up short. She immediately downshifted and held up her hands in a placating gesture. "I'm sorry, Commander. That was completely out of line."

"You're goddamn right about that," Riker muttered, working heroically to rein in his emotions.

"I'm well aware of the contributions of your ship and crew to the safety of the Federation." Her face was pinched, her expression pained. "I apologize. This isn't about you, or Captain Picard. This is about *my* captain and *his* choices."

As he calmed, Riker examined Ramirez more closely. He had never met the woman before today, but he counted himself an excellent judge of human nature. Behind the young woman's bluster, he saw a deep reservoir of pain and fear. The whole idea of this mission had set something off inside her. He lowered his voice and offered, "This won't be like last time, Commander. Captain Picard won't allow it. *I* won't allow it."

"You can't make that promise." She turned abruptly, walking away down the corridor as she left a confused and frustrated Will Riker behind her.

Alshain Heavy Cruiser *G'Shrora* - Detention Block, Deck 7

The prisoners were flung to and fro in their detention cells as the cruiser shuddered from repeated impacts. Anij clung to Gallatin for support. "What's happening? Has Starfleet come to rescue us?"

Gallatin grunted as they were thrown against the wall, he shielding Anij from the impact with his body. "More likely a Son'a cruiser," he said, thinking, *I'm surprised we have any left.*

The wailing of internal alarms drowned out the shouting from their Alshain captors as the weapons fire ceased suddenly. Gallatin whispered to Anij, "They are being boarded. We must be prepared to confront the guards should they come to execute us before we can be rescued."

Anij's features tightened with fear, but her eyes were clear and focused. She was Ba'ku, one of the last thanks to the efforts of the Alshain. Her people and their culture must be preserved.

Moments passed, then the sounds of fighting erupted from somewhere nearby. The whine of disruptors competed with the basso growl of pulse blasts. In the corridor at the end of the detention block, figures silhouetted in smoke dashed about amidst the flash of weapons fire.

A tall, red-furred Alshain soldier sprinted into the block, whirling about and taking a kneeling position with his rifle held at the ready. Two hazy figures leaned out into the corridor from opposite sides of the doorway simultaneously to send a flurry of white energy bolts towards the soldier. He replied in kind and vaporized one of the enemies as he himself was cut down by their fusillade.

The surviving figure moved cautiously down the corridor. Gallatin noticed that the indistinct form of the humanoid was not due to the surrounding smoke, but was instead the result of mimetic holomesh armor that simulated the wearer's immediate surroundings. As a former soldier, Gallatin admired the smooth, steady advance of the armor clad figure, constantly scanning his surroundings and sweeping the path of his advance with his rifle.

As the commando arrived at the occupied cells, the figure spoke in accented Federation standard, no doubt the result of a translator matrix. "You are Son'a?"

Gallatin stepped forward, stopping just before the energy field. "Yes."

The figure reached out to toggle off the security screens and release the prisoners. "Stay close together and remain with me."

Gallatin stooped to retrieve the fallen Alshain soldier's rifle and hefted the bulky weapon with difficulty. "Understood."

Sandhurst looked sheepishly at Picard as Riker slid past him and began his pursuit of Ramirez down the corridor. The captain of the *Enterprise* looked less than thrilled with the actions of his own exec, and directed a wry smile at Sandhurst.

"Well, that was... awkward," Sandhurst offered. He began to apologize for Ramirez's statements but the older captain casually waved away the effort.

"No need, Captain. She's entitled to her opinion, and after all you and your crew have been through in past months, I believe I can understand the source of her discomfort." He patted Sandhurst on the shoulder. "Don't give it any more thought. We've much to accomplish in very little time. Let's not allow ourselves such distractions." With that, Picard stepped into the hallway, leaving Sandhurst standing in an empty room save for Rear Admiral Covey.

Years earlier, Covey had been the first officer aboard *Cuffe* where Sandhurst had served as an engineer. Later, as a captain she'd stolen him away from that ship and made him her chief engineer on *Chevalier*. Five months ago Covey had approached Sandhurst, then the first officer on *Venture*, and convinced him to accept a captaincy.

Covey recognized Sandhurst's frustration and grinned at him. "Look out for Liana when she gets a full head of steam. I'll bet she and Will are toe-to-toe out there."

Sandhurst rolled his eyes. "No doubt."

The admiral stepped forward hesitantly. "How are you, Donald?" She couldn't quite hide her discomfort with his new appearance. A mere two months earlier, Sandhurst had been noticeably overweight and had possessed a thick mane of dark black hair that had just begun to gray at the temples. Now that hair was nearly completely white, and had been shaved close to his head, leaving what amounted to a crown of stark white stubble. He was leaner now than when she had known him as a junior engineer years before, but he seemed gaunt and brittle.

Sandhurst attempted a smile of his own but wasn't able to follow through. "I'm... better."

"Really?" She placed a hand on his arm. "I'd heard rumors that something... very unpleasant had happened to you. Despite my rank, I couldn't get any official confirmation. Everything was ultra-classified."

He pursed his lips regretfully. "Unfortunately, yes. I can't talk about it. Under the circumstances, that's more a blessing than a curse."

She inclined her head, having no choice but to accept that explanation. "I'll see your 'no comment' and raise you an 'are you sure about this mission?'"

The reference to their weekly poker games aboard *Chevalier* ignited the smile Sandhurst had been unable to light on his own. "I think it's the right thing to do, both for the Federation, and the Son'a."

She nodded reluctantly. "You know how I feel about this."

"I do, and I want you to know your opinion carries considerable weight with me."

She laughed. "But Jean-Luc is just so damn compelling, right?"

"Something like that," he said with a chuckle.

"Fair enough. Just promise me you'll be careful, okay? I didn't pin that fourth pip on your collar so that you could go and get yourself mauled by an interstellar wolf pack."

He mock winced. "Nice imagery, thanks."

She stepped through the door into the passageway. "C'mon, Captain. I've been waiting for a tour of that old ship I pawned off on you."

Sandhurst fell in step with her as he shook his head ruefully and just for a moment felt once again like his old self.

Alshain Heavy Cruiser *G'Shrora*

Sutahr R'Vor roared in concert with the scream of his disruptor rifle as he poured concentrated fire down the corridor towards the shadowy, advancing enemy. These creatures were wraiths, darting out from behind cover to slay his men with well-placed weapons fire before vanishing again into the chaos. Their inexorable advance towards the detention center was proof enough that they were here to rescue the Alshain's prisoners, but the sutahr had never known the Son'a or their servitor species to fight so hard or so effectively. For a moment he wondered if these were Jem'Hadar holdouts, perhaps some vanguard of a second invasion of the Alpha Quadrant, hiding out in the Briar Patch.

He crouched back behind the corner as the enemy's answering fire flashed past. R'Vor accessed the computer command link affixed to his gauntlet. He reprogrammed the ship's onboard security forcefields, tapping delicately at the interface with a clawed finger. R'Vor smiled coldly and congratulated himself on his own bloody creativity as he motioned for his men to retreat from near the mouth of the passageway.

He activated the defense screen emitters in the corridor, which sent a horizontal field of energy scything down the passageway at waist level. Like a blade cutting stalks of grass, a half dozen of the darting figures were cleaved in two instantaneously. Those of the enemy fortunate enough to have been in adjoining corridors or lying prone began an immediate tactical withdrawal, sensing the sudden shift in the fortunes of war.

R'Vor led an advance down the hallway to retake the corridor and then dispatched pursuit teams to harass their retreating foes. He paused at a bisected enemy body, his eyes struggling to focus the image of the man as the soldier's holomesh armor flickered randomly. He knelt beside the body and unfastened the figure's combat helmet and faceplate, peeling them away to stare uncomprehendingly at the naked visage of his enemy.

He looked up to see one of his men doing likewise with another of the enemy. His crewman's features also clouded with confusion. The man looked to R'Vor. "I don't understand, Sutahr. They are Bajorans."

Chapter 3

Holosuite 3, Deck 6 - USS *Gibraltar* - Parrises Squares Competition

Score:

Pava's Pirates – 4

Tark's Thugs – 2

Lieutenant Pava Lar'agos heaved the ion mallet for all he was worth, contacting the orb with a resounding thud that reverberated off the walls of the playing grid. The playing sphere rocketed away to spin into opposing territory as the scoreboard registered a point for the El-Aurian's team. Lar'agos jumped from the descending platform and onto its rising neighbor. He struggled keep his balance as the roving tactiball screamed by and delivered a glancing blow to his left shoulder as he landed atop the moving square.

He was of average height, perhaps a bit on the smallish side, but Lar'agos was deceptively strong and nimble. His dark, tightly curled hair was cut short, and his brown eyes hinted at an ample intelligence, bolstered by several lifetimes of experience. His current posting was as Chief Security/Tactical officer of the starship *Gibraltar*, and at the moment he was deeply engrossed in a tactical training scenario.

Across the grid, the leader of the opposing team struggled to meet the incoming orb. Master Chief Tark, a stout Tellarite, charged up his team's launch ramp. He leaped into the air as he swung the mallet, missing the illuminated sphere by scant centimeters before toppling forward to land hard atop an ascending riser. The impact drove the breath from him, and he fought to rise on wobbling arms as he looked around for the fumbled ion mallet.

"What's the matter, old man?" asked Petty Officer 1st Class Saihra Dunleavy as she charged past, now in possession of the mallet. "Did you fall down, go boom?"

Tark attempted a snarl that emerged sounding more like a desperate wheeze. Dunleavy sprinted the ramp and jumped from the crest to deliver a solid blow to the orb on its rebound off the back wall. It arced into enemy territory, sending Pava's Pirates scrambling to intercept it.

Ensign Diamato moved to snare the orb in his under-arm catch net but lost his footing between ascending and descending risers. He fell hard, cracking his shin and leaving him writhing in pain atop a plummeting square. *En route* to his own rendezvous with the orb, Specialist Sharpe experienced an unfortunate high-velocity encounter with the tactiball. He was knocked backwards and fell onto a square currently radiating a containment field that immobilized him for the required thirty seconds.

Lar'agos' only remaining teammate was deep in the well, waiting for the undulating tide of risers to bring him back up and into play. His chest heaving with the effort, Lar'agos charged forward, stutter-stepping from one square to another in quick succession, while trying to track the orb's path through the air. His legs burned but kept pumping and sent him upwards to catch the ball as it bounced off his team's score-pad and registered a point for Tark's Thugs.

Wielding the ion mallet like Thor's hammer, he rose to meet the ricocheting orb as he screamed a primal cry of defiance. His victory call was cut short as he completely missed the sphere with the mallet, and made the unwitting decision to strike it squarely with his face instead. He fell like a marionette whose strings had been abruptly severed and collapsed into the now ascending risers making their way back up from the well.

As the pain in his head and side subsided, Lar'agos became aware of the growing sound of raucous laughter. The rest of the security team stood, sat, or lay on the floor of the now deactivated holosuite, depending on their level of infirmity. A hairy, porcine face peered down at Lar'agos. Tark's meaty hand grasped his and hauled him back to his feet. As he wiped at the blood coursing from his broken nose, Lar'agos gurgled, "Thank you, Master Chief."

Lar'agos cleared his throat and announced, "Folks, this concludes today's security training exercise. You all did very well. A good game of Parrises squares forces you to maintain your situational awareness in a dynamic environment, just like in a fire fight." He assessed the group, noting numerous injuries. "Everyone here got banged up, but you all stayed in the fight. That speaks both to your stamina as well as your dedication." He wiped the sleeve of his blue Parrises jumpsuit across his nose again. "Let's go get patched up in Sickbay, then meet in the rec lounge for debrief and drinks."

The group of limping security personnel assisted each other out of the holosuite, grinning and chatting animatedly. Tark noted with a smile the difference between Lar'agos' new training regimen and his previous campaign of endless, excruciating drills and holographic scenarios. The security personnel were still learning valuable skills, but without the burn-out and the oppressive psychological toll that grueling earlier schedule had taken on them.

Their last assignment had resulted in nearly every member of the ship's security department having been either killed or seriously injured. Although Tark knew the circumstances of that mission were something that would almost certainly never be repeated, those who had survived the ordeal had gelled and grown stronger for the experience. Those 'old-timers' now formed the core of the ship's newly expanded security detachment.

As Tark helped Lar'agos through the parting holosuite doors, he asked, "So what do you call that move, sir? Cranial intercept? Full facial volley?"

Lar'agos chuckled as he winced and held his aching ribs. "Don't forget, little man. I know where you live."

Sickbay, USS *Gibraltar*

The doors parted to allow Lieutenant(j.g.) Issara Taiee and her guest into what had been, until two hours earlier, her Sickbay. Taiee was a career Starfleet officer, and she knew that life was change. That being said, at this moment she was ready to admit that so much change in such a compressed period of time was a bit hard to swallow.

The ship's medical staff were assembled in formation, an almost unheard of occurrence. Medical technicians and nurses stood at attention in two rows, flanking the main diagnostic exam table on either side. Taiee stepped aside to allow her guest to take center stage. She kept her voice carefully neutral as she announced, "People, I'd like to introduce you to our new Chief Medical Officer, Lt. Commander Murakawa."

Doctor Denise Murakawa followed Taiee into what she had to admit was an impressive medical center, especially given the size of this ship. Currently classified as an escort, *Gibraltar* had been briefly refitted as a hospital ship earlier in her service, and after being brought out of mothballs during the Dominion War the engineers overseeing her refit had decided to let the ship keep some of that expanded medical capacity. She now supported forty biobeds and four surgical suites, in addition to a host of dedicated laboratories and even a null-g ward.

The woman Murakawa was replacing, albeit temporarily, was not a doctor but an accomplished nurse practitioner. In the wake of the war's losses, not every starship could be afforded a full-fledged doctor and surgeon. Smaller ships like *Gibraltar* made due with nurses, relying more heavily on their Emergency Medical Holograms than did larger, better staffed vessels.

Taiee looked on, feeling both humiliated and unappreciated, but striving to bury both unworthy emotions under a façade of tolerant acceptance. In the past five months aboard this ship she had treated numerous injuries and helped to save the lives of not only the captain but countless crew from theirs and other vessels. During the war, Taiee had served in a front line mobile surgical hospital, often nearer the conflict than many starships. She felt that her record and skills spoke for themselves, as they had certainly been sufficient to warrant her original posting as the CMO. Until now, apparently.

Murakawa was presently the senior medical officer aboard the starship *Sutherland*, a post she'd held for the last six years. She had been on leave, attending Starfleet's annual medical symposium, held this year on Bajor as a testament to that planet's rapid progress in rebuilding its post-occupation medical infrastructure. Her time at the renowned convention had been cut short, however.

On orders from Dr. Beverly Crusher of the *Enterprise*, Murakawa had been unexpectedly reassigned as CMO of *Gibraltar* during its participation in the Briar Patch taskforce. The ship's medical capacity made it a definite asset to the mission, but Crusher had judged that an actual physician needed to be in charge should the ship be asked to assist with a mass casualty or evacuation scenario. Other attendees of the symposium had been likewise assigned to other ships in the flotilla, bolstering their existing medical teams in preparation for coping with the humanitarian disaster that presumably awaited them within the nebula.

Murakawa set her shoulders and met the expectant gazes of her new staff with a faint smile. "I know this change in leadership comes as an unwelcome surprise. I was caught off guard by this suddenness of this as well. I assure all of you that this arraignment is only temporary, and shouldn't be construed as a lack of confidence in your collective abilities. I'm not here to rock the boat, or to play power games, but to complete a task to the best of my ability." She turned to look at Taiee, who was doing an admirable job of looking supportive. "Lt. Taiee and I will endeavor to make sure we're prepared for whatever the Briar Patch has in store for us. Now, let's get down to business."

Forward Observation Post B'hala - Aulerg Moon - The Briar Patch (Klach D'Kel Brakt)

Anij awoke to find herself laying atop an uncomfortable metal-frame cot, alone in a darkened room. The air was stale and humid, and Anij was drenched in perspiration. She stared at the ceiling for a few moments while she concentrated on breathing and clearing her head. The last thing she remembered was fleeing through the corridors of the stricken Alshain warship, following Gallatin and their mysterious rescuers.

There had been a wild chase through a confusing series of corridors, their escape beset by random firefights between their liberators and the Alshain. That's where things grew hazy for her, but she supposed some kind of beam-out had occurred. This certainly didn't resemble the interior of the Alshain cruiser.

She sat up, her nose crinkling at her own unwashed odor. How long since she last bathed? How many days had passed since her entire civilization had been wiped out in a handful of minutes? Anij fought off another wave of fruitless tears, determined to figure out where precisely she was, and how she had come to be here.

Only meters from Anij's cot, separated by layers of lunar rock and thermal concrete, Vadark Jobrin Adnai stared impassively at the Son'a officer seated across from him in the cramped cement walled room. The Son'a's face was a tortured mask of stretched flesh that only seemed to underscore for Jobrin the Prophets' displeasure with the Son'a's naïve attempts to hold death at bay.

Adhar Wuuten, the latest in a long line of Son'a strongmen, sipped idly at the cup of springwine his Bajoran host had provided. He choked down the sickly, flowery scented liquor, unwilling to upset his hosts' delicate sensibilities. The Bajora-Tava had very little in the way of creature comforts, and the offer to share drink with an outworlder was a sign of deepest respect. Their culture was so totally geared to martial sensibilities that they seemed to have neither the time nor the desire to actually enjoy their lives. It was a cultural trait, Wuuten knew, the ultimate example of delayed gratification. Paradise would await them in the next life with the Prophets. This life was for making war.

"You and your people are to be congratulated on your bravery and skill, Vadark." He made certain to address the man by his Bajoran religious

title. "The rescue of the prisoners was superbly executed, but I wonder, why did you not destroy the Alshain ship when you had the chance?"

Jobrin set down his empty cup and eyed the foreign leader warily. "We left the ship intact because you asked us to rescue their prisoners, nothing more. As yet, the Alshain are not our enemies. It was gratifying to test our abilities against them, to be sure, but you know very well we have marshaled our strength for the tasks that lay ahead."

Wuuten inclined his head to concede the point. "Perhaps I should be more detailed in my future requests?"

Jobrin's countenance darkened. "Do not mistake us for servants like your Tarlac and Ellora, *Adhar*. We are allies because such a relationship benefits us both. The moment you forget this fact and attempt to command us like chattel, that relationship will be irrevocably severed."

"I would never attempt to do so, Vadark. We value your help in whatever capacity you select to offer it." Wuuten hated the obsequious act he was forced to put on for the benefit of these arrogant warrior monks, but as the Son'a were currently being hunted down and killed by the rapacious Alshain, one took allies wherever one could find them.

Jobrin tilted his head, accepting Wuuten's gesture of humility and appreciation. "Your new mimetic armor served us well, *Adhar*. Many lives were saved by its use; the Alshain are ferocious fighters, especially when defending their own ship."

"Fates willing, we will repel their advance into our space and the Son'a will be left in peace."

Apparently moved by that sentiment, Jobrin poured them both another cup of the cloying liquid. As they raised their glasses, the vadark intoned, "Perhaps someday, the Son'a will stand beside us as we retake Bajor from the clutches of the Cardassians. It is the Prophets' will."

Wuuten smiled, his haphazardly placed artificial teeth making the expression more horrific than celebratory. "Death to Cardassia," he said.

"Death to Cardassia," Jobrin of the Bajora-Tava repeated, his invocation moving him almost to tears.

Ready Room - USS *Gibraltar* - En-route to Starbase 12, Warp 6.5

Liana Ramirez stood at parade rest in front of Sandhurst's desk. The captain had been silent for nearly a minute as he mulled over how severe a dressing down he should or could give to a subordinate who had done nothing more than answered honestly a question posed by a superior.

He finally uttered, "Would you like to tell me what all that was about?"

Ramirez stared over his shoulder through the circular viewport where an airlock door had once stood. The stars fell behind them as streaks of light in the void as *Gibraltar* and her sister ships made way for Starbase 12 in tight formation.

"He asked me my opinion, and I gave it. Simple as that, sir."

Sandhurst sighed and leaned back in his chair as he rubbed his chin. "Have we lost that much ground, you and I?" He shook his head regretfully. "Liana, I'll ask one more time. You can either answer and get it out of your system, or stay quiet and fume about it for the next five weeks. I know you'll do your duty either way, that's not the issue. It's more about your comfort level."

She considered that. "Fine. I disagree with your decision to take part in this mission in the strongest possible terms."

"Why?"

"This isn't about the Son'a for Picard, it's about the Ba'ku. And it isn't about either of them for you, Captain. It's about the Cardassians, and all those people we left for dead back there on Lakesh."

Sandhurst's face colored, but he held his temper in check. "You don't feel our helping to intervene in a slaughter of innocents is a worthy assignment?"

"Under different circumstances, certainly. But in this scenario Picard's going to get us embroiled in a blood feud deep inside of a spatial anomaly that prevents us from calling for backup. The Alshain Starforce may not be what it was three hundred years ago, but it's certainly more than a match for a dozen starships."

As he sat forward and placed his elbows on the table, Sandhurst marshaled his patience with his young, headstrong first officer. "I'm sorry you feel that way, Liana. However, this is going to have to be one of those occasions where we agree to disagree. The mission stands." He forced himself to relax. "I do appreciate your feelings on the matter."

"Do you, sir?" was her sharp retort.

His head dipped in growing exasperation. "Meaning?"

"Meaning that I think if you'd really cared about my opinion, you'd have asked for it *before* signing onto this job. After all your talk of our shared responsibility for this crew, you go and volunteer us for something this dangerous without even consulting your executive officer."

He leaned back in his chair again and examined her thoughtfully. "And how do you know I volunteered?"

She directed an incredulous glare at him. "I got my hands on a copy of Picard's original mission proposal. It asked for ten ships, and *Gibraltar* wasn't on the list."

"Oh," was all Sandhurst could think to say.

Ramirez continued, "And with the exception of the hospital ship *Bethesda*, the other taskforce vessels are all heavy cruisers or explorers that might stand a chance taking on an Alshain warship one-on-one."

"Your point?" Sandhurst's patience was beginning to wear thin, due more to Ramirez's insight than anything else.

"I'd be less worried if the taskforce was staying together once inside the Briar Patch, but we're going to be scattered on individual assignments. That makes us all vulnerable, and *Gibraltar* doubly so. With our speed restricted to one-half impulse within the nebula, we certainly can't outrun trouble. And even with our paltry allotment of six quantum torpedoes in addition to our photons, we're in no shape to fight our way out of a confrontation."

"We didn't have quantum at Lakesh, and we survived that battle," Sandhurst pointed out, immediately regretting the comment the instant it had left his lips.

Ramirez went rigid, her eyes flaming. "With respect, sir, we did not *all* survive that engagement." The burning, listing bridge of *Phoenix* intruded into her thoughts, and she shook her head as if trying to cast the image out.

"I'm sorry." Sandhurst closed his eyes briefly. "I wasn't thinking." He sought to atone for the gaff by offering an olive branch. "I understand your feelings regarding this mission, and I apologize for not consulting you. That being said, I think we can do some good out there in the Briar Patch." His eyes sought out hers, trying to convey his deep conviction. "We have to try, Liana. It's what makes us different, what makes the Federation a beacon of hope for others."

She nodded. "I hope things go according to plan, too, sir." Ramirez took a deep breath and grasped the proffered branch. "I appreciate you letting me vent, Captain."

He smiled slightly, the gesture small but genuine. "Always, Commander. Anything else on your plate?"

She thought about that briefly. "Only one other matter I can think of, sir. We've received updated orders from Starfleet. Apparently Admiral Covey wants us to have a diplomatic officer aboard for the duration of the mission."

"Very well. Make sure we make arrangements for that officer's billet once we've reached Starbase 12."

Ramirez hesitated fractionally. "Actually, sir, we're scheduled to divert from the formation briefly to rendezvous with a runabout bringing her outbound from Pacifica."

Sandhurst scowled. "Really? That's a bit odd, isn't it?" Then his eyes widened slightly as he did the math in his head. Covey. Diplomatic officer. He looked physically pained as he asked, "And the name of this officer?"

"Lt. Commander Pell Ojana, if I remember correctly, sir. She's Bajoran."

Sandhurst rubbed the bridge of his nose and sighed. "She certainly is."

Ramirez studied him curiously, then observed, "I take it you know her."

"You could say that."

She quirked an eyebrow and summarized, "This is Monica being a meddling wench again, isn't it?"

"Oh, yes indeed, Commander."

Chapter 4

Alshain Heavy Cruiser *Venska* - In orbit of Son'a administrated Tarlac colony Norfander XII - The Briar Patch (Klach D'Kel Brakt)

The weapons officer glanced back at his sutahr, his muzzle flecked with salivation from his excited state. "Five-hundred thousand kilometers, sir. Still no signs that they've detected us."

Venska sat cloaked in orbit of a planet populated by the Tarlac. The inhabitants below had been seeded by the nascent Son'a Imperium with the proviso that they should be fruitful and multiply, thereby providing their masters with slave labor and foot soldiers.

Now an Alshain warship perched unseen above a flotilla of civilian rescue ships. They had been dispatched by several non-aligned worlds in the vicinity of the Briar Patch in an attempt to deliver some portion of the region's civilian populations from harm.

No Alshain vessel had yet penetrated so deeply into Son'a controlled space. The major engagements were being fought along a front some lightyears distant, contiguous to the Briar Patch. The Starforce had attempted a few sorties within the great cloud, but as yet the Son'a were still too formidable and wily so deep in their own backyard, and had visited defeats upon the Alshain like the crippling of the cruiser *G'Shrora*.

But here within the diaphanous veils of nebular gas was the crèche in which the Son'a enemy birthed and reared their armies. To attack here would weaken the heart of their defenses, and sow panic and confusion among their servant races. And here was where Sutahr Vlack R'Voss would avenge the dishonor visited upon his family.

"Type and number of enemy warships present?" asked R'Voss, making a final tally of his ship's weaponry on a display panel as he projected firing solutions in his mind's eye.

"One Ellora-crewed frigate, Sutahr. Compliment of thirty-seven; reading class-four armaments."

R'Voss sneered, "A single shepherd guarding such a fat herd of meat-stock." He nodded knowingly to his first officer. "The day will be ours." The bulky transports clustered like animals at a water hole, beaming and shuttling aboard the alien chattel that were now his by the ancestral right of the hunt.

"Perhaps you should look again, before you leap, Sutahr." This note of caution was sounded by their Klingon advisor, Captain Yejokk, the man responsible for the maintenance of the Imperial cloaking device that had allowed their unobserved approach to this most pregnant target.

R'Voss turned to look back at the Klingon officer, irritated by the man's reluctance to let the call of the prey heat his blood. The warriors of Qo'noS prided themselves as hunters, but secretly the Alshain laughed at the audacity of the ridge-headed little man-apes. Real hunters relied not upon spears or knives or disruptors, but on tooth and claw, muscle and bone. "You have found something, Captain?"

Yejokk toggled a sensor display, enlarging an image of Norfander XII's northern polar region. "As we approached, I detected an errant sensor return from near the polar magnetic field. Perhaps it is nothing, or perhaps it is an enemy warship lying in wait."

R'Voss growled impatiently. His cousin, a revered member of his family Sept, was Sutahr R'Vor of the *G'Shrora*. R'Vor's defeat at the hands of presumed mercenaries in the Son'a's employ had cast a shadow of embarrassment over all their kin. Thus, R'Voss had vowed revenge upon their foes. They were so close now he could smell them, and the call of his instincts was rivaling that more rational part of his mind which was listening to Yejokk's counsel.

His muscles ached for the release of the pursuit and the kill, but R'Voss reined in his baser callings. He gestured to the helmsman. "Re-align for polar orbit, Z plus fifteen hundred kilometers. Bring us in above whoever may be hiding in the magnetosphere."

"Immediately, Sutahr."

Pell Ojana hadn't know what to expect when she materialized aboard *Gibraltar*, but it certainly wasn't the sight of the ship's captain manning the console in an otherwise unoccupied transporter room.

She shifted the strap of the duffle bag on her shoulder, straightening as she announced formally, "Lt. Commander Pell Ojana, Diplomatic Officer, reporting as ordered." A traditionalist, she added, "Permission to come aboard, sir?"

Sandhurst stepped out from behind the transporter console, all stoic professionalism. "Permission granted, Commander." He extended a hand, "Welcome aboard *Gibraltar*."

Pell stepped down off the dais, taking his hand and shaking it lightly. Her eyes drank in her old friend's new and unfamiliar appearance. '*He looks worn down,*' she thought finally. '*But there's also a strength there I don't remember from before.*'

"It's been too long, Donald."

He inclined his head thoughtfully. "Four years and eight months, give or take a week or two." Sandhurst cracked a self-conscious grin. "But who's counting, right?"

She returned his hesitant smile, the expression on her face causing a dull pang in Sandhurst's chest. He remembered that smile. Once upon a time, the woman to whom that smile belonged had loved him.

"Last time we met, I was the superior officer. How quickly things change, eh?" Pell stood facing her as she struggled against the part of her mind that seemed determined to replay the memories of the first time they had made love. She railed internally against that selfish recollection. This wasn't her. She didn't do this, daydreaming like some addled schoolgirl. She had given her imagination too much free reign during her leave on Pacifica, spinning what-if's and might-have-been's as she watched her good friend Jasmine Glover struggle with the potential dissolution of her marriage. Pell sought to ground herself, directing her mind to an image of her long dead husband Soyam, and the errant line of thought abruptly terminated. That had been love. That had been commitment.

In an attempt to make small talk and break the tension, she said, "I have to admit, I knew you'd be a fantastic chief engineer but I never saw this coming." Pell reached up and ran a finger along the four pips that adorned his collar. He flinched unexpectedly at the gesture, causing her to freeze. She looked mortified and withdrew her hand. "I'm sorry, Captain, that wa—"

Sandhurst's face flushed with embarrassment as his hand shot out to capture her retreating one. "No!" he blurted. "I mean..." his voice suddenly abandoned him, and he released his grasp of her hand. He shook his head, turned and sat down on the edge of the transporter pad, looking haggard. "Damn it, Ojana, I'm sorry. I can't imagine how I could make this any *more* awkward or uncomfortable for you."

Pell lowered her duffle to the deck and took a seat beside Sandhurst while placing a hand on his shoulder. "If nothing else, I'm glad to see you're as worked up about this as I am," she said softly.

He sighed, looking morose. "I'm sorry about this. I know Monica's using your expertise as an excuse to play matchmaker, but I'd be lying if I said we didn't need someone of your caliber with us. My exec is a superb tactician, but neither of us has any appreciable diplomatic experience." Sandhurst turned to look at her. "If this isn't going to be doable for you, I can transfer you to whichever of the other ships could use your services."

She shrugged lightly, her smile now radiating reassurance. "The *Aegis* is gone, and I'm just fresh from prison with no immediate job prospects." She laughed lightly at that, running a hand through her hair in another unconscious gesture that Sandhurst had once cherished but had since forgotten. "Now there's something I'd never have expected to hear myself say."

Sandhurst relaxed enough to join in her quiet laughter. "Aren't we a pair? Me a captain, and you an ex-con. Who'd have thought?"

She squeezed his arm lightly. "I honestly can't imagine anyplace I'd rather be than someplace I'm actually needed." *Or wanted*, she added silently in her head. Her eyes met his. "Are *you* okay with this?"

Sandhurst took a moment to consider the question and found that he in fact was. "Yes." He stood, straightened his uniform and tried to regain some semblance of his command persona. She watched him, suddenly recognizing his strange reticence and disproportionate responses to stimuli. Pell had seen such reactions in herself and others long ago, just after having been liberated from the squalor and despair of the Cardassians' Gallitep labor camp.

As he reasserted his bearing, Sandhurst announced, "I'll show you to your quarters, Commander."

She followed him to her feet as she retrieved her duffle. "After you, sir."

Tarlac destroyer *SDU-17* - In polar orbit of Son'a administrated Tarlac colony Norfander XII - The Briar Patch (Klach D'Kel Brakt)

The Tarlac officer rubbed his eyes, taking a brief respite from staring at the monotonous prism of the sensor scope. They had remained here, mired in the soup of the polar magnetic field for the past two days, standing watch over the motley collection of civilian transports and cargo carriers as they strained to load every last Tarlac refugee their hulls could contain. While the Elloran frigate was the obvious guardian, his ship had been given the dubious honor of covert over-watch.

Although he could just barely make out the signatures of his charges through the sensor scrambling magnetic interference, he continued to do so, terrified that a moment's inattention could spell disaster for the whole evacuation.

The first indication that something was amiss took the form of a volley of missiles fired scattershot from above by the newly decloaked *Venska*. The tactic was a variant of the old naval depth charges designed to rattle a hidden enemy and provide a better sensor return with which to calibrate a more robust attack.

"Shields!" the Tarlac captain howled above the screeching alarms as he blinked against the strobing confusion that now dominated the sensor returns. He abandoned the scanners to stumble towards his command couch. The man struggled to keep his footing as the deck trembled from weapons impacts.

"Shields raised, now holding at thirty-one percent." The engineer called out. "We've taken structural damage to the engines, and systems damage to life support, tactical, navigat—"

"Fire! Return fire!" the captain roared as he pounded his fist against the inoperative weapons panel at his command console.

"Incoming!" shouted the sensor chief, who flung himself out of his chair and curled into a tight ball beneath the illusory safety of his workstation.

Having pinpointed the destroyer's exact whereabouts with the missile salvo, the *Venska* trained her exciser cannons on the smaller ship. The scintillating bluish-white beams punched through its depleted defense screens to carve chunks from the hull, venting air and crew into the vacuum.

A chorus of rending metal drove all thought of escape from the Tarlac captain's mind. He moved past the flailing weapons officer and hastily pushed the helmsman from his seat. As he took the controls of his dying ship, the captain came about and set sub-light engines to full and ran headlong towards the oncoming Alshain cruiser.

The captain's valiant suicide run was ended prematurely by *Venska's* disruptor batteries, which peeled the hull of the ship away like the skin of a fruit before leaving the glowing hulk of the destroyer's shattered interior to cool in the pitiless cold of space.

R'Voss grinned savagely at his crews' handiwork displayed on the viewscreen before turning his attention to the burgeoning transports. "Now, Klingon, you shall watch how true predators make the hunt."

The Elloran frigate fought hard and well, but it was outmatched by its opponent. The loss of the Tarlac destroyer on over-watch meant that the escort ship was the only thing standing before the Alshain and the helpless Tarlac civilians.

The crew of the smaller ship struggled valiantly to give the civilian ships time to escape, but most of the transports continued to remain stubbornly on station, awaiting recovery of their surface teams via transporter and shuttle. In the end, all that could be said of the frigate was that it died well, having depleted the cruiser's forward shields by forty percent.

Now, nothing remained to keep the Alshain warship from its intended prey.

Angosian Hospital Ship *Thruuma II* - In orbit of Son'a administrated Tarlac colony Norfander XII

Captain Brinig Uxtel navigated the teeming corridors of his ship, weaving through and around the clutching knots of Tarlac refugees that had spilled into the passageways from the vessel's overcrowded compartments and holds. The aging craft's life support and waste reclamation systems had been upgraded specifically for this mission of mercy, so there was no danger of running out of breathable air, but the sheer numbers of people jamming every cabin, health ward, hold and closet aboard couldn't help but give the ship a claustrophobic feel.

Uxtel stopped every so often to inquire about the wellbeing of his passengers and attempt to reassure the emotionally exhausted evacuees that everything was being done in order to transport them out of the war zone. Doctors, medics, counselors, and other volunteers from a half-dozen non-aligned planets helped make the transition for the frightened people somewhat easier.

The Federation had its plate full with recovering from the war and trying to secure their borders, and apparently could not be bothered to assist with the growing humanitarian crisis in and around the Briar Patch. A coalition of planets not affiliated with any of the great powers had combined their meager resources in an attempt to at least lessen the suffering of those innocents caught between the Son'a and the Alshain.

His earpiece comm chirped, "*Captain, our Ellora escort says we're under attack. They've just lost their covert sentry and are tracking the approach of an Alshain attack cruiser.*"

His stomach clenched at the thought of an Alshain warship running amuck deep behind Son'a lines. Uxtel threaded his way through the mass of bodies as quickly as possible, heading for the command cabin. He had seen enough war in his time. Indeed, he had been personally responsible for countless deaths, and not all of them could be easily categorized as 'enemy.'

As a physician and researcher for the Angosian government, Uxtel had helped to create a generation of physiologically enhanced super-soldiers to defend their homeworld in the Tarsian War. Those among their programmed and bio-modified ranks who survived the conflict were scarred physically and emotionally for life, many unable to readapt to the society that had spawned them.

Uxtel's self-imposed atonement for those sins had come as captain of this ship, a vessel whose crew had sworn to make a difference in the galaxy, despite their limited range and resources. He had elected to ally himself with people whose view of the galaxy was unique, people who purported to put morality ahead of politics.

Uxtel arrived in the command cabin just in time to witness a nearby Lissepian freighter explode into spinning debris, the result of a concentrated disruptor barrage. Rolwik, one of the very soldiers his captain had helped to forge, manned the helm. He glanced back from his bulky acceleration seat to note almost laconically, "The Alshain cruiser has opened fire on our convoy."

Uxtel envied the man his endless reserve of calm as he ordered, "Take us out of here, best speed." He hated abandoning the other ships to this ghoulish shooting gallery, but *Thruuma II* had no offensive weaponry.

"Coming about, sub-light engines ahead full."

The local comms channels were clogged with panicked voices; ships laden with refugees pleading for mercy from the Alshain attack. Their entreaties were met with surgically precise weapons fire. A Rutian cargo carrier listed towards the planet, holed through from repeated exciser strikes. The vessel trailed glittering contrails of frozen gas as it slid towards the planet's upper atmosphere.

The *Venska* moved into the confused melee, firing weapons in all directions. The cruiser took note of the quickly retreating silhouette of *Thruuma II* and moved to pursue.

“They’re coming after us,” Rolwik stated with a dissatisfied grumble.

“Escape pods?” the captain asked.

“It might... confuse them.” Rolwik smirked. “They may slow to try and capture or destroy them.”

“Then by all means...”

Rolwik tapped at an auxiliary panel and entered a series of codes and safety overrides. Four of *Thruuma II*'s escape pods launched away to drift into the path of the oncoming warship.

Rolwik eyed the sensors. “They aren’t even bothering to fire on them. Not taking prisoners today, apparently. They’re just going to mow straight through them.”

Uxtel grunted, “Cold hearted bastards, aren’t they?”

“Big bad wolves,” Rolwik affirmed as he moved to reinforce their aft shields a moment before an Alshain disruptor pulse crashed into their rear screens.

Venska's forward shields plowed into the tiny capsules. The impacts triggered the trilitium laced tri-cobalt explosives encased within each that had remained undetectable thanks to their ingenious subspace shielded housings. The resulting detonations rocked the cruiser and overloaded their shield grid while causing multiple hull breaches along the leading edge of the ship's prow.

“Oops,” Rolwik noted dryly. “Our life pods appear to have exploded.”

Uxtel frowned. “How strange. You usually don’t see that kind of behavior in emergency escape vehicles. Remind me to order a diagnostic on the other pods when we get home.”

“I’ll do just that,” the ex-soldier replied with a laugh as the *Thruuma II* quickly fled the planet’s orbital zone. Behind them those remaining craft still under their own power also moved to escape, taking advantage of the precious few moments the Angosians’ ploy had given them. The Alshain would not be disabled for long.

The captain activated a specially encrypted subspace transceiver. Uxtel began preparing a report that they would be unable to broadcast until they had cleared the nebula, but he wanted to make sure he’d properly underscored the seriousness of the growing catastrophe within the Briar Patch. A decades long operative of Starfleet Intelligence, he felt that this was something worth intervening in.

Captain Yejokk emptied the bulky Alshain extinguisher onto the crackling console fire, depriving it of oxygen just long enough to suffocate the flames. He threw the now empty device aside with derision as he approached R’Voss’ command seat. The large lupanoid cradled his head in his hands as his crew scurried about, reinstating damaged systems. On the flickering viewscreen, a dozen scattering transports darted into the nearest tendrils of nebular gas.

“And where,” Yejokk asked, his voice dripping with sarcasm, “does a true predator go to lick his wounds?”

Chapter 5

USS *Gibraltar* - Docked to Federation Starbase 12

Denise Murakawa strode down the narrow corridor on her way to Sickbay, returning from her meeting on the starbase with the chief medical officers from the ships participating in the task force. As she navigated the passageways, Murakawa marveled that people could live and work aboard so small a vessel. She was used to the spacious corridors and living areas of a *Nebula*-class starship, and even though *Gibraltar's* crew compliment was a relatively small one-hundred and forty souls, the ship still felt cramped. It was hard to believe that nearly a century earlier this same ship had supported a crew of over four-hundred. *They must have stacked them like cord wood*, she thought sardonically.

She stepped into Sickbay to find the pre-mission staff briefing already underway.

Although in her opinion these people were not on par with her hand-picked staff aboard the *Sutherland*, Murakawa trusted in their skill and professionalism sufficiently that she had not felt it necessary to oversee the more mundane departmental tasks. Heading up a routine pre-operational logistics accounting was something Taiee could handle.

On her way towards her office, Murakawa paused as she noticed the two EMH Mark I's were activated and present among the nurses and med-techs as Taiee worked through a medical inventory checklist. The atmosphere of the meeting was noticeably casual, with various personnel laughing and joking as the admittedly boring inventory process continued. Denise didn't object, in fact she worked to keep things light with her own staff to help cope with the pressures of the job.

Murakawa completed her daily quota of datawork, then spent an hour drawing up the ship's specific operational plans for various contingencies, including planetary evacuation and mass casualty crises. She glanced up to see Taiee standing in the doorway.

The regularly good natured lieutenant was putting up a valiant front and had remained her jovial self for the benefit of her coworkers in Sickbay and the crew at large. Taiee was widely accepted as the ship's unofficial morale officer, as well as the emotional rock upon which many of the crew anchored.

"You wanted to see me, Doctor?" Taiee struggled to keep her voice inflection neutral.

Murakawa, cognizant of Taiee's discomfort, tried to choose her words carefully. "I noticed your medical holograms were activated during the meeting. Might I ask why?"

Taiee stepped a bit further into the room, clearly ill at ease with being on the other side of what had been her desk. "They're part of the medical team," she replied succinctly.

"The EMH is supposed to be a short-term emergency supplement to a ship's medical staff, Lieutenant."

Taiee frowned. "Perhaps that's the case aboard larger ships with more abundant medical resources, Doctor. However, without a physician's knowledge base, I rely on our holograms for assistance in everything from diagnoses to surgery."

Murakawa shook her head. "That's unacceptable. You're using them as a crutch, one that will ultimately undermine your own skills and judgment."

"A crutch?" Taiee echoed incredulously. She gestured through the transparent partition towards the EMH that was still online. Taiee had left it activated to teach a refresher to the medical staff on staunching arterial bleeding, utilizing a holographic victim. The nurses and med-techs looked on with rapt attention, in stark contrast to their earlier levity.

As she pointed to the hologram, Taiee struggled to keep the mounting anger out of her voice. "The EHM contains every piece of medical knowledge ever compiled by the Federation, Doctor. Two hundred years of accumulated brilliance... Phlox, Darvanger, Carrington, McCoy, Pulaski... their ideas, their skills, they're all in there. How could I not use such a phenomenal resource?"

Murakawa nodded. "I agree wholeheartedly that they're a useful tool, Lieutenant. However, becoming dependent upon them risks not only losing your edge, but ultimately endangers the welfare of your patients."

Taiee folded her arms across her chest in an unconsciously defensive gesture. "I've managed without them before."

"I'm sure you have, but as acting CMO it's my job to make sure that you're prepared to take on a medical crisis without having to rely on the hologram for help."

The lieutenant stared expectantly. "What are you suggesting, Doctor?"

"Are you familiar with a 24/QPS?" Murakawa studied the nurse-practitioner's face, aware that her response would demonstrate just what kind of medical professional she was.

Taiee stiffened slightly. "Yes. It's a twenty-four hour quarantine protocol scenario. It's a pre-graduation exercise for doctors in their final year at Starfleet Medical Academy. A simulated pathogen infects a starship crew, and the medical staff has twenty-four hours under deteriorating circumstances to identify and treat the infection."

Murakawa smiled. "Precisely. And to make things more interesting, the simulation takes place in circumstances where the starship in question has lost portions of its computer core memory. As the scenario progresses you're going to lose access to more and more of the medical database, so time is most definitely *not* on your side."

Taiee's face took on a defiant cast. "When does this begin?"

"Report to Holosuite Two with these people at thirteen-hundred hours." The doctor handed Taiee a padd containing the names of eight of the ship's medical personnel selected at random.

Taiee turned to leave, pausing on the threshold. "Has Captain San—"

Murakawa replied curtly and cut off Taiee's line of inquiry. "The captain has already approved this training, Lieutenant." She directed her most confident smile at the nurse. "Despite what you may think, this isn't a punishment, or me trying to grind you down. You're a good CMO, but you could be better. I'd like you to see for yourself what you're capable of."

Taiee left without another word, deep in thought as she succumbed to a growing sense of anxiety.

Alshain Heavy Cruiser *Venska* - In orbit of Son'a administrated Tarlac colony Norfander XII

Captain Yejokk looked on with obvious distaste as Sutahr R'Voss placed the targeting reticule directly over the central urbanized area of the Tarlac colony on the surface. R'Voss drew his lips back to expose his glistening teeth to the Klingon officer. "You disapprove, Captain?"

"Slaying your enemies in battle is one thing, Sutahr. Slaughtering the helpless from orbit may be effective, but it is not the way of the warrior."

"What would you have me do, Klingon?" R'Voss brought himself to his full bipedal height, though his species was equally comfortable moving on either two or four limbs. "They are the foot soldiers of my enemy. If I leave them, they and future generations might take the lives of my kin in battle." His smile became ever more predatory. "Besides, they are *only* Tarlac. If it had not been for the Son'a's interference, these creatures would still be drawing on cave walls with charcoal. Instead, they have warships and phasers and swear allegiance to their Son'a masters."

Yejokk stepped forward. "Beam down, and engage them in person, Sutahr. I do not object to your killing them, but at least show them the respect of looking them in the eye as the deed is done. Give them a chance to defend themselves as men, to die on their feet."

Snuffling with laughter, R'Voss' ears twitched in an Alshain approximation of a head shake. "Sometimes I find it difficult to believe your people overcame the Dominion, Captain. Your antiquated code of honor belongs to an age where men fought one another with bows and swords."

Yejokk's cold smile was tinged with irony. "Perhaps, but it serves us."

The Alshain captain turned back to complete the targeting process. R'Voss aimed the Son'a manufactured isolytic subspace weapon at the planet's surface, targeting the two-hundred thousand plus inhabitants of the world's capitol city. "It will appear that the Son'a, fearing that this planet would fall into our hands, decided to cleanse it with fire rather than allow the Tarlac to live under Alshain rule."

"I'm curious. Exactly how did such weaponry fall into your hands, Sutahr?"

R'Voss grinned fiercely. "Their arms depot at Wuan'bado was the target of our first attack against the Son'a Imperium. We took possession of a cache of these devices."

"Use of such armaments is a flagrant violation of the second Khitomer Accords," Yejokk offered, his tone carefully impartial, "to which the Alshain are a signatory."

The Alshain captain turned to look at his Klingon counterpart. "As is your covertly providing cloaking technology to our government."

Yejokk found himself returning the Alshain's toothy smile. "An excellent point, Sutahr." He moved to a vantage point offering a better view of the main screen. "Do we know what effect this weapon will have on a planetary body?"

R'Voss released control of the weapons console to his tactical officer and then moved to sit in his command chair. "In fact I have no idea." He glanced sidelong at his Klingon advisor as the sutahr said, "Let us find out together, shall we?"

Eiayna City, Tarlac colony Norfander XII

Ancient Tarlac myth told of a Judgment Day on which the demons of old would tear the sky asunder and boil the seas. Although the threat of attack by the Alshain had spurred much of the population to near panic, few would have believed that the day to end all days would have arrived *today*.

The isolytic weapon detonated some thirty kilometers above the city. It caused a subspace shear and sent out a shockwave measuring over one-hundred isotons. Just seconds prior to the overpressure wave annihilating the city, the subspace wave front swept across the surface, a bizarre

confluence of energies forcibly pushing peoples' consciousness out of their bodies. Each and every one of the Tarlac witnessed the demise of their physical forms from a surreal out-of-body perspective. An instant later the overpressure front pulverized the entire continent and blasted the seas in that hemisphere into superheated steam.

The *Venska* witnessed the death of Norfander XII as the ship thrust away from the stricken world at half-impulse. A monstrous shockwave swelled out from ground zero to spread across the planet at thousands of kilometers per hour. The subspace tear upset the gravitational balance of the planet's orbit, shifting the planet off its axis as R'Voss' ship was tossed about like flotsam on a breaking tidal wave.

As the Alshain captain pulled himself back into his chair, he stared with near disbelief at the image of the shattered planet, shocked from its gravitational plane. He glanced to Yejokk as the captain struggled to his feet and exclaimed, "Now we know..."

Forward Observation Post B'hala - Aulerg Moon - The Briar Patch (Klach D'Kel Brakt)

The pressure door hissed open and light poured through the opening that forced Anij to shield her eyes against the unexpected intrusion. She could discern the form of a man standing in the doorway, but it was not until she heard his voice that the ember of hope in her heart grew to an open flame. "Gallatin!"

He embraced her tightly, picking her up off her feet, happy to know he had at least one friend left in the cruel universe that had so recently claimed most of his dying race. "It's alright, Anij. We're safe for the moment."

"Where are we?"

He lowered her to the floor and took her hand to lead her slowly out into a bare, cement-walled corridor. "We're on a moon, though I'm not entirely sure in what star system. Some of the Son'a are here, along with a new ally."

She looked at him after a cursory examination of her new surroundings. "What's happening, Gallatin? Why did the Alshain attack our world? What did you and the others do to provoke them?"

It was a perfectly valid question under the circumstances, despite the discomfort it generated within Gallatin. He led her to a small lounge of sorts, though it was bereft of any windows it boasted a dozen tables and some primitive looking food replicator units. They sat as Gallatin tried to find the right words under Anij's expectant gaze.

"When our group was first exiled from home, we set out to forge empire for ourselves. But... we had nothing but a handful of old ships, and the technology that you, our parents, had abandoned when you settled Ba'ku. We discovered races like the Tarlac and Ellora nearby, primitive by our standards, but they were easily controlled and we convinced them that we were their gods. We forced them to work for us, made them soldiers and laborers, and settled them on uninhabited planets so their numbers would grow."

Anij's eyes glistened as she absorbed the litany of the Son'a's crimes.

Gallatin continued reluctantly, "But then we came across the Alshain Exarchate, whose empire hemmed us in and threatened our acquisition of new territories. They were an ancient power, now in decline. Generations ago they controlled a sizeable portion of the Alpha and Beta quadrants, but their empire was now a mere shadow of its former glory. We were still no match for them in a direct confrontation, so we decided to take another path."

Overcome with emotion, he took a moment to retrieve a hot, heady smelling drink from one of the replicator slots as he struggled to contain his grief and embarrassment. He returned to the table and accepted Anij's offered hand as he resumed the difficult tale. "We manufactured a potent narcotic, ketracel-white, and introduced it to the ruling nobility of the Alshain. We became the sole suppliers of this drug, and we used their addiction to the white to influence and manipulate generations of their leadership. We stole their technology, annexed their territory, and undermined their society at every opportunity. Most of our industrial and military strength came at the expense of the Exarchate."

Tears streamed down Anij's cheeks, her eyes wide with shock and revulsion. "So, they have just cause to hate you. To hate us..."

Gallatin nodded ashamedly. "They do indeed."

"But why now? What brought all this to a head?"

As he looked down at his cup, Gallatin said, "After the Federation thwarted our attempts at collecting your planet's metaphasic radiation, the Son'a allied themselves with the Dominion, an aggressive power from the Gamma quadrant determined to conquer the known galaxy. The Alshain took this opportunity to join the Federation alliance opposing the Dominion."

He took a long draught of his drink with a shaking hand. "Our side lost, and now the Alshain have set about collecting the spoils of war. They wish to re-establish the Greater Alshain of ages past, and in so doing they're intent on wiping out the Son'a, our servant races..." he looked up to meet Anij's unwavering gaze, "...and our parent race."

She collected herself and managed to hold her anguish in check for the moment. "What are we to do, Gallatin? Can these new allies transport us to the Federation? Perhaps Jean-Luc and his people can help us?"

Gallatin finished his drink. He appeared to have regained some of his composure following his difficult confessions. "The Federation has its own problems right now. I don't think we'll be seeing them anytime soon. But, the remaining Son'a and these Bajora-Tava are planning

something big, something that may slow the Alshain advance into the nebula.”

Her countenance darkened. “More fighting. More death.”

“That’s what it’s going to take for us to survive, Anij. The Alshain won’t rest until we’re all dead, or until the last handful of us have been pushed so far away from our homes that we’re no longer a threat.”

She shook her head dejectedly. “This all seems like a bad dream, a nightmare that refuses to end.”

He held her hand more tightly. “It will end, Anij. I promise you that. The few of us that remain will reclaim our heritage and retake our homeworld.”

“But at what price, Gallatin? What will remain of the Ba’ku soul at the end of such a conflict?”

He had no answer for her.

Deck 6, USS *Gibraltar* - Federation Task Force Peacekeeper - Approaching the Briar Patch, Warp 7

Sandhurst stepped through the parting doors into the turbolift, mildly surprised to find Ramirez inside. “Don’t you have the midwatch?” he asked.

She smirked. “I do, but Lieutenant Ashok was determined that I needed to see firsthand the adjustments he’d made to the impulse engines to decrease the likelihood of our overheating the impulse manifolds once we’re in the Briar Patch.”

The captain nodded. “Well, we’re seeing improvements in that respect. On *Enterprise’s* last visit they were restricted to one-third impulse. With the assistance of the SCE we can now achieve half-impulse, maybe better.”

Ramirez gave him an inscrutable look. “You sure you don’t want to go down there and check Ashok’s work, sir?”

“Bridge,” he ordered the computer. He cast a glance at Ramirez. “I’m sure that’d go over like gangbusters, Commander. The man’s already nursing an inferiority complex; I don’t need to heap any more anxiety on him.”

She smiled approvingly. “Good. I’m glad you’re finally giving him some space.”

“I had to. Have you *seen* the man? He’s a mountain.”

Ramirez chuckled lightly.

Sandhurst looked momentarily thoughtful, then ordered the turbolift to pause its ascent. He asked suddenly, “Is it just me, or have things seemed a bit tense onboard in the past few days? I don’t mean pre-mission jitters; it’s something else, I think.”

“Let me ask you this,” Ramirez replied cryptically. “Who’s the person that keeps us all on an even keel emotionally?”

“That’s easy, it’s Taicee.”

Ramirez smiled patiently at Sandhurst’s perplexed expression, letting the man work it out for himself.

He winced slightly after a moment. “Oh. Dr. Murakawa’s test.”

“Right.” She chided gently, “From her perspective, you had her replaced by a new CMO who’s now calling her abilities into doubt publicly by putting her through some very difficult testing of questionable necessity.”

Sandhurst frowned. “I thought the 24/QPS sounded like a good idea. Taicee’s very capable, and I felt this testing would only serve to enhance her abilities.”

Ramirez looked unconvinced as she replied, “Your intentions may have been good, sir, but Taicee and her team failed the simulation. Now, she’s angry and embarrassed, and you’re seeing that mood reflected by a large portion of the crew that she’d normally be helping to keep in good spirits.”

He sighed, closing his eyes. “Damn it.”

His exec remained silent, having made her point.

“Resume,” Sandhurst ordered, and they continued their journey upward.

The two officers, each lost in their own thoughts, exited onto the bridge. The magnificent panorama of the Klach D’Kel Brakt filled the main viewer.

Lar’ragos nodded to the captain and XO from the Tactical station as the pair assumed their respective posts. The Chief Security/Tactical

officer offered a status report, "ETA to the entry portal is fifteen minutes, sir. *Enterprise* has ordered us to reduce speed to one-quarter impulse as we approach. All vessels are scanning actively for any sign of threat activity."

"Acknowledged, Mister Lar'ragos," Sandhurst responded as he initialed a fuel consumption log with his thumbprint for the Chief Operations officer, Lieutenant(j.g.) Olivia Juneau.

Juneau resumed her station at the crescent shaped console in the bridge's well, taking her seat next to the Flight Control officer, Ensign Brett Lightner. The ensign's gaze remained fixed on the approaching nebula as he leaned in towards Juneau to remark, "Can you believe the Klingons and Romulans fought a war inside there?"

Juneau looked up and gave the orange and crimson nebular cloud a dismissive glance. "It was a battle, not a war. And now it appears it'll be our turn."

Lightner quirked an eyebrow. "Fatalistic much?"

She laughed without humor. "Simply extrapolating based on our track record to date."

From behind them at her station in the well, Ramirez cleared her throat loudly and asked, "Would you kids like to share with the rest of the class?"

"No, ma'am," they replied in unison, using their most petulant child-like tones.

In the command chair, Sandhurst smirked slightly at the exchange. "Let's keep our eyes open, folks. There's a lot of people unhappy about our presence here."

From behind him at the Tactical station, Lar'ragos intoned, "Hostile territory, aye, sir."

USS *Enterprise* - Federation Task Force Peacekeeper - Approaching the Briar Patch, Warp 7

Captain Picard leaned forward in his seat, the anticipation of their arrival at the nebula causing his skin to tingle. He was too much the professional to allow his crew to sense his excitement, however. Anyone other than Counselor Troi.

"Mister Data, order the task force to drop to one-quarter impulse on your mark for nebular entry."

"Aye, sir," Data replied evenly as he relayed the instructions to the rest of the starships. As the task force dropped to sublight, the android's board chirped insistently, and he quickly distilled the incoming sensor information for his captain. "Sir, we have located what appears to be a fixed communications buoy in the center of the entry conduit." Another chime from the sensors presaged his assessment, "It appears we are being scanned, Captain."

"Yellow alert, shields to full," barked Riker from the seat to Picard's right.

"Incoming transmission from the buoy," announced the Tactical officer. "Audio only."

"On speakers," Picard ordered.

"Federation vessels, be advised that a state of hostilities exists within the nebula between the Alshain Exarchate and the Son'a Imperium..."

"It appears we were expected," Riker noted *sotto voce* to Picard.

"...Any attempts to interfere in the internal affairs of the Exarchate will be interpreted as an act of war. It is strongly recommended that you reverse course and avoid the Klach D'Kel Brakt until such time as hostilities have been concluded."

The message repeated, and Picard motioned for its termination with a cutting gesture at his throat. He stood and tugged at his uniform as he pursed his lips thoughtfully. "Any signs of anomalous activity aside from the buoy, Data?"

"No, sir."

Lt. Commander N'Saba, the Alshain Starfleet officer turned from the Science station to observe the captain. Unbidden, he offered his thoughts regardless. "You may be assured, Captain, that they mean what they say. They've also made a point to avoid clearly establishing exactly what constitutes 'interference.'"

Riker craned his neck to look at the supercilious lupanoid. "Then how are we to know when we've crossed that line, Mister N'Saba?"

"When they open fire, Commander," was his terse reply.

"Very well." Picard crossed his arms and moved to a position between the Helm and Operations consoles. "Inform the task force, all ships to red alert. All ahead at one-quarter, *Enterprise* has the lead."

Chapter 6

Gibraltar's spacious crew lounge had stubbornly resisted being named since the ship had been launched nearly six months earlier. Various titles, some clever, others not, had been floated and rejected by the senior staff. Other vessels had created elaborate themes for their recreational facilities, modeling them after famous bars of bygone eras or holographically altering them to appear to be in exotic locales like a dense rainforest or a cloud city. The recreation center aboard this ship was utilitarian, and as such was simply referred to as 'the lounge.'

Pell Ojana entered the cavernous rec center and stopped just inside the doors to marvel at the unobstructed splendor of the Briar Patch on the other side of the room's large rectangular viewports. She tore her eyes away from the spectacle and scanned the compartment for a recognizable face, finally settling on the solitary form of Liana Ramirez occupying a table right beside the windows.

Pell procured a synthale from one of the replicators lining the inside bulkhead and then approached Ramirez's table. "Mind if I join you, sir?"

Ramirez had been engrossed in the contents of a padd, and looked up suddenly at the interruption. She deactivated the device and set it aside. "By all means, Commander."

Pell slid into the chair as she directed a friendly smile at the first officer. "Quite the ship and crew you have here, sir."

As she returned the smile, Ramirez replied, "Thank you, and you can call me Liana. No need for formalities off duty."

Pell bobbed her head. "Very well, please call me Ojana."

"How are you settling in, Ojana?"

"Well enough, I suppose. New ship, new faces..." she brushed her hair back, looking chagrined, "... new captain."

Ramirez studied her. "Is that going to be a problem for you?"

Unable to distinguish how much Ramirez knew of her and Donald's past, Pell stared self-consciously at her drink. "I wouldn't have thought so, but it's turning out to be a bit more challenging than I'd imagined."

Taking a sip from her mug, Ramirez offered, "One of those *complicated* relationships?"

"Are there any other kind?" Pell gestured to the padd, blatantly reaching for a change of subject. "Anything interesting?"

Ramirez chuckled darkly. "Speaking of complicated," she held up the padd. "It's the sum total of the Federation's historical and sociological knowledge on the Alshain."

Pell looked genuinely interested. "I've been dipping into that myself, but its slow going. Their entire society is like a living mass of contradictions."

Ramirez rubbed her eyes and mock groaned in agreement. "Tell me about it. I thought the Cardassians were hard to grasp."

The diplomatic officer raised an eyebrow. "You've studied the Cardassians?"

Ramirez nodded. "And the Klingons. I had a two year Robert Fox fellowship to Harvard's Kennedy School of Government."

"Their intercultural studies program?" The Bajoran looked perplexed. "I... thought you were a security officer before going into command?"

"That's right," Ramirez said diffidently, watching Pell for a reaction.

Pell blushed. "I'm sorry. The only people I've known who've been through that course are in the diplomatic corps or are egghead intellectuals. You don't fit the stereotype."

The XO smirked. "That's me. I just leave the tobacco pipe and the tweed jacket in my quarters."

That drew a blank look from the Bajoran, who looked at Liana questioningly.

"Sorry, Terran collegiate reference." Ramirez squinted as she struggled to think of an analogous Bajoran example. "Something like a Vedek scholar's *donzl* shawl and ear-pick."

Pell laughed loudly at the image. "Alright, now I get it." After a moment's levity, she glanced out the viewport and seemed lost in thought for a brief time. As she looked back at Ramirez she inquired, "What's your take on all this, Liana? How long are the Alshain likely to let us stomp around in their backyard?"

Ramirez grew somber. "Not long, I'm afraid. They're a proud people, and their feud with the Son'a goes back a long ways. I'm worried Picard's putting too much faith in our current alliance, and isn't taking their cultural hubris into account."

The tension was evident in Pell's expression as she nodded. "That would be my assessment as well. Hopefully, the Federation can make some

ground diplomatically with the Exarchate and head off any unpleasantness.” She took a sip of her synthale. “Regardless, we should proceed with caution.”

“Oh, we always proceed with caution, Ojana. Not that it seems to matter much.”

Pell frowned. “Pardon?”

“Like the *Aegis* and the *Enterprise*, our ship isn’t forced to go looking for trouble. It usually finds us first.”

Her expression darkened as Pell sighed. “Oh. You’re one of *those* ships.”

Ramirez raised her mug in response. “Welcome to The Rock.”

Ascent to the Hall of Ministries - Central Ministries Complex, Governance Archology - Alshain Proper

Federation Ambassador Xin Dejong ascended the seemingly endless flight of broad stairs carved from Lurian bloodstone. He paid little heed to the forest of massive columns that bracketed the stairway like a phalanx of giant guards, clearly a gesture meant to inspire wonder and dread.

He could have taken the lift, of course, or beamed in, but the Alshain architects of this monstrous building-city had intended the path to the Hall of Ministries to be a test of endurance for foreign dignitaries. It would be a shame to disappoint them.

The structure was designed to awe the outsiders who shuffled up these steps to grovel in supplication before the Exarch’s throne and the august offices of his Bloodling kin. When Greater Alshain had ruled this region of space millennia before, a long line of slaves, vassals, and clients had made this trek under the menacing gaze and tritanium manacles of their Alshain overlords.

The planet’s cities were impressive, that was undeniable fact. The famed Alshain arcologies had held a place among the catalogued galactic wonders since before the Romulan/Vulcan schism. Each rose more than five kilometers into the sky; the giant wedge-shaped crescents were fully contained city habitats, each home to millions. All agricultural operations were carried out on nearby client worlds, so that the homeworld would remain unpolluted by the stigma of something as mundane as agrarian toil. The remainder of Alshain Proper was a lush natural preserve, untouched save for the occasional hunting forays by their society’s elite.

Six months before he had replaced her, Dejong’s predecessor at this post had recommended he familiarize himself with the history and politics of the Terran Roman republic and early empire. Xin had obligingly done so, despite being confused as to the connection between the two. Now entering his second year of this ambassadorship, he understood what the woman had been getting at.

Alshain politics were a complex web of familial, clan, corporate, and military relationships that defied the ability of Federation exosociologists to easily classify. The great houses, or Septs as they were called, were the primary focus of Alshain society, especially among the elite nobility. Despite their haughty demeanor and militaristic bent, buried deep within the Alshain psyche was an almost pathological need to be accepted within the greater galactic community.

For untold generations, the Alshain had been viewed by their neighbors as little more than mindless space-faring predators, an irregular evolutionary combination of primitive barbarity coupled with high technology. As a result, the ruling nobility of their species had made a point to transform their culture into the pinnacle of civilization. They had establishing elaborately codified laws regulating behavior, speech, dress and all other aspects of their social interactions.

It had been the pursuit of such ideals that had eventually led to the neglectful collapse of their empire. The great, avaricious eye of Alshain society had turned inward and grew increasingly obsessed with the trappings of power and prestige. Their dominance over neighboring systems had begun to crumble at the edges, helped along by repeated incursions by the nomadic Hur’q horde as well as uprisings among their own vassal worlds.

Dejong paused a moment to catch his breath as he reached the top of the nearly quarter-kilometer tall stairway. He made sure to straighten the folds of his formal tunic and make himself presentable for his meeting with the Minister of War. It was a testament to Alshain obstinacy that they had no foreign ministry. All diplomatic matters, as well as military ones, were handled by the Ministry of War.

Whisked through additional security check points, the ambassador soon found himself in the antechamber just outside the war minister’s private office. Dejong had learned early on to judge the seriousness of diplomatic situations between their peoples by how long he was forced to wait before his audience with members of the Alshain leadership.

His wait was startlingly brief, clearly not a good sign. The minister’s aide ushered him inside the extravagantly large office. It was adorned with the spoils of millennia of Alshain conquest. Death masks from Itrob, an ancient Klingon projectile rifle, and the gauntlet of some unfortunate Gorn captain were but a few of the trinkets on display for his edification.

“Ambassador Dejong, welcome.” Xin turned at the sound of his name and bowed formally as the Minister of War, Orthlin C’Oemnm entered, clad in ornately flowing robes dotted with runic script, each symbol an allusion to an ancient Alshain victory over their enemies. He was tall, even for an Alshain, and his fur was a mottled grey, now running to white in his declining years.

Dejong, on the other hand, was of medium height for a human. In his sole concession to vanity, he colored his hair to retain the jet-black hue of his youth. Of Chinese ancestry, Dejong’s forebears had immigrated to Malaysia in the mid-21st century, thus avoiding the thermonuclear holocaust visited upon China in the Third World War. His family had narrowly avoided being wiped out by a scant matter of months, a fact

that had been passed on from generation to generation. As a result, Xin was especially sensitive to the kinds of horrors taking place at present within the Briar Patch.

C'Oemnm moved past the enormous desk to a sitting area as he gestured for Dejong to take a seat in a chair clearly designed for the body type of visiting humanoids. The minister sat across from him, gathering his robes over one arm as he lowered himself into the chair with all the delicacy of a 17th century French courtier.

"We appreciate you seeing us on such short notice, Mr. Ambassador." C'Oemnm spoke in the royal first person plural, yet another bizarre affectation of the Alshain ruling class.

Dejong bobbed his head. "I am at your disposal, Minister."

"We are greatly concerned with this unexpected Federation intrusion into the Klach D'Kel Brakt." Xin still marveled that for all their audacity, the Alshain insisted on calling the nebula by its Klingon designation. It was, he'd been told, an intentional reminder among the Alshain of the crushing defeat they had suffered there at the hands of the Klingon Empire centuries earlier. That battle had marked the end of the Alshain hegemony over the region and brought home to them the reality of their nation's decline.

"Respectfully, Minister, we announced our intentions to your ambassador on Earth a full three weeks ago. As you already know, the Starfleet presence entering the nebula is there solely to try and prevent any further unfortunate and unnecessary bloodshed."

The Alshain's ears twitched with irritation. "What you call unnecessary bloodshed, Mr. Ambassador, we call justice."

Dejong steepled his hands as he considered his reply. "I understand the reasons for your people's deep-seated animosity towards the Son'a, Minister, but they are already beaten. After the armistice, they'd agreed to territorial concessions, both to you and to the Klingon Empire before the Alshain Starforce had even begun this new campaign of ethnic cleansing."

C'Oemnm gestured pointedly at the human. "No. Not 'ethnic cleansing.' We are retaking territory that is rightfully ours. It was ours before the Son'a settled in the nebula, and it remains ours. We gave them an ultimatum before our attacks began, leave or be destroyed. They elected to stay and fight."

Wisely conceding the point with a nod, Dejong replied, "Be that as it may, Minister, the Federation would hope at the very least to be allowed to evacuate the Son'a, Tarlac, and Ellora survivors from the war zone."

The minister drew back his lips to expose a mouthful of fearsome teeth. "To what end, Mr. Ambassador? So they can regroup under the umbrella of Federation protection and return generations from now to avenge themselves upon us?" C'Oemnm traced the lines of one of the runic symbols on his robes with a wickedly honed claw. "You Federation types think in such limited time spans. The Exarchate has endured for thousands of years. Thus, we seek to predict the motivations not only of our current enemies, but those who *might* oppose us centuries from now."

Dejong smiled and rose to meet C'Oemnm's implied challenge. "And where does the Federation figure into your long-range predictions?"

The minister sat back, taking a good half minute to ponder the question. "We have been allies of necessity, opposing the Dominion assault on the Alpha quadrant. Now that the war has ended, it is clear that the Federation's adherence to its democratic ideals are incompatible with the Exarchate's monarchical system and political goals." He leaned forward as his ears flattened in an aggressive gesture. "Rest assured, you may have brought the Klingons to heel, but we will never submit."

As he laughed dismissively, Dejong shook his head. "I very much doubt the Klingons see themselves as having been conquered, Minister. Just four years ago, we were at war with them, however briefly."

C'Oemnm smiled mercilessly. "The last, dying gasp of the empire's independence, encouraged by Dominion intrigues. The Klingons, like us, are hemmed in on all sides." He sat back slightly in his throne-like chair and continued, "The Exarchate realizes that the Federation will ultimately seek to strangle us into submission. Once our home systems are engulfed and surrounded by Federation members, you will seek to undermine our monarchy and spread your democratic ideals among the lower strata of our population." He bared his glistening teeth and said in a low voice, "You are to be congratulated on your cunning. In your own way, you are as insidious as the Borg."

Dejong shifted uncomfortably in his seat, shocked at this new insight into the Alshains' collective paranoia. "Minister, the Federation has no plans, be they near-term or long-range, for the destruction of the Exarchate. I'm sorry if you see our actions in the Briar Patch as being indicative of a plot against you, but that's simply not the case." He sat forward, determined not to be cowed by the minister's bluster. "To be perfectly blunt, despite the fact that your people were stalwart allies to us during the war, your current behavior towards the Son'a and their client peoples is an embarrassment to the Federation. What you're doing in the Briar Patch is a violation of every tenet of civilized conduct."

The minister's upper lip quivered in an approximation of a sneer. "You needn't worry yourself about the vagaries of our alliance anymore, Mr. Ambassador." He reached into the folds of his robes and C'Oemnm produced a parchment scroll that he handed it over to the Federation ambassador.

Opening the document slowly, Dejong found that like all important official government papers of the Alshain, it had been written in the blood of some unfortunate member of the lower nobility whose name had been drawn by lottery. Xin fumbled for his optical translator unit, but C'Oemnm summarized its contents for him.

"It says that the non-aggression and mutual defense treaty between our peoples is in abeyance until such time as the situation in the Klach D'Kel Brakt has been resolved. Furthermore, any attempts by Starfleet to interfere in what is clearly an internal matter of national security for

the Exarchate will be interpreted as an act of war against the Alshain people.”

Dejong frowned, exuding displeasure at this obvious political gambit. “This is an unfortunate and dangerous step backwards for both our peoples, Minister.”

C’Oemnm was unmoved. “If that is the case, then it is your Federation’s doing, Mr. Ambassador. We warned you repeatedly that the Exarchate would brook no interference in this matter, but you refused to listen.” He leaned forward even further and emitted a low growl that raised the hairs on the back of Dejong’s neck. “A single misstep within the nebula and we’ll destroy every starship in your task force before gorging ourselves on the survivors.”

The ambassador was smart enough to detect the sudden and potentially lethal shift in their relationship. The importance of the information he now carried was a physical weight on his spine. Xin Dejong stood and bowed again, though more curtly this time. Forgoing any diplomatic pleasantries, he said simply, “I will convey your message, Minister.”

Task Force Peacekeeper had threaded the needle and transitioned into the Briar Patch without incident. *Enterprise* had given the various ships their operational orders, and the flotilla had broken up, going their separate ways. Some would reconnoiter known Son’a colonies and suspected strongholds. Others would concentrate on the Tarlac and Ellora settlements to search for survivors.

Ready Room, USS *Enterprise* - Federation Task Force Peacekeeper - The Briar Patch (Klach D’Kel Brakt)

Picard was standing with his back to the door, gazing out the viewport as Riker entered. The strains of Donizetti’s *Lucia di Lammasoor* wafted through the air and gave Will pause. *That’s a tragic romance*, he mused, trying to gauge his captain’s mood. *Definitely not a good sign*. Picard had grown increasingly somber as the scope of the war crimes being committed by the Alshain was uncovered.

Riker cleared his throat to catch Picard’s attention. The captain turned and accepted the proffered padd in his XO’s hand. “Status?” he inquired as he muted the operatic tune.

“All ships are away with the exception of *Bethesda* and *Gibraltar*.” Riker gave Picard a questioning look. “And you’ve yet to tell us where *we’re* going.”

Picard favored his first officer with a smile that appeared to require a great deal of effort. “Captain’s prerogative, Number One.” He took his seat. “Did you have a destination in mind?”

Riker looked nonplussed. “I thought the Ba’ku planet would be a reasonably good place to start. Don’t you, sir?”

As he looked up at Riker, Jean-Luc’s expression hardened. “We both know that’s not possible, Will. If I take the *Enterprise* anywhere near there, I’ll be accused of fabricating this entire mission to fulfill a personal agenda.”

Riker crossed his arms. “Respectfully, Captain, you’ve already been accused of that. It doesn’t change the fact that now that Ba’ku’s therapeutic energies are common knowledge, the planet has taken on real strategic value.”

Picard gave his exec a curious look as he queried, “How so?”

“You don’t think the Alshain oligarchy already has plans to build a colony on Ba’ku, sir? Their ruling class could add decades to their lives frolicking in the literal fountain of youth. That alone would make this military offensive into the nebula worthwhile.”

Picard considered his words. “Perhaps, Number One. But there are planets out here supporting hundreds-of-thousands of inhabitants. I can’t very well justify making our first stop a colony of six-hundred, no matter its strategic value.” He closed his eyes briefly. “This is a mercy mission, after all.” The image of Anij floated in his mind’s eye. He had never taken that promised shore leave among the Ba’ku; the war and its tumultuous aftermath had conspired to keep him firmly planted in the captain’s chair.

Riker nodded. “Understood, sir. The needs of the many…”

“*Data to Picard.*”

Grateful for the interruption, the captain tapped his combadge. “Go ahead, Data.”

“*We are receiving a priority communiqué from an Angosian vessel on approach. It appears to be a non-aligned medical ship, but its captain is utilizing a valid Starfleet Intelligence identification code.*”

Picard reached out and toggled on his computer workstation. “Very well. Put it through to my terminal.”

“*Aye, sir.*”

He motioned for Riker to join him and both men read the brief yet disturbing report of the attack on the orbiting relief ships at Norfander XII. Picard scooted back from the desk. “Picard to Data. Thank our operative for his information, and have the *Bethesda* inquire as to whether they need to transfer over any of their patient load.” After a moment’s consideration, he added, “Tell them we’ll provide an escort out of the

nebula.”

Picard nodded toward the monitor. “There’s our mission. Once we’ve seen the Angosian vessel safely away, set course for the Norfander system, best speed.”

Riker moved for the exit. “Aye, Captain.” He paused as the doors parted and the XO looked back over his shoulder. “And the Ba’ku planet?”

“Dispatch the *Gibraltar*, Commander.”

USS *Bellerophon* - Federation Task Force Peacekeeper - Delta Arigulon System - The Briar Patch (Klach D’Kel Brakt)

Captain T’Agdi of Cait stood preternaturally still on her shaking bridge, seemingly unmoved by the fluctuations in the inertial dampeners as well as unaffected by the blaring klaxons. “Report,” she ordered stolidly.

Her chief engineer turned from where she had been conferring with the duty officer at the engineering console, only to lose her footing and stumble face-first into the safety railing. T’Agdi winced sympathetically as the engineer writhed in agony on the floor, clutching at her broken nose and bemoaning her dislodged teeth.

Again, she uttered, “Report.”

The tactical officer proved more efficient. “It appears we were struck by a gravitic mine, Captain. We’re registering serious damage to our starboard warp nacelle and impulse engine.”

The operations officer chimed in with, “Initial casualty report is three confirmed dead, eight injured and two missing, sir.”

T’Agdi moved to a flickering auxiliary console and attempted to access data from the damaged panel without success. She looked back at the duty engineer and inquired, “Status of transporters?”

“Offline, sir,” came his apologetic response.

T’Agdi turned her attention to the main viewer. The planet they orbited was home to an Ellora colony of some fifteen-thousand people. Her first officer and a landing party of twenty-five had beamed down to begin arranging a limited evacuation of those most at-risk persons in their population.

T’Agdi returned to her command chair as she growled to the surrounding officers, “Find out how we missed that mine, and if there are any more out there.” She toggled the comms to open a channel to her executive officer on the planet. “This is the captain. We’ve struck a mine in orbit and taken heavy damage. We’re going to have to withdraw for the time being and effect repairs. As it stands, we’re practically defenseless.”

There was a long pause before her exec replied, “*Understood, sir. Shall I assemble the team and beam back?*”

“Transporters are out. We’ll have to shuttle you back aboard.”

There was another delay before he continued in a grave tone, “*With respect, sir, our team would like permission to remain behind. The colony’s leaders and police force have already fled on the last of their ships, and the rest of the Ellora down here have nothing in the way of protection.*”

The captain frowned. “You realize once we leave orbit, you’re on your own. An Alshain raiding party won’t take the time to differentiate targets down there.”

“*I... we understand that, sir.*”

Against her better judgment, T’Agdi acceded. “Permission granted, Mister Somerset. May fortune favor you all.”

“*And you as well, sir. Away Team, out.*”

Main Bridge, USS *Gibraltar*

Lar’ragos was pulling the nightwatch duty officer’s post, seated comfortably in the command chair as he gazed at the image of their younger, larger sister ship on the main viewer. He idly studied the graceful lines of the *Sovereign*-class *Enterprise* as he wondered how his career might have been different had he taken the post of chief of security aboard that ship. Captain Picard had interviewed him for the job, and had seemed reasonably impressed with his credentials. But when the offer had finally come through, Lar’ragos had politely refused in order to take the position aboard the *Gibraltar* instead.

It had been an interesting ride so far. He had joined Sandhurst’s crew out of a sense of obligation to his old cadet classmate, the young man he had tutored and shepherded through four tumultuous years at the academy. Lar’ragos had figured that Sandhurst would need his help and experience on his first command, and he’d been right. But the man who had once been his protégé had surpassed Lar’ragos both in rank and

ability, demonstrating an affinity for command that the El-Aurian would not have believed possible only a few years before.

However, since his return from Betazed, Sandhurst had been reclusive and aloof. He had met briefly with Lar'ragos to thank Pava for saving his life, but had since avoided him in anything other than on-duty interactions. Lar'ragos supposed that was part of his healing process, perhaps an unconscious decision to avoid the people he most closely associated with his abduction and torture.

A series of beeps at the Tactical station behind him pulled him from his reverie. He glanced back, finding Tark looking at him with an inscrutable expression. "What do we have, Master Chief?"

"Our marching orders, Lieutenant."

Lar'ragos gave the surly Tellarite an expectant look and inquired, "Good news?"

Tark shrugged indifferently. "They're all round rocks to me, sir." He transferred *Enterprise's* orders to a padd and handed it to the lieutenant.

Lar'ragos perused the information, faintly recalling a wartime report of the flagship's encounter with the progenitors of the Son'a and a pitched battle within the nebula. He hummed softly to himself as he read, the words to the ancient marching song echoing in his mind. *Over the hills and o'er the main, to Flanders, Portugal and Spain... King George commands and we'll obey, over the hills and far away.*

Chapter 7

USS *Argonaut* - Federation Task Force Peacekeeper - The Ichimide Vortex - The Briar Patch (Klach D'Kel Brakt)

It had been such a little thing, really. The storm of micrometeorites had been brief, clattering against the hull of the ship like a squall of hail against the roof of a metal shed. The navigational deflectors were designed to protect every square meter of the ship against damage from such commonplace dangers. On this day, however, there had been a freak mishap, an unlikely statistical anomaly. One of the roughly three-hundred and twenty-two million shards of meteoric debris had made it past the defensive screens.

The resulting microfracture along the starboard nacelle strut was laughably minute, a veritable pinprick only a few microns in diameter. It was so small that the ship's diagnostic sweeps would not have detected it until it had grown to twice its size. Though tiny as it was, it allowed a few stray molecules of drive plasma to escape into the void.

Navigational hazards were endemic in this part of the Briar Patch, which explained why the Son'a had elected to build a covert anchorage here, establishing a fallback position in the event something catastrophic befell their people.

The officer at Operations sat forward suddenly and her expression tensed as she detected an incoming transmission. "Captain," she looked back at Sharoudin, "I'm picking up a garbled distress call. It appears to be from the *Bellerophon*."

Sharoudin inclined his head towards her. "Let's hear it."

"It's audio only, sir," she relayed as she touched a toggle to broadcast the message. A static filled yowl filled the air, causing assorted crew to wince. The Ops officer quickly turned down the audio gain, "...phon to *Argonaut*, we have struck a gravitic mine and sustained serious damage. We have detected incoming *Alshain* vessels and are attempting to evade them. We need you to rendezvous with us at the accompanying encoded coordinates as soon as possible."

Sharoudin sat forward, his face now a mask of intensity. "Decode those coordinates and route them to Helm. Lieutenant, as soon as you receive them, set course and engage at best speed."

A litany of affirmatives answered his orders, and the Helm officer came hard about to set course for the Delta Arigulon system. As the *Steamrunner*-class starship executed the turn, the microfilament of superheated plasma trailing from the micrometeorite strike drifted into a pocket of volatile metreon gas. Even had the shields been raised, it likely would have made little difference in the outcome. The resulting explosion jarred the ship off course, and before anyone aboard could react, the plasma filament had ignited. Like a burning fuse it retraced its path back to the nacelle strut and into the plasma conduit within.

The destruction of the matter/anti-matter reaction chamber was followed less than a second later by the rest of the starship. Three hundred and twenty-seven people were dead before they had even fully processed the shockwave from the exploding metreon pocket.

Argonaut had been assigned as *Bellerophon*'s patrol partner, the only vessel in close enough proximity within the chaotic EM environment of the Klach D'Kel Brakt to receive subspace transmissions from the other in the case of an emergency. As such, their stricken sister ship would find no help on this day when, despite their best efforts, their presence at the Elloran colony was indeed discovered by the unforgiving *Alshain*.

Forward Observation Post B'hala - Aulerg Moon - The Briar Patch (Klach D'Kel Brakt)

Anij steeled herself against the needle's intrusion as it lanced beneath her flesh, drawing up blood, various other bodily fluids, and perhaps the future of her very race.

Adhar Wuuten looked on as the Tarlac medical technician carried out the last in a series of thorough tests designed to map the Ba'ku genome for what he hoped would be a successful attempt at cloning the next generation of his dying species.

The doors parted behind him, and an enraged Gallatin entered the lab. The disruptor he clutched in his hand made short work of Wuuten's two bodyguards, both of which collapsed onto the concrete floor, stunned. Gallatin holstered the weapon as he rushed Wuuten, barreling into him and knocking the Son'a leader over a table cluttered with diagnostic equipment.

As he landed heavily atop Wuuten, Gallatin wrapped his hands around the man's throat and began to squeeze as he hissed, "This is how you treat your guests, *Adhar*? Strapping them down and running obscene tests on them? Your *own people* you sick bastard?"

Wuuten clawed ineffectually at Gallatin's hands, gurgling, "She... volunteered!"

Anij called out from where she lay restrained on the inclined exam table, "Gallatin, its true! He asked me and I agreed to help."

This gave Gallatin pause, but only just. He glared down into Wuuten's bulging eyes and inquired, "What is this about? Why have you brought us to this Bajoran moon and kept us isolated?" Finally, he realized that his victim was about to lose consciousness and he relaxed his grip. Gallatin clambered awkwardly to his feet amidst the littered chaos of their brief struggle.

The Son'a leader wheezed and took a few moments to collect himself before pulling himself to his feet with the support of a nearby table. Gallatin made no move to help him. Wuuten rubbed his neck ruefully as he took a seat in a nearby chair. "I let you live, and this is the thanks it gets me?"

Gallatin's hand caressed the handle of his holstered disruptor. "You *let* us live? What cause would you have for killing us?"

Wuuten, suddenly inflamed, spat back. “Not her, you traitorous dolt. *You!* You betrayed Ru’afu. You betrayed us all. Why shouldn’t I have killed you for wrecking our plans to resettle the Ba’ku? We might have succeeded had you not joined with Picard and his crew.”

Gallatin relaxed his hand, having to forcibly resist the urge to shoot his former underling. “What we were doing was wrong. It was immoral. We should be better than that. We *can* be better than that.”

Wuuten shook his head sadly. “We are dying, Gallatin. Our attempts at longevity treatments have rendered us sterile, and the healing energies of our homeworld were our last, best hope for a cure.”

Gallatin scowled as he gestured to the surrounding lab. “Is that what all this is about? Are you still chasing that perverted dream of immortality?”

“No,” Wuuten croaked. “I am trying to ensure that our race has a future, Gallatin. The Ba’ku, or what remains of them, still possess our people’s original, uncontaminated genetic heritage. I am using Anij’s tissues to help in establishing a genetic pool from which we will try and clone the next generation.”

“Clone?” Gallatin looked appalled. “You can’t clone a race from just a handful of people. Without genetic diversity the species would die off from inherited abnormalities in just a few generations.” His eyes widened in sudden realization. “Dear gods, is that why you allied yourselves with the Dominion? Their cloning technology?”

“That is precisely why. They needed ketracil-white, and we needed their expertise in cloning and genetic engineering.” Wuuten had finally recovered some of his strength and sat up in his chair. “With what knowledge we gleaned from the Dominion before their defeat, we can artificially introduce enough genetic variation into the clones’ DNA to ensure viability. We can have a future, Gallatin. Our people will not be extinguished from the universe.”

Gallatin considered this, taking a moment to disarm the two bodyguards who were beginning to stir on the floor. He stood with his back to the wall beside the door, and the former general queried, “What about these Bajorans? Where do they figure into your scheme? You obviously don’t want me having any interaction with them because you’ve gone to great lengths to keep me away from them.”

Wuuten nodded soberly. “They are the Bajora-Tava, an offshoot of the Bajoran people who fled here following the Cardassian occupation of their planet.”

“They’re a long way from home.”

“Indeed,” Wuuten agreed. “They’ve been completely cut off from the outside galaxy during their time in the nebula. Their entire society is founded on the belief that it’s their destiny to one day return to Bajor and free the planet from the Cardassians. They’ve gone from being a militaristic fundamentalist monastic order to a full-fledged warrior culture in less than fifty years.”

Gallatin gave the *adhar* a scathing look. “You haven’t told them that Bajor’s been free for almost a decade now?”

“Absolutely not.” Wuuten motioned for the Tarlac med-tech to complete his duties as Anij listed with rapt attention to their conversation. “I’ve convinced them that if they can help us survive the Alshain onslaught, we’ll assist them in overcoming the Cardassians and driving them from Bajoran soil.”

“Typical,” Gallatin fumed. “You lie, cheat and deceive everyone standing between you and your goals.”

“You speak as if I’m defrauding a business partner, Gallatin. I’m trying to save our race from extinction, just as you and Ru’afu once did.” He stood stiffly, moving toward the exit. Wuuten stepped over the groggy guards as if they were refuse to be avoided as he shot one final heated look at Gallatin. “Pack your things, Gallatin. We’re taking a trip back to Ba’ku.”

“To what end? Everyone’s dead.”

“Anij says there were between twenty and thirty villagers who were away from the settlement when the Alshain attacked. If they fled along the kelbonite veins back to the same caves they used to hide from us, they may have avoided detection. Those people and their collective genetic inheritance may be exactly what I need to complete this project. That is, unless you’d like future generations to see the Son’a in an exhibit of extinct cultures, right next to the Iconians?”

Gallatin’s only reply was an embittered scowl.

USS *Gibraltar* - Federation Task Force Peacekeeper - Periphery of the Ba’ku System - The Briar Patch (Klach D’Kel Brakt)

As *Gibraltar* lurked at the edge of the Ba’ku’s home star system, the tension on the bridge was palpable. The senior staff was assembled, with the additional presence of Lt. Commander Pell at the auxiliary station in the well opposite Ramirez.

Lt. Commander Elisto Plazzi, the seasoned science veteran stood watch over the man who would soon replace him, Ensign Kuenre Shanthi. The younger man sat at the Sciences station, the expression on his ebony face one of deep concern as he reported, “Our probe indicates no signs of humanoid life on Ba’ku, Captain.”

The worry lines around Sandhurst’s eyes which had deepened during his recent ordeal were now especially pronounced. Their advanced probe sent into the system to orbit Ba’ku told a sad tale of a vibrant community snuffed out in a matter of moments. Their first mission within the Briar Patch was a sad disappointment. The captain dreaded having to inform Picard of this turn of events.

Adrift within the Oort cloud at the system’s furthest boundary, the ship was rigged for silent running. Aside from the encrypted tight-beam

datalink to the probe, *Gibraltar* was emissions quiet. Main power was on standby, along with tactical and defensive systems, as the starship utilized minimal auxiliary power only. It was nowhere near as effective as a cloaking device, but against the background radiation of the surrounding nebula the vessel's signature was greatly diminished.

Ramirez stood from her seat, walking to the upper deck of the bridge to get a firsthand view of the probe's telemetry. She focused on Sandhurst as she postulated, "There could very well be survivors, sir. Picard's logs of their encounter with the Son'a nine months ago indicate the mountains surrounding the village are rife with kelbonite deposits."

Lar'ragos picked up on Ramirez's line of reasoning and added, "If they'd followed those kelbonite veins they'd be virtually undetectable to sensors, sir."

Sandhurst emitted a reluctant grunt from the command chair. "Maybe, but we'll have to break cover to find out for sure."

"We could make a stealth approach," Ramirez offered. "Keep power systems at minimum and ramp up just enough speed to coast into the system at one-sixteenth impulse?"

"And we'd only spend a week crawling to the planet at that velocity," Plazzi commented dryly, rolling his eyes.

"Ten hours, actually, sir," Lightner offered from the Helm.

"Any faster and our EM emissions and thermal signature will light us up like a beacon, Elisto," Ramirez said defensively.

The heavysset, bearded scientist's response was accompanied by an expansive shrug. "Don't shoot the messenger, Commander."

Lar'ragos frowned. "If it weren't for the speed restrictions imposed by the nebular density, I'd suggest a near-warp transport. Jump into orbit, beam down an away team, and warp out before anyone could respond."

Juneau joined the conversation, sounding incredulous. "And leave the away team stranded?"

The El-Aurian met her gaze impassively as he answered, "I prefer the term 'engaged in detached operations.'"

Her eyes narrowed and the junior lieutenant shot back with, "Sounds a lot like 'abandoned' to me, sir."

Sandhurst started to interject between the squabbling officers when Ensign Lightner coughed into his fist, "*Shuttle!*"

They turned their heads collectively to look at the young helmsman. He grinned broadly, swiveling around in his chair like a stage performer in the center spotlight. "A Type-8 shuttle has a significantly lower sensor return than a starship. I can put an away team on the surface with a very good chance of zero-detection by potential threat forces and still be in position for an emergency egress should things get hairy."

A slow smile spread across Sandhurst's face. "That's quite a boast, Ensign." He turned to Ramirez and gave her an expectant look. "Well?"

She cocked her head to one side and pursed her lips thoughtfully. "Best idea I've heard so far, though it does leave the away team vulnerable. At half impulse, it will still take *Gibraltar* well over an hour to reach the planet from our present coordinates."

Juneau looked pointedly at Lar'ragos, mouthing 'stranded' and eliciting an icy glare in return.

Lightner cleared his throat. "We've seen no signs of capital ships anywhere in the vicinity of this system, sir. If the Alshain have anything smaller hiding nearby, we'll still stand a very good chance of outrunning them long enough for you to come to our rescue."

"And you're comfortable operating in a 'detached' capacity, Exec?"

"Aye, sir." Ramirez affirmed with a wry smile. "I'll need a security detachment, a science officer, a medic, and of course, a pilot." She looked behind her at Plazzi as she inquired, "You ready for away duty, Mister Optimist?"

Plazzi leaned against a console, touching a hand to his chest dramatically. "Oh, no, sir. I'm afraid my skills are too valuable to the captain and crew for me to risk myself on such a harrowing assignment." He gestured to the tall African man seated beside him. "Ensign Shanthi has been requesting more planet-side experience and I think this would be a terrific opportunity for him to display his aptitude."

To his credit, Shanthi actually did look enthused at the prospect. Sandhurst was briefly torn, a small part of him hesitating to send the youngest son of Fleet Admiral Thousana Shanthi into harm's way. He caught Ramirez's steady gaze out of the corner of his eye, and her non-verbal message came through loud and clear. *The man's a Starfleet officer. Let him do his job.*

"Alright, Commander. See to it."

Ramirez moved to the lift, triggering the doors to open. "Lar'ragos, Lightner, and Shanthi, you're with me."

As the officers filed past into the turbolift, Lar'ragos turned to the helmsman. "I hope your flying is as sharp as that silver tongue, kid. I'll take substance over style any day."

Lightner just smiled wistfully, vowing to let his piloting skills speak for him.

Ramirez followed them into the lift car as she chuckled, "He'll be okay, Pava, so long as he steers away from dragons this time."

A moment after the doors closed on the away party, Sandhurst stood. He looked to Ojana and said, "Commander Pell, would you join me in the ready room?" Sandhurst glanced at Plazzi as he headed for the door to his office. "Elisto, you have the conn."

Pell followed the captain inside, observing him as he rounded the desk and settled lightly into his chair. "Computer, recognize Donald M.

Sandhurst, Captain.”

“*Recognized.*”

“I am logging a temporary transfer of executive officer authority to Lt. Commander Pell Ojana. Authorization, Sandhurst Tango-Epsilon-Zero-Four-Zero-Eight.”

The computer processed that with a series of quick tones. “*Temporary transfer of stated authorities logged and accepted.*”

Pell looked at Sandhurst pensively. “Expecting trouble?”

He shook his head. “Precautionary. Should something happen to me, you’re the most qualified officer onboard to take command.”

She looked doubtful. “What might happen to you?”

He locked eyes with her and replied evenly, “The possibilities are limitless.”

“What about Commander Plazzi?”

“He’s not command certified, and he’s spent most of the past two decades teaching planetary geology at Berkley.” Sandhurst forced himself to settle back into the chair and relax, though his instincts were howling for him to take some kind of action in the face of his mounting anxiety. “You, on the other hand, are an experienced first officer with all the necessary certificates and qualifications.”

Pell pulled out a chair and took a seat across the desk from him. “Would you like to tell me what this is really about?”

“Absolutely.” Sandhurst interlaced his fingers, resting his hands in his lap. “It’s about uncertainty, and my wanting this ship and crew to survive whatever might be in store for us out there.” He pointed in the general direction of the Ba’ku planet.

She searched his eyes, a hint of disapproval in her features. “You were never this much of a fatalist, Donald.”

He met her gaze unflinchingly. “The man you’re looking for isn’t in there anymore, Ojana.”

“And he’s been replaced with whom?”

Sandhurst answered after only a second’s hesitation. “The captain.”

Forward Observation Post B'hala - Aulerg Moon - The Briar Patch (Klach D'Kel Brakt)

Vadark Jobrin Adnai stepped into the room hesitantly, awed by the ethereal glow of one of the Orbs of the Prophets. The holy icon floated within its open containment vessel, casting a shimmering radiance upon the form of the leader of the Bajora-Tava as he prayed before it. Jobrin was uncomfortable intruding upon the man as he embraced the physical representation of their religion, but he had been summoned.

The vadark knelt, holding his arms out with palms up in a gesture of supplication. “Emissary, I am to serve.”

As he closed the containment case reverentially, the Emissary ceased his contemplation on the Orb of Transcendence. He rose slowly and turned to look upon the vadark, the chief military officer of the Bajora Army of Light. “Adnai, my friend. Rise.” Jobrin stood obediently, moving to the Emissary’s side. “And what is it that our new Son’a friends ask of us now?”

“A protection detail, Emissary. They wish to send a ship to the Ba’ku planet to ‘reclaim their genetic heritage.’” Jobrin’s mouth twitched with dark amusement at the notion. “Their words, not mine. Had they not chosen to pollute their bodies with artificial organs and their heretical longevity treatments, perhaps they would not now need to sift through the remains of their parents’ village looking for bits of flesh and bone to render for their DNA sequences.”

The tall, white-haired man harrumphed with a kind of detached disdain, “Perhaps, Adnai, perhaps. The collapse of the Son’a civilization may well be the will of the Prophets, but it has not yet been revealed to me as such. Until then, we must aid them when and where we can. The Alshain pogrom against them is too similar to what we suffered at the hands of the Desecrators.” So hated were the Cardassians by the Emissary that he would not deign to speak their name.

Jobrin nodded deferentially and intoned, “It is your will that guides my hands, Emissary.”

“If we can help them to overcome this assault on their nation, they may become powerful allies in our bid to free Bajor from the yoke of the Desecrators.”

“As you say, Emissary.”

The spiritual and military leader of the Bajora-Tava stood in contemplative silence for a moment. “Send a squadron of our ships to guarantee safe passage for the Son’a to the planet. They are to provide overwatch and see to their safe return.” He reached out a hand, brushing Jobrin’s earlobe before grasping the man’s shoulder in a gesture of camaraderie. “Your pah remains strong, Adnai. It burns like a star. You must remain true to this course, despite your misgivings with the Son’a. They have strayed from the path the Prophets set out before them, and they have been punished as a result. However, with our help, they may come to realize the folly of striving for eternal life in the physical universe.”

Jobrin bowed his head silently.

He patted Jobrin’s shoulder and the Emissary offered the customary parting salutation. “Free Bajor.” It was as much a prayer as a statement of

intent.

“Free Bajor,” came Jobrin’s reply, as he moved to do the Emissary’s bidding.

Sickbay - USS *Gibraltar*

“Can I have a moment, Lieutenant?”

Taiee looked up from her work, then nodded curtly as she stood to join Dr. Murakawa. “Of course, sir.”

She followed Murakawa from the main ward into the corridor just outside the CMO’s office. The doctor turned to face her, “Commander Ramirez is assembling an away team to travel by shuttle to the Ba’ku planet. My first inclination is to go with them, but seeing as this is your ship and crew, I thought I’d give you the choice of joining the mission.”

Without pause, Taiee announced, “I’m in.”

Murakawa nodded approvingly, taking note of the nurse’s strong attachment to her crewmates. “When you get back, we’re going to sit down and go over the 24/QPS. Both you and your staff are more than proficient enough to pass this test, but I’ve got the feeling you’re psyching yourself out.”

Taiee looked away, choking back an angry retort. Finally reestablishing eye contact, she replied, “Aye, sir.”

“Gather your gear and report to the shuttle bay.”

The team members were busy packing every square centimeter of the shuttle *Heyerdahl* with equipment and supplies when Taiee lugged her medical pack and away mission gear through the pressure doors. A chorus of whoops and celebratory shouts greeted her as she approached.

Ramirez poked her head out the lowered aft hatch of the shuttle. “Doc, you’ve come to join the party. Welcome.”

Taiee set her gear on the deck, and walked along the side of the shuttle, running her hand over the name emblazoned on the side of the craft. Stenciled neatly below the name of the famous 20th century explorer was the title, ‘Gibraltar Ambulance Service.’

She looked into the cockpit through the window to find Lightner in the pilot’s seat. Taiee gave him a mock accusatory glare. She pointed to the shuttle’s designation and shouted, “This your idea, smartass?” The last time she’d been aboard the *Heyerdahl*, she’d been medically evacuated in the shuttle from an attack on a Cardassian refugee camp.

Lightner activated the shuttle’s exterior speakers. “*I have no idea what you’re referring to, Doc.*” He emphasized his point with an exaggerated shrug. Taiee laughed in response, returning to haul her gear onboard and stow it with Lar’ragos’ assistance.

Lar’ragos gave Taiee a welcoming smile. “Glad to have you with us, Doc.”

As she settled into the side-bench seating between two security personnel, Taiee came to the strange realization that given the choice, this is exactly where she would choose to be in all the cosmos.

Ramirez slid into the copilot’s seat next to Lightner, helping to finish the preflight checklist. Satisfied that they were loaded and ready, she glanced back into the main cabin. “Okay folks, everyone settled in?”

One by one, each of the occupants replied with a raised thumb.

“Alright, then.” She toggled the comms and announced, “Bridge, shuttle *Heyerdahl* ready for departure.”

“*Acknowledged Heyerdahl,*” came Juneau’s reply from Ops. “*You are cleared for departure. Suggest you take an initial heading of 273-mark-042 to avoid cometary obstructions.*”

As he settled his hands on the controls Lightner looked totally at peace with the universe. “And away we go...”

Chapter 8

Shuttle *Heyerdahl* - En route to Planet Ba'ku - The Briar Patch (Klach D'Kel Brakt)

The shuttle *Heyerdahl* bulled through the nebular gasses at one-quarter impulse on a heading for Ba'ku. In the back of the craft, the security, science, and medical personnel all checked and re-checked their equipment in a complex ballet of activity designed as much to allay their pre-mission jitters as it was to ensure their safety.

They had ramped the engines to full for a brief burst of speed, and were now coasting towards their destination, trying to project the most minimal EM cross-section possible. In the darkened cockpit, Ramirez finished situating the gear on her tactical vest. She looked over at Lightner in the pilot's seat as she inquired, "So, how's your brother doing?"

Lightner's entire body tensed at the mention of his brother. He hadn't been aware that Ramirez even knew of his sibling's sordid history, though in retrospect he knew he shouldn't be surprised. His brother's Maquis affiliations featured prominently in Brett's own service records.

Ramirez read the ensign's reaction and allowed, "It's okay if you don't want to discuss it; I realize it's a personal issue for you."

"No, sir... it's okay. It's just that I honestly don't know where he's got to. Kyle was released from prison a month ago, but neither my parents nor I have heard from him since."

Ramirez pondered that. "Any idea where he's headed?"

He sighed in response and murmured, "For all I know Kyle could be headed back to Ronara Prime."

The exec frowned, "That's in Cardassian territory now; he couldn't hope to head back there. He'd be thrown in detention the moment he stepped off the transport."

"Three years in prison haven't done anything to mitigate his views on our old colony's sovereignty. Kyle's just one of those people who can't admit when he's wrong. He'd rather die first."

As she studied the young officer's features, Ramirez ventured, "Starfleet Intelligence reports there are whispers of a Maquis resurgence among their members who survived the Dominion purges in the DMZ."

Lightner checked their course and speed, making a slight adjustment with the maneuvering thrusters in the bow. "That wouldn't surprise me. I'm sure in Kyle's mind he'd not only be trying to retake his home, but avenge the deaths of all his Maquis comrades." He shook his head in frustration, "It's a vicious cycle."

"How do you feel about that?"

Lightner turned to face her, looking as severe as she'd ever seen the usually lighthearted youth. "I love my brother, Commander. Despite everything he's put my parents and I through, I still believe that there's a decent man somewhere at the core of him." He turned back to the flight controls. "That being said, if he's taken up arms against the Federation again, I'll hunt that son-of-a-bitch down myself."

Ramirez knew that Brett blamed his brother's Maquis connections for his being assigned to a mere escort ship after having graduated in the top third of his academy class. Like any talented pilot fresh from the academy, he'd yearned for a position with a fighter squadron or with a more formidable ship of the line.

She turned her attention back to the planet that now loomed large in the viewport and commented, "All things considered, Ensign, I hope it doesn't come to that."

Kuenre Shanthi sat wedged uncomfortably between a security specialist and Pava Lar'ragos. He had carried out a brief inspection of his equipment, tricorder, hand phaser, and various specialized science gear, but now felt self-conscious as he watched the others repeatedly checking theirs. He leaned in toward Lar'ragos as he asked, "Why do you keep doing that, sir?"

Lar'ragos gave him an amused look as he locked the power cell back into his phaser sidearm. "I can't speak for the others, but for me it's pure superstition."

Shanthi looked equal parts confused and skeptical.

Lar'ragos explained, "I check all my equipment five times before each deployment as a kind of good-luck ritual."

Still appearing incredulous, Shanthi asked, "Whatever for?"

"Fear," Lar'ragos smiled patiently. "It helps me to deal with my anxiety."

"You still get anxious? After all these years of service?"

Lar'ragos nodded, checking the propellant pressure on a strange, non-Starfleet looking gun that he slipped into a holster on his tactical vest. "Every time."

Shanthi frowned, "I'd hoped that eventually I'd learn to stop feeling like this before a mission."

“Fear is your friend, Ensign.” The older man looked at the young science officer, his expression serious. “It keeps you from taking foolish risks when they aren’t necessary.”

Shanthi digested that. “How will I know when they *are* necessary?”

The El-Aurian smirked as he finished his ritual fiddling. He placed his hands on his knees and leaned back against the bulkhead as he closed his eyes. “Don’t worry, Ensign. You’ll know.”

Shanthi nodded wordlessly, then pulled his phaser from his holster and began field stripping the weapon.

“Sir, we have a sensor contact.”

Prylar-Captain Bral Insofuss shifted in his seat within the cramped cockpit of the Bajora-Tavan *Taluno*-class attack ship. He accessed the incoming sensor readings and squinted at the meager return. “Whatever it is, it’s small.”

“Yes, sir. I’d guess a shuttle or a small corvette. Extremely low power emissions. It appears to be moving on inertial thrust only.”

“How close?”

The combat-sensor officer made some quick calculations. “At its present speed, the craft will enter planetary orbit around Ba’ku in less than ten minutes.” He adjusted the sensors to filter out more of the background radiation caused by the surrounding nebula. “It’s pure chance that I detected it, sir. It was only the ship’s differential against the backdrop of the Prophets’ Veil that made its approach briefly visible.”

“Is it Alshain?”

As he studied the hazy computer-generated cross-section of the incoming ship, Bral’s underling looked dubious. “I don’t think so, sir. Even the tiniest of their small craft tend to be larger than this. I don’t recognize the design.”

“Understood.”

The combat-sensor officer craned his neck to see around the side of his acceleration chair and noted, “I would point out that it appears to be on a deliberate stealth approach, Prylar-Captain.”

“You’re implying there could be more that we’ve yet to detect?”

“Yes, sir.”

Bral reached up and pulled the communications screen down on its swing-arm. “Maintain sensor contact and prepare to shadow the vessel if it moves to land on the surface.” He activated a heavily encrypted tachyon transmitter beam to open an emergency channel. “This is Sentry Four to FOB B’hala. Contact report to follow...”

Son’a Battlecruiser *Ru’afu* - Joint Son’a/Bajora Tava Ba’ku Mission - En-route to Planet Ba’ku - The Briar Patch (Klach D’Kel Brakt)

“*Adhar*, incoming message from the Bajoran outpost.” The Elloran comms officer turned in her chair to direct a concerned look at Wuuten. “They say an unidentified spacecraft has just landed on Ba’ku, only a few kilometers from the village. The Bajorans have a ship tailing the intruders but have not yet made contact. They’re asking for instructions, sir.”

Wuuten cast a glance from his throne-like chair to where Vadark Jobrin Adnai stood, flanked by his personal protection detail. The *adhar* addressed the vadark, “What would you have me tell them?”

Jobrin’s expression was neutral. “Are they your enemy?”

Wuuten shifted uneasily in his chair, again silently cursing the need for joint leadership on this mission. The Bajorans were too concerned with the moral implications of their actions, not wishing to give unintentional offense to their Prophets. “They are trespassing on Ba’ku. Is that not provocation enough?”

“Do you not already have enemies enough, without making more by stumbling blindly in the dark?”

Wuuten held his temper in check, though only barely. “It can only be two possibilities, Vadark. They are Alshain, in which case, we should set upon them without mercy. Or, they are Federation, allies to the Alshain and enemies to the Son’a people.” He allowed his eyes to meet and hold the vadark’s icily impassive gaze. “Either way, the outcome should be the same.”

Jobrin closed his eyes, murmuring a prayer under his breath as he sought the counsel of the Prophets. Two minutes passed in tense silence before Jobrin finished his discourse with the divine. “You may tell them to close with and capture these trespassers, *Adhar*. Then we may determine what kind of threat they pose.”

“*Why can’t these people ever make anything easy?*” Wuuten fumed internally. He turned back to the comms officer, “Tell them to engage and capture the intruders, and that their actions carry the blessing of the ranking vadark.”

It would still be three hours before the *Ru’afu* and her Bajoran escorts arrived in the Ba’ku system. The battle would be underway before then, and Wuuten savored the idea of joining the ensuing melee. If it were representatives of the Federation, he would kill them slowly for having

wrecked his people's attempt at collecting the restorative energies of their homeworld. Bajorans or no, Wuuten vowed he would have his pound of flesh, and then some.

USS *Bellerophon* - Federation Task Force Peacekeeper -Retreating from the Delta Arigulon System -The Briar Patch (Klach D'Kel Brakt)

"Wait... wait for it..." Captain T'Agdi coughed into her sleeve as she watched the approaching Alshain cruiser on the grainy, flickering main viewscreen. Smoke drifted throughout the bridge, and half the consoles were inoperative. Three of her senior staff were in Sickbay, two of them were dead. She could barely bring herself to think about the fate that had befallen her away team to the doomed Elloran colony. Their desperate cries for help had been cut short by an orbital bombardment that had vaporized the colony and every living thing within a twenty kilometer radius of the settlement.

T'Agdi had wanted to turn around and attempt a rescue of her people, but the damage from the Son'a orbital mine had made that impossible. Instead, the ship had been forced to seek escape from its pursuers as the away team was obliterated. She would not sacrifice her entire crew for twenty-six people, no matter how badly she felt about abandoning them.

Bellerophon's distress calls to the *Argonaut* had gone unanswered, and in an act of sheer desperation, T'Agdi had ordered the launch of twelve probes rigged with subspace communications relays toward star systems within the Briar Patch scheduled to be reconnoitered by other task force vessels.

The crippled starship had then fled, limping from one occluding cloud to another as the Alshain warships prowled the area like sharks following a blood trail.

Now, one of those sharks had wandered too close to where *Bellerophon* had gone to ground.

"... Wait... wait..." T'Agdi leaned forward as the cruiser entered their established kill zone. "Fire!" she roared, sending a concentrated phaser spread followed by four photon torpedoes at their enemy.

"Direct hits, sir. Their port shields are damaged and I'm reading structural weakening all along their port quarter."

T'Agdi leaned back in her chair, "Now the quantum, Lieutenant." She watched with muted satisfaction as the two bluish missiles streaked towards the warship on the viewer. They blasted through the cruiser's depleted shields and detonated against the ship's hull, buckling the superstructure and sending white-hot electrical discharges arcing across the outer surface of the craft.

"Captain, sensors indicate main power has failed aboard the cruiser. Shields are down, and their propulsion systems are offline."

She called back to the senior chief manning Tactical, "Phasers only, Chief. Disable their weapons emplacements and engines. I don't want to see these people again any time soon."

As the phasers cycled in accordance with her wishes, the captain gestured to the Helm station. "Get us out of here, Mister Crowley."

"Evasive pattern, sir?"

"Yes, initiate evasive pattern run-the-hell-away, best speed."

This brought a few grim smiles despite the bleakness of their circumstances. The battered *Intrepid*-class starship slid from her berth within the cloud of fluorine and made a dash for a nearby stellar crèche, where T'Agdi hoped the radiation and fluctuating magnetic fields would dissuade the Alshain from pursuing them further.

'I don't so much mind playing cat and mouse with these bastards,' the Caitian thought dolefully, recalling the human aphorism. *'But how the hell did I end up playing the part of the mouse?'*

USS *Enterprise* - Federation Task Force Peacekeeper - In orbit of Son'a administrated Tarlac colony Norfander XII - The Briar Patch (Klach D'Kel Brakt)

Silence reigned on the bridge of the *Enterprise* as the crew tried to absorb the enormity of the tragedy that had consumed Norfander XII. The debris field still held a generally spherical shape, suggesting that a planet had once occupied this particular point in the cosmos. What had once been a vibrant, living world had been reduced to assorted rubble.

Picard cleared his throat, rising slowly from his chair. "Mister Data, any signs of escape craft that might have survived?"

"No, Captain." Data's voice was troublingly free of inflection, a clue that he'd taken the opportunity to deactivate his emotion chip.

Deanna Troi followed Picard to her feet, stepping forward, her eyes wide with disbelief. "What did this?" Her expression shifting to one of mounting anger, she looked to the android at Ops. "Who did this, Data?"

"The energy signature permeating the planetary debris is consistent with the detonation of a Class-7 subspace weapon, Counselor." Data shifted in his seat to glance back at Picard. "As we learned from our firsthand experience with them, the Son'a regularly arm their vessels with such devices, sir."

"Are we in any danger here?" This from Riker, who was studying the sensor returns on his console.

“Not at present, Commander. However, I would recommend increasing power to shields if we intend to move any closer to the asteroid field.”

Troi was still processing Data’s assessment. “But this was a Tarlac colony. Why would the Son’a destroy an entire planet of their own servants?”

“Maybe they didn’t want it falling into Alshain hands,” offered Riker. “In the history of human warfare it was referred to as a ‘scorched earth’ policy. As you retreat you destroy anything of value that could be used by your attackers.”

She forced her eyes away from the screen and Troi murmured, “Unbelievable.”

Picard finally tore himself from his dark reverie, turning to face his senior staff. “Let’s not jump to conclusions. If a forensic examination is what’s in order to determine culpability here, then that’s what we’ll do. The guilty party must be identified and brought to justice.”

“Correct me if I’m mistaken, Captain,” spoke Lt. Commander Seb N’Saba from the Science station, “But wouldn’t hunting down the offending party here exceed our purview as established by Starfleet Command?”

Riker shot to his feet, but Picard waved him off. The captain turned to face N’Saba. “I take it you disagree, Commander?”

“To be frank, sir, either side in this conflict is equally capable of having committed this atrocity. It was my understanding that we were dispatched here to attempt to establish a diplomatic dialogue between the warring factions, and failing that we were to evacuate non-combatants from the nebula.” N’Saba’s ears twitched with indignation, “I fail to see how launching a punitive campaign against whichever nation is responsible for this war crime meets those criteria.”

Picard decided a change of venue would be more appropriate for this conversation. He stepped towards his ready room door, looking back to the Science station. “Mister N’Saba, join me in my ready room.” The Alshain stood from his console, walking calmly past the incensed XO and followed Picard into his office.

He took a seat behind his desk, and Picard marshaled his composure before addressing the outspoken science officer. “I’m not accustomed to having my orders questioned openly on the bridge, Commander. I realize you’re new to this ship, and I’m willing to make allowances to a point.” He directed a hard stare at N’Saba. “You have now reached that point, Mister N’Saba.”

Unflustered, N’Saba replied “Permission to speak candidly, Captain?”

Picard nodded, “Granted.”

“I understand what you’re trying to accomplish here, sir. Your goals are laudable and are in the finest tradition of both Starfleet and the Federation.” N’Saba straightened, his ears flattening as he anticipated an adverse reaction. “That being said, Captain, this is a fool’s errand.”

As he pursed his lips, Picard muttered incredulously, “Is that so, Commander?”

“Neither side here gives a damn about our overdeveloped Federation morality, sir. They mean to kill one another, and if we get in their way, they’ll have no compunction about cutting through us to get at their enemy.”

“And what would you recommend we do?”

N’Saba answered quickly and with utter sincerity. “Gather what refugees we can and immediately withdraw from the Briar Patch, Captain. Nothing awaits us here but death and sorrow.”

Picard stood, “I appreciate your viewpoint, Commander, but you’re going to need to—“

“Riker to Picard.”

“Go ahead, Number One.”

“Captain, we’ve detected an incoming message buoy that appears to be from the Bellerophon. They say they’ve come under attack by the Alshain Starforce in the Delta Arigulon system and need immediate assistance. They also indicate they’ve lost contact with the Argonaut, sir.”

Picard frowned and tried to ignore the vaguely satisfied look on N’Saba’s face as he made for the door. “Mister N’Saba, we’ll have to continue this conversation later. In the interim, I expect you to use greater discretion in front of the crew.”

N’Saba followed the captain back onto the bridge as he replied obediently. “Of course, sir.”

Planet Ba’ku -Dorian Mountains

Ramirez paused to take a break in the away team’s rigorous hike. “Alright, people, ten minutes.” They followed her lead and the remainder of the group stopped to drop their packs and rest. They had been ascending a worn path up the ridge face of one of the mountains overlooking what had been the Ba’ku village.

The breathtaking vistas of snowcapped peaks crowning densely forested valleys were intoxicating after so many months aboard ship. Even the slightly agoraphobic Ramirez, raised aboard a space station, had to admit the view was stunning.

The group had left the shuttle hidden under camouflage netting in a valley below, hoping that the ruse in conjunction with a localized sensor scattering field would conceal the presence of the craft.

They were following in the footsteps of the Ba'ku who'd fled the Son'a attack on their community the year before with the assistance of the *Enterprise's* senior officers. The away team was climbing towards the cave system that had sheltered the refugees from that incident. The hope was that those Ba'ku who'd been away from the village when the Alshain obliterated it from orbit would retrace their steps and seek shelter in the same caverns.

Lightner set his pack down and took a seat next to Saihra Dunleavy from Lar'ragos' security detail. The pilot had been pleasantly surprised when, against his expectations, Ramirez had ordered him to accompany the rest of the team. He had anticipated getting stuck babysitting the shuttle. Ramirez had reminded him that in order to qualify for advancement, it helped to have active away mission experience.

He smiled shyly at Dunleavy as he opened a ration packet from his backpack and withdrew a pair of energy bars. Lightner offered one to the petty officer, and blushed slightly as she accepted the bar with a wink. "Careful, Ensign," she admonished, "you're going to turn the shade of your collar." He had admired the young woman from afar for months, repeatedly struggling with the impulse to pursue her romantically. She had apparently picked up on the vibe, and constantly took advantage of his unwillingness to approach her openly about his intentions.

A few meters further up the trail, Lar'ragos squatted on his haunches, studying the patterns of woodland debris littered atop the surface of the rocky pathway. Ramirez approached, crouching down beside him. "Lieutenant?"

He pointed to some random looking patterns in the pine-needle analogues covering the path. "Someone or something has been through here recently. Whatever it was, it was at least as big as a humanoid adult." He looked around, breathing in a deep draught of the crisp mountain air. "It's likely animals use this trail as well, and with the interference from the kelbonite, the tricorder's no help."

"So, maybe-maybe not." Ramirez assessed.

He nodded unhappily, "That's pretty much the size of it. Unless someone's left a more pronounced track farther up the trail, we'll have to wait until we reach the caves to see if anyone's home."

She chuckled. "Let me guess, in addition to all your other misadventures, you were also a big game hunter?"

"Quite the opposite," he replied in a heavy voice, his briefly haunted expression erasing the amusement on Ramirez's features. "I was prey. Learning to cover my tracks was a high priority."

The exec had no response to that disclosure, and merely gave Lar'ragos a curious look.

"There are worse things in the Delta Quadrant than the Borg, Commander." Lar'ragos elaborated cryptically, then stood and stretched.

Ramirez rose to her feet and reached out to put a hand on the El-Aurian's arm, stopping him as he was about to turn back to the rest of the party. "If I haven't said so before, it's good to have the old Pava back."

His smile washed away his earlier gloom. "Thank you, sir. It's good to be back."

As she moved past the security chief, Ramirez announced. "Break's over, folks. We've got another eight kilometers to cover before nightfall." Despite the physical exertion required of this mission, there were no complaints from the team members. The view more than compensated for a few aching muscles and sore feet.

Prylar-Captain Bral finished putting on the last of his reconnaissance/combat gear, sliding a lethal looking knife into a scabbard on his thigh. As he slung his rifle over one shoulder Bral spared a glance at the path snaking upward into the mountains looming overhead. The Bajora-Tava had landed their attack ship as stealthily as possible in the foothills of the mountain range, preparing to set out on foot in pursuit of the intruders.

Bral's comlink crackled, "*Feina to Prylar-Captain, we've located the intruder's craft. It appears to be a small shuttle and its markings indicate it's some kind of medical transport.*"

"Acknowledged, Feina," he replied. "Tactical assessment?"

"*Low-yield phasers only, sir. It certainly doesn't appear they came armed for bear. The craft was crudely camouflaged and they attempted to mask it with a distortion field.*"

"Understood. Put an observation team on the shuttle in case they return to it before we've tracked them down. Then return to the ship with the remainder of your detachment. We'll be leaving on a pursuit mission in five minutes, and you'll be in command until I return. Remember, this is a capture detail. No lethal force unless absolutely necessary."

"*Yes, Prylar-Captain.*"

He deactivated the comlink, sighing. '*And now, in their wisdom, our leaders have us hunting doctors through the mountains.*' Bral thought dourly. Their new Son'a allies did not sit well with the young captain, who found their obsession with youth and longevity to be a perversion of the Prophets' grand design.

Regardless, he was a soldier-priest in the Army of Light, and he had his orders. Distasteful as they were, he would see them through. He turned to examine his men, clad in their newly acquired mimetic combat armor. It had taken more than a generation to train and forge such elite warriors, and he looked on them with the pride of a father for his children. '*Prophet's help the people we seek here this day,*' he mused, '*for we will be like the hara cat hunting the hapless vole.*'

"Move out!" he ordered, activating the holomatrix embedded into his armor as he and his men began their ascent.

Chapter 9

USS *Gibraltar* - Federation Task Force Peacekeeper - Periphery of the Ba'ku System - The Briar Patch (Klach D'Kel Brakt)

With the away mission well underway, there was little to do aboard *Gibraltar* but sit and wait. Some people found themselves unable to sit for the duration.

The racquetball thudded off the far wall, caroming off the side barrier only to find its path obstructed by Pell Ojana's racquet. She blasted it back towards the wall, imparting a downward spin that sent it dropping into the corner, thus making Sandhurst's return nearly impossible. That didn't stop him from trying, of course.

He sailed across the court and made a valiant attempt to intercept the ricocheting ball but succeeded only in splaying himself across the floor comically. Sandhurst rolled over to mock glare at Pell who was laughing so hard she had to brace herself against the wall.

He sat up slowly and joined in the moment of levity, chuckling. "Thanks for mocking my pain."

As she caught her breath, she replied, "You know, your game has actually improved since the days on the *Cuffe*. You'd never have even attempted that shot back then." She stepped forward, offering him a hand up.

Sandhurst clambered back to his feet with Pell's assistance as he noted, "Racquetball was a passion of Captain Ebnal's. Being able to keep up was a prerequisite for being his XO on the *Venture*. I haven't had much opportunity to play recently."

She smiled, stooping to scoop up the ball. "I'm happy I could remedy that situation for you." She glanced back, catching Sandhurst admiring her profile.

The young Donald Sandhurst she'd known would have blushed fiercely and tripped over himself apologizing for such a gaffe. This Sandhurst merely smiled approvingly.

She stood and scrutinized him "Anyone ever tell you you're a bag of mixed signals?"

He shrugged, "Aside from my family, my friends, and my crew... no. Why do you ask?"

Pell shook her head bemusedly as she served, sending the two of them dashing about the court once again.

The game proceeded for the next twenty minutes, both players elevating their games incrementally to the point where their individual sets were lasting minutes at a time. The two battled fiercely, neither willing to yield as on some level, the contest became a microcosm of their failed relationship. Eventually, however, Pell's greater skill and superior stamina won the day.

Sandhurst looked tired but happy as he wiped the sweat from his head and face. He called a holographic bench seat into being and sat heavily.

Pell observed him while toweling off before she spoke unexpectedly. She hadn't meant to have this talk, not yet, and she took herself by surprise with her own forwardness. "Where did we go wrong, Donald?"

He seemed to take a long moment, his eyes averted as he fingered the strings of his racquet. Sandhurst looked up at her and finally replied, "Things weren't the same after Tong Beak, for either of us."

She frowned, her expression caught somewhere between pain and irritation. "Was she so damn irresistible? You and Terrence both threw yourselves at her." She took a drink from a water bottle as she worked to contain emotions held too long in check. "Him I can understand. He'd found someone who looked just like me but wasn't. Terrence wasn't risking anything. But you? You had the real thing."

He braced his elbows on his knees and leaned forward, gazing at the floor. "Don't ask me to explain to you what I can't justify to myself, Ojana."

Her eyes narrowed. "Try," she said, more harshly than she'd intended.

"Fine." He stood, walking to the center of the court, folding his arms across his chest as he took a brief self-inventory. "You'd been on the *Chevalier* for months, and we were growing apart. You knew damn well I wasn't comfortable abandoning Diaz after Monica stole you away from the *Cuffe*, but you jumped ship anyway."

She began to protest, but he cut her off with a rebuking glare. "You said you wanted an explanation."

Pell held up a mollifying hand, bidding him to continue.

"When we encountered the... other Ojana... your doppelganger was like you in image only. She was wild... unbridled, uninhibited in a way that I found enormously seductive."

She shook her head and Pell remarked, "A bad girl in your good girl's body."

"Something like that." He sighed. "As it turned out, it was pure manipulation. She was using the both of us. Not that it makes the deed any less hateful. Glover still despises me for telling you about his part in that whole mess."

"And later?" she asked. "After you'd joined me on the *Chevalier*? I'd forgiven you, but you still kept pulling away."

He turned to face her. "Guilt, Ojana. You may have forgiven me, but I couldn't absolve myself. I couldn't touch you without thinking about

my betrayal. In the end, being with you was just making me hate myself all the more.”

“And that’s why you left?”

He nodded reluctantly. “The chief engineer’s post on the *Venture* couldn’t have opened up at a better time as far as I was concerned.”

“What about now?” She stood and approached him slowly, moving to embrace him. Sandhurst tensed but did not otherwise resist the gesture. “Is there any chance for us to start over?”

He looked into her eyes, his pain and reticence only too clear. “It’s not that easy, I’m afraid. Not so long ago, someone... hurt me. Badly.”

She stared up at him and radiated waves of empathy. “I’d gathered as much.”

“Part of that experience was that my memories were altered. Memories of my friends and loved ones were ripped away and someone perverted them terribly. I still... I have faint recollections of hurting you, violating you in the most obscene ways.” His jaw tightened, and he struggled to keep the moisture brimming in his eyes from flowing over. “On Betazed they helped me to recognize which of my memories are real, and which aren’t. Logically, I know those horrible visions are a fraud, but they still *feel* real, and it’s all wrapped up with my guilt over Tong Beak and my genuine feelings for you.”

She held him tightly, her eyes glistening as well. “I’m sorry, Donald. I’m so sorry.”

Sandhurst made a valiant attempt at a wry smile. “Hey,” he said gently. “That’s supposed to be my line.”

Planet Ba’ku - Dorian Mountains

“The Core Breach?”

“No.”

“Graceland?”

“Nope.”

“Beazy’s Backroom?”

“Um... no. And who the hell is Beazy?”

“The Wild West? We could have swinging doors into the lounge area, dress it all up in 19th century frontier Americana.” Lightner was nothing if not persistent. But as long as his mouth was moving, it seemed his legs were as well, and Ramirez needed him keeping up with the group’s grueling pace.

“I told you, Brett, the lounge doesn’t need a name. Or a theme.” The exec replied patiently, looking ahead at the group as they forged upward in the fading light of day. She had moved to the back of the party to motivate the lagging ensign into matching the rest of the away team’s tempo.

“I think we just need to jazz it up a bit, Commander. Other ships have novel themes or decorations.”

She resisted the urge to smile. “We’re not other ships, Mister Lightner. We’re not about flash or image. We’re about getting the job done.”

He grinned self-consciously. “I know that, sir. I’d just like to leave my mark on the sh—“

The thought went uncompleted.

As ambushes go, it was exceptionally well executed. Lar’ragos was in the lead, and the Bajora-Tavan soldier who initiated the attack waited until the lieutenant had moved past him and out of the target area before launching the antipersonnel munitions. This would maximize the effect on the largest number of the intruders.

A rippling wave of brilliant white flashes erupted in close proximity to Shanthi, Taiee, Dunleavy, and two more of the security detail. They were followed almost immediately by the zing of neural disruptors, which did not give off a visible light beam, but simply rendered the target insensate at short range.

Momentarily blinded and struck deaf by the flash grenades, Dunleavy was struggling to bring her phaser rifle up when a neural pulse struck her, sending her toppling off the trail and sliding down the ridge.

One of the munitions landed too close to Shanthi, and the science officer’s supposedly fireproof Starfleet field jacket and tactical vest erupted in flames as he lurched backwards away from the dazzling flare.

Taiee threw her hands up over her eyes, too late to stop the optical flash from washing away her vision. She flung herself onto the ground as the sounds of exchanging weapons fire and explosions roared around her.

Specialist Sharpe, who had already donned his night-vision glasses in deference to the growing twilight, was spared the visual disruption of the opening assault. He toggled off his rifle’s safety and fired blindly, blanketing the uphill side of the trail in pulse phaser bolts.

Ramirez grabbed Lightner by the back of his vest and pulled him over the lip of the pathway. She scabbled down the ridge-face with the ensign in tow as the sounds of combat raged above them. Lightner fought for breath as he fumbled for his phaser pistol, hissing, “Who is it,

Commander? The Ba'ku?"

"Shut up," she replied coldly as she ramped up her phaser rifle's power setting while scanning the downward slope for signs of enemy targets. She tapped her combadge but was not terribly surprised by the device's null-function buzz. Disrupting communications was a prerequisite for an effective surprise attack, denying the victims the ability to more readily coordinate a counter-attack.

As she pushed Lightner ahead of her, they began their clumsy descent down the steep ridge. Ramirez hoped to avoid any immediate pursuit by the threat forces. She yearned to climb back to the path and engage this unknown enemy but knew to do so would be both foolish and futile. Escape and evasion were their only options now.

Fifteen meters above them, Taiee looked up, blinking, just in time to see the solidifying image of a dark, armor-clad warrior standing over her. He leveled his weapon and she closed her eyes, searching desperately for a prayer she had once learned from her great grandmother. She recalled the first few words, but the rest escaped her as the neural beam disrupted her cogent thought centers.

The soldier-priest who'd begun the attack turned back to bring down the lead intruder, only to find the man had vanished from the trail. He scanned the vicinity with high powered optics and sensors but found nothing. Odd, he thought. He could have sworn the man had been only a few meters away.

Multiple stunner beams converged on the wildly firing Sharpe, who collapsed heavily onto the dirt path. The attackers began to advance down the slope towards the trail, their mimetic armor allowing only wavering, dissonant glimpses of their movement in the tree line.

Disoriented and deafened, Shanthi struggled out of his burning vest and jacket, too preoccupied to notice the arrival of their attackers in the away team's midst. The Bajora-Tava had the courtesy to let the young man extinguish the flames before stunning him.

Unable to locate the missing intruder, the Bajora-Tavan soldier turned back to rejoin his comrades as they moved to eliminate the last vestiges of enemy resistance. Despite the advanced optics in his helmet, he did not foresee the large rock that slammed into the side of his head. He reeled and staggered backwards, only to have his legs cut out from under him by a phaser rifle wielded like a cudgel. The butt-stock of a rifle descending towards his face was the last thing he perceived before the blackness claimed him.

Prylar-Captain Bral looked on with satisfaction as his soldiers gathered the shell-shocked prisoners and prepared to egress the ambush site. He turned to his lieutenant and inquired, "All accounted for?"

"No, sir," was the man's uncertain reply. "Thavid is missing, Prylar-Captain."

Bral scowled behind his helmet. "Missing? How is that possible?"

"We estimate three or four of the intruders are unaccounted for, sir. Thavid might have been taken prisoner."

Bral tried to wrap his mind around that unlikely scenario. "By doctors and nurses? A Soldier of Light?"

The lieutenant knelt to retrieve one of the intruder's rifles. He rose to offer weapon to Bral. "Respectfully, sir, I don't believe they were all medical personnel. This is an advanced phaser rifle. Combat grade equipment."

Bral fumed silently as he returned the weapon to his man. "Perhaps a vigorous interrogation of our prisoners will reveal what their comrades have done with Thavid." Despite his leadership role, Bral had very little actual practical warfare experience. Thus far, the Army of Light had engaged in only a few skirmishes with the occasional vessel that wandered into their territory within the Prophets' Veil. Those encounters and their recent clashes with the Alshain formed the sum total of their actual combat experience.

Bral suffered from a nagging sense of his own potential inadequacy. He wondered what they might have done differently here that could have given them a greater edge. Had he been too overconfident in their abilities? The prylar-captain vowed to banish his feelings of insufficiency by recovering his missing soldier, by whatever means necessary.

2nd Scion Thavid of the Bajora-Tavan Army of Light awoke suddenly to feel himself being carried with difficulty through an area of dense forest. He looked out through the cracked visor of his helmet and saw he was in a fireman's carry, across the shoulders of a humanoid male whose features were obscured by the darkness. He attempted to access his hands-free comms transmitter, only to find that function and a host of others including his infrared optics were inoperative.

Thavid sought escape. He brought his armored elbow down, feeling a solid impact against the man's head. The young soldier crashed to the ground as the figure released his grip on the Bajoran. He rose quickly to his feet as he drew his sidearm, only to have the weapon kicked from his hand by an expertly placed boot to his forearm. The soldier deployed the scythe-shaped blade housed in his other forearm and drove a strike at the silhouette of his attacker.

His bladed arm carved through air only and was subsequently grabbed by his opponent. Off balance already, Thavid's momentum was used against him and he found himself pulled off his feet and launched airborne, flipped over the man's shoulder. He hit the ground again, the impact driving the air from his lungs and leaving him gasping.

Thavid felt himself being rolled roughly over onto his stomach. As he regained his senses he attempted to bring his arm-fixed blade into play, only to find that arm pinned to the ground by a foot. Suddenly he felt something cold and sharp bite into the back of his knee. With horror, he realized his attacker was severing the muscles and tendons in his knees; that small section of flesh left vulnerable by the flexible joints in his

leg armor.

Thavid's warrior training and conditioning momentarily left him, and he cried out in fear. Repeated violent blows to the back of his helmet not only silenced the suddenly terrified young soldier's screams, but also succeeded in knocking out the last of his integrated comms systems. Beaten, battered and literally hamstrung, the soldier wheezed in pain as his attacker located the clasp on his battle helmet and ripped the headgear off and away. "Prophets' mercy!" he pleaded desperately. "Please don't kill me!"

"So, the negotiations begin," growled Pava Lar'ragos, examining the helmet briefly before tossing it aside. "Now I know what it is you want. You want to live." Lar'ragos rolled the man over onto his back and was clearly shocked at the sight of the young man's distinctive nose ridges. "Well, there's an interesting twist."

The El-Aurian straddled the soldier's chest, his knees pinning the man's arms to the ground. In his hand the lieutenant grasped a knife slick with the Bajoran's blood. The blade tip inscribed a delicate figure-eight in the air just above the soldier's throat. "Now, friend, let me tell you what it is that *I* want."

USS Gibraltar - Federation Task Force Peacekeeper - Periphery of the Ba'ku System - The Briar Patch (Klach D'Kel Brakt)

"Plazzi to Sandhurst."

The communications prompt activated the ceiling light, shining a harsh spotlight onto the head of the bed that was guaranteed to wake even the deepest sleeper. He blinked against the intrusion and Sandhurst interposed his hand between his eyes and the light. He cleared his throat and croaked, "Go ahead, Elisto."

"Sensor contact from one of our passive drones, Captain. Looks to be a grouping of vessels entering the system at one-third impulse."

As he climbed gingerly out of bed, Sandhurst moved to the closet, feeling various twinges and complaints from his body after the heated racquetball match. "Any news from our away team?"

"No, sir. Ba'ku has been emissions quiet."

As he struggled into a fresh uniform, Sandhurst sought to clear the cobwebs from his head. He and Ojana had sat up talking into the wee hours, catching up their years apart now that the emotional dam between them had broken. "On my way, Elisto. Wake Commander Pell if you haven't done so already."

"Aye, sir."

Plazzi had already abandoned the captain's chair for the Science station by the time Sandhurst stepped off the turbolift. The pale blue lighting scheme that dominated the bridge was a visual reminder of the ship's reduced-power state, although the captain noted the yellow alert indicators had been activated.

"Report," Sandhurst instructed as he assumed his seat.

"One of our passive sensors hidden in the Oort cloud detected a squadron of ships entering the Ba'ku system. They appear to be on a direct course for the planet."

"Type and number?"

"One Son'a *Shrike*-class battlecruiser," Plazzi intoned, putting a slowly rotating schematic of one of the enormous horseshoe-shaped vessels on the main viewer. "Escorted by eight smaller ships of unknown origin." A view of one of the corsair-sized, lozenge-shaped escort ships appeared. Sandhurst couldn't place the design, but it certainly appeared compact and lethal. It reminded him vaguely of the Federation's *Defiant*-class.

Sandhurst had ordered the pre-positioning of six passive sensor probes, disguised as pieces of cometary debris, a trick he had picked up some months before from Cardassian insurgents. These drones had expanded *Gibraltar's* sensor capacity, seeing as the ship could not actively scan the area without betraying her presence.

He looked to Plazzi and Sandhurst asked hopefully, "Life signs?"

The older scientist shook his head, still engrossed in the sensor scope. "Sorry, sir. Insufficient resolution with passive-only scans."

"Ops, if we were to hail those ships, could we transmit through one of our probes by tight-beam and broadcast from its location without giving away our position?"

Juneau checked the probe's capabilities. "Aye, sir. We could."

"Excellent. Set it up, please."

Pell Ojana stepped onto the bridge, moving down into the well and taking a seat at the usually unoccupied mission specialist's station. Rather than ask for a redundant update, she quietly put in an earpiece and accessed the ship's bridge recorder, replaying the past five minutes of bridge activity to catch her up with their current circumstances.

Plazzi sensed the captain's line of thought. "Are we certain we know the Son'a's intentions here, sir? Or if they're operating under duress?" He

gestured to the schematic of the mystery ship still rotating on its axis on the viewer.

Sandhurst rubbed his chin, toggling the interface and removing the image of the alien craft, and instead displaying a tactical overlay of their relative positions within the system. "We've got a team on the planet, Elisto, and these people are heading right for them. I need to determine their objectives."

Plazzi touched his controls to highlight the tactical symbol representing the Son'a battlecruiser. "She's four times our mass, with five times our firepower, Captain."

Sandhurst nodded slowly, "Precisely why I'd like to remain hidden for as long as possible."

Juneau announced, "Signal relay to our furthest probe has been established, sir."

As he sat forward in his chair, Sandhurst ordered, "Patch me through. Audio only."

"Channel open, sir."

"Son'a vessel, please identify yourself and state your intent. I am the captain of a Federation starship, sent to recover Son'a, Ba'ku, Tarlac and Ellora survivors of the Alshain offensive in the Briar Patch. Please reply on this channel."

"That got their attention," Plazzi said after a moment. "Their scanning intensity just increased by a factor of seven. They're trying to find us."

"I concur, sir," said Juneau. "Four of the smaller craft have broken formation and are establishing trans-system trajectories. They are now actively probing the vicinity of the broadcasting drone with full sensors."

"Acknowledged," Sandhurst replied quietly, awaiting a response to his hail.

"Federation vessel, this is the Son'a warship Ru'afo. We are currently surveying the damage to the Ba'ku settlement on the planet. Show yourselves."

Pell, now up to speed, turned in her chair to address the captain. "I'd advise extraordinary caution here, sir. That ship is named after a notable Son'a patriot who died at the hands of a Starfleet captain less than a year ago."

"Yeah," Sandhurst remarked dryly, "I'd picked up on that."

He opened the channel again from his armrest panel, and Sandhurst countered, "Under the circumstances, *Ru'afo*, I'm sure you can understand my desire to remain incognito for the time being."

"That is unacceptable. You have violated the territorial integrity of the Son'a Imperium, and we demand that you make yourselves visible and present your vessel for inspection."

At Ops, Juneau emitted a derisive hiss. "Sure. That's gonna happen."

Plazzi squinted at his display screen, looking troubled. "One of the smaller ships is scanning this area of the Oort cloud, sir. Their search pattern will intersect with our position in less than five minutes."

"Damn," Sandhurst breathed softly. He tapped his communicator. "Sandhurst to Engineering."

"Ashok here, sir."

"Lieutenant, we've got potential hostiles sniffing around and we're going to need full power in less than five minutes. Warm up the main reactor and prepare for combat power systems configuration."

Ashok replied sullenly in his basso rumble, *"Understood, sir."*

"He's just delighted to be part of this plan, sir." Plazzi noted wryly.

Sandhurst spared the scientist a smirk. "How can you tell? He always sounds like that." He looked back at the stout Tellarite at the Tactical station. The captain said, "Master Chief, tactical analysis. If we have to trade fire with these people, what are our options?"

He quirked an eyebrow and the Tellarite replied. "We have three choices if confronted by the Son'a and their friends, Captain. One, we can run. Two, we can retreat. Three, we can flee."

As he glanced at Pell, Sandhurst noted, "I'm sensing a pattern, Commander. Would you concur?"

The acting exec look confused. "As to their cynicism or our being hopelessly outmatched, sir?"

Sandhurst shook his head and smiled despite the circumstances. "Helm, I want you to plot multiple evasive courses to the Ba'ku planet. If we have to fight our way through, that's what we'll have to do."

The petty officer manning the Engineering station announced, "Main power restored, sir. Charging shields and tactical systems."

An alarm warbled at Plazzi's station. "That tears it," he exclaimed, "They've found us."

Sandhurst settled back into his seat and toggled the public address. "All hands, this is the captain. Our away team is stranded on a planet in this system, and a force of threat vessels stands between us and our people. We are going to run that gauntlet. I know I can depend on each of you to do your jobs to the best of your ability, and our collective lives may depend on that." He took a deep, steady breath as he felt the ship

come to life around him. "All hands to battle stations."

Chapter 10

USS *Gibraltar* - Federation Task Force Peacekeeper - Periphery of the Ba'ku System - The Briar Patch (Klach D'Kel Brakt)

As *Gibraltar* accelerated towards the incoming warships, Sandhurst toggled the comms once again. “*Ru’afu*, we are on a peaceful mission to try and stop the Alshain ethnic cleansing against your people. We have no hostile intent.” He paused, considering his quickly dwindling options. “We have a landing party on the Ba’ku planet searching for survivors. If you will allow us to recover our team, we will immediately withdraw from Son’a space.”

He sat back then glanced at Juneau after a moment.

The lieutenant shook her head, “They’re receiving us, but are not responding.”

‘*And now I’ve given up our away team.*’ Sandhurst fumed internally.

From behind him at Tactical, Tark announced, “Two of the smaller unidentified ships will be within weapons range in five minutes, Captain.”

“Assessment, Master Chief?”

Tark analyzed the incoming vessels, probing their energy transfer systems and defensive generators. “Mid-yield phasers, ion-jacketed plasma canons, photon torpedoes, and Class-five shields, sir.”

Sandhurst mulled that over. They could take one of them without too much effort. Three would prove difficult, and eight would be impossible. There had to be another way. “Ops, download our logs to the emergency buoy and launch. Make its destination the Norfander system.”

Pell glanced up from her console, her expression dark. Captains traditionally launched log buoys only when faced with almost certain destruction. “Great expectations?”

He cocked his head thoughtfully as he replied, “Might as well let *Enterprise* know what’s happening to us.”

Sandhurst turned back to the viewer, weighing various courses of action. As he mused, part of his mind began preparing the ship for what appeared to be an impending engagement. “Come to course zero-nine-two-mark-zero-zero-four, thirty degree roll to starboard. Ten-degree positive pitch on the bow. Twenty percent increase in forward shield strength,” he checked his armrest display. “Take the additional power from the port-aft and starboard-aft grids.”

A litany of affirmatives answered his commands. He stood impulsively, the kernel of an idea fomenting in his skull as he moved to the Science station. Sandhurst leaned over Plazzi and whispered briefly with the man, whose eyes widened in disbelief.

“You... can’t be serious, sir?”

Sandhurst looked grave. “Serious as taking on nine ships at once.”

Flustered, Plazzi shook his head. “I’d have to run the numbers, Captain, but I can’t imagine—“

Sandhurst cut him off tersely, “Do it. We don’t have much time.” He moved to the Engineering console. As he checked some figures on the panel, he tapped his combadge. “Sandhurst to Ashok. Lieutenant, I’m going to need you topside.”

Son’a Battlecruiser *Ru’afu* - Joint Son’a/Bajora-Tava Ba’ku Mission - Ba’ku System - The Briar Patch (Klach D’Kel Brakt)

“...*If you will allow us to recover our team, we will immediately withdraw from Son’a space.*”

Vadark Jobrin Adnai looked askance at *Adhar* Wuuten. “Again, they claim only peaceful intent, *Adhar.*”

“Lies,” Wuuten spat dismissively. “The interlopers will be destroyed.”

The Bajoran turned to face the Son’a leader. “I am unconvinced. It is but a single vessel, and your scans indicate that it is no threat to your ship.”

Wuuten fought to hold his temper in check. “It does not matter,” he said with slow deliberation. “The Federation betrayed our alliance, and now they enter our space uninvited in a time of war. I will take my revenge upon this ship.”

“The starship is launching a shielded distress buoy, sir.” This from the sensor officer.

Wuuten nodded, “Fine. Let them lure more of their comrades to the slaughter.”

Jobrin moved to the middle of the command center, still flanked by his bodyguards. “The Bajora-Tava will not participate in this egregious act, *Adhar.* If you wish our continued cooperation, you will cease this action immediately.”

Wuuten stood abruptly, causing Jobrin’s escorts to step in front of him, the emitters of their rifles rising just slightly. This, in turn, called Wuuten’s own security force into play. They advanced from their guard posts throughout the command center to bring their sidearms to a low ready. The Son’a leader spoke, his voice tremulous with fury. “You do not give orders on my ship, Bajoran!”

Unmoved, Jobrin replied icily, "Then you may consider it the most serious of requests."

Wuuten became unhinged, "I have had *enough* of your pious morality and your arrogance! I tell you these people are our enemies! Can you not trust us to know who is and is not a threat?"

Still implacably calm, Jobrin inclined his head. "A danger to you, perhaps. Not to us, *Adhar*. We agreed to help you in your struggle against the Alshain and their campaign of genocide against your people. We have no desire to entertain a blood feud between yourselves and this apparently benign Federation."

Wuuten pointed wildly, his vat-cloned eyes bulging as he screamed, "Get off my ship! All of you!"

"As you wish." Jobrin touched a finger to the control bracelet on his wrist, initiating a transport signal. "It appears the Bajora-Tava will have to re-evaluate our relationship with the Son'a Imperium." A purple field of energy engulfed the vadark and his subordinates, depositing them back aboard one of their escorting corvettes.

Six decks below the command center, Anij sighed deeply and shook her head as the *Ru'afu*'s battle alert klaxons began to blare. Looking across the nearly empty guest quarters cabin at Gallatin, she said quietly, "I don't know about you, but I have had quite enough of war and killing."

Gallatin raised his head from the computer terminal he was studying atop the otherwise bare work desk. "I agree, but what can we do about it?"

She made a point of looking around the room. "From in here? Not terribly much, I'd imagine."

He turned off the computer and gave Anij his full attention. "You have a plan," Gallatin surmised.

"The beginnings of one."

He smiled, the prospect of interfering in Wuuten's machinations warming his blood. "Please, Anij. Do tell."

"As you know, we Ba'ku are not without our own... special talents."

Gallatin looked at her skeptically. "Anij, those stories are apocryphal. Believe me, the Son'a spent years studying our genome looking for just such abilities and found nothing."

She stepped over to him, taking his hands in hers. "This power can't be found in a laboratory, my friend. It's a matter of belief, of faith."

He rolled his eyes and attempted to extricate his hands from hers, but she held firm. "Let me prove it to you, Gallatin. I want to share a moment with you. It will not be a perfect moment, but it will be a prolonged one. And such moments, occurring at the right time, can move worlds."

He issued a resigned sigh. "Fine. I will try and keep an open mind."

"That's all I ask."

Alshain Heavy Cruiser *Venska* - Running cloaked within the Ba'ku System - The Briar Patch (Klach D'Kel Brakt)

Sutahr R'Voss watched with rapt attention as the Son'a ship and its escorts repositioned for an attack on the advancing starship. The cloaked *Venska* had stumbled upon the little Son'a led flotilla after leaving the confines of the Norfander system. Intrigued by the possibility of discovering the identity of the Son'a's new allies, the Alshain warship had tracked the squadron to the Ba'ku system. Now, they observed the drama playing out on the tactical plot map as the plucky, yet apparently suicidal Federation escort bore down on the superior firepower of the Son'a grouping.

R'Voss looked to his Klingon counterpart and asked, "How would you characterize the Starfleet commander's actions, Captain? Is he a hero or a fool?"

Captain Yejokk, his hand gripping a mug of raktajino, watched the forthcoming battle from his own terminal on the *Venska*'s bridge. He glanced up to fix his gaze on the Alshain. "That is yet to be seen, Sutahr. If he falls in battle taking many of the enemy with him, then he dies a hero. If he is cut down quickly without giving proper account of himself in battle, then he dies a fool."

R'Voss snuffled with canid laughter, "Well spoken." He glanced at his weapons officer and ordered, "Be prepared to activate all weapons systems on a moment's notice. I may well decide to decloak us and finish off the victors of this engagement."

Planet Ba'ku - Dorian Mountains

Ensign Shanthi was forced to his knees, his arms bound tightly behind his back. The blindfold covering his eyes left him completely unable to guess his whereabouts, though he gathered by the temperature change and echoing footfalls that he'd been moved indoors someplace. His inability to see his surroundings increased the terror of the situation by several orders of magnitude.

His training in counter-interrogation tactics at the academy had been a brief one-week course that hadn't come close to preparing him for the

real thing. He fervently tried to recall the basic precepts of resisting torture but found that his fear addled mind would not cooperate.

He thought of his mother, and how she would have handled this situation. Before rising to the admiralty, she'd served as the captain of the starship *Potemkin*. During that tour, Thousana had been taken hostage by the Chalnoth after a disastrous breakdown in negotiations with the burly anarchists on Milika III. They'd held her and a Federation ambassadorial party for a month, attempting to ransom them, until a young Lieutenant Jean-Luc Picard had orchestrated a daring rescue of their party. Shanthi vowed to show at least a fraction of the courage it must have taken his mother to endure such an ordeal.

Shanthi doubted very much that such a rescue would be forthcoming this time. As far as he knew, their entire away team had been captured or killed, and any survivors were being held separately. He tried to steel himself against whatever was to come as he heard a new set of footsteps enter the room.

The blindfold was removed, and Shanthi found himself in a small compartment, presumably within some manner of spacecraft. Seated across from him was a Bajoran male in a dark military uniform adorned with various accoutrements indicating something, but Shanthi didn't know enough about Bajoran culture to guess who or what he was dealing with. The man had a medium build, widely set brown eyes, sparse dirty blonde hair, and carried himself with an aura of authority.

"I am Prylar-Captain Bral of the Bajora-Tava. You have been captured intruding upon the territory of our Son'a allies. Explain your purpose here." The man spoke without exaggerated emotion or any apparent hostility, which only made him that much more intimidating to the ensign.

"Kuenre Shanthi, Ensign, Starfleet. Serial number BR-813-751."

Bral smiled so slightly that Shanthi almost missed it. "You and your companions have been reluctant to cooperate with this process." He moved to take a small box out from a satchel on his belt. "It is disappointing."

Without thinking first, Shanthi blurted out, "I don't understand. Our people are allies."

Bral looked perplexed and hesitated in opening the box in his hand. "Would you care to elaborate, Ensign?"

Shanthi struggled against his vow of silence, then abandoned it in hopes of talking his way out of this. So much for his stalwart, tight-lipped defiance. "The Federation and the Bajorans have been partners for nearly a decade."

His curiosity piqued, Bral sat back in his chair. "And how are an oppressed and occupied people allowed to make alliances?"

Shanthi blinked as his thoughts raced furiously. *What's he getting at? Surely he has to know?* "Oppressed? Bajor hasn't been oppressed since the end of the occupation."

Bral stiffened. "Watch yourself, Ensign. You're treading into dangerous territory. The subject of the occupation isn't to be taken lightly. Do not mock the plight of our brothers and sisters still in chains."

"Who's taking it lightly?" Shanthi looked at the Bajoran with evident disbelief. "Where the hell have you been? The occupation ended eight years ago, right before they found the wormhole."

"Wormhole?"

Shanthi closed his eyes, dredging up his exo-historical courses from two years prior. "The... the Temple of the Prophets. I think that's what your people call it."

Bral was up and out of his chair in a flash, striking Shanthi so hard that the young man didn't even have time to cry out as he toppled over onto the deck plating. Bral stood over him, seething, and looking at his hand as if he'd just witnessed the act from outside his own body.

As he regained his composure somewhat, Bral massaged his now aching hand with its counterpart. "Do not speak heresy to me, Ensign. I consider myself moderate in most things, but my faith is not one of them." He pulled Shanthi back up and into a kneeling position more gently than the ensign had expected. "We should avoid that subject, I think."

Shanthi coughed, spitting blood onto the floor, presumably from a cut somewhere inside his mouth. "Kuenre Shanthi, Ensign, Starfleet. Serial number BR-813-751."

Bral looked troubled as he returned to his chair, seemingly startled by the violence of his own reaction. He sat and retrieved the box from its satchel once again. This time he opened it, exposing a shimmering, rotating miniature version of the Orb of Transcendence. "As the piece is of the whole, as the leaf is of the tree, so too is the shard linked to the will and the body and the word of the Prophets," he intoned by rote.

Shanthi did not want to look too closely at the artifact but found he could not tear his eyes away. The scintillating mini-orb rotated slowly, seemingly drawing his consciousness towards it. He felt himself falling, though he couldn't be sure if that was an actual physical sensation, or something imagined.

A bright light washed over him, infusing him, opening dark recesses within his consciousness he'd thought long forgotten. He felt intrusive tendrils of thought penetrating his memories, sifting through his recollections. Shanthi reached out, trying to communicate with this new presence, only to find that the connection was purely one way. Too late, he began to resist, to try and close off the sections of his psyche the intruder seemed most interested in. It was too late, however, and oblivion soon engulfed the young ensign.

They crept through the sparse trees near the crest of the ridge that overlooked the shuttle's landing zone. Ramirez thought she and Lightner had either been enormously lucky to have got this far without being detected by their unknown enemies, or they were being toyed with.

She had deactivated their combadges and programmed their tricorders to emit a low-level scattering field that she hoped would mask their life-signs. They had maintained a steady pace downward over uneven terrain, and both were bruised and scratched from more than one fall or scabbling descent.

Ramirez edged closer to the crest, pulling a compact set of binoculars from her tactical vest and activating the low-light setting. Visually scanning the shuttle, she saw nothing amiss. She gritted her teeth against the dropping temperature as she whispered to Lightner, who was hugging himself for warmth despite his field jacket. "Nothing. Not sure if that makes me feel better or worse about this."

Lightner issued a few false starts before forcing a reply past his chattering teeth. "Wh- what do you mean?"

"She means she'd feel better if she could actually see some of the enemy milling about," Lar'ragos said quietly from behind them. Both Ramirez and Lightner started, the XO spinning about to bring her rifle up as the ensign lost his footing, toppled over and slid two meters down the rocky slope.

"Gods, man, how do you *do* that?" Ramirez hissed, equal parts shaken and annoyed.

Lar'ragos smirked in the darkness. "Years of practice."

Ramirez lowered her rifle. "I was wondering when you were going to show up." She shook her head and muttered, "That was some ambush."

"Absolutely," Lar'ragos agreed. "I was on point and didn't see it coming. If anyone's at fault here, sir, it's me."

"It's no one's fault, Pava. I'm just angry they made us look like rank amateurs, whoever the hell they are."

"They're Bajorans, actually." The lieutenant jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "Their ship is parked about a klick and a half that way. You feel like dishing out a little payback while we retrieve our people, Commander?"

Ramirez matched his feral smile, looking fearsome. "Do I ever." Then his statement sank in. "Bajoran?"

As he slid deftly down the slope to assist Lightner, Lar'ragos answered, "Got some intel on the new threats, sir. Nice young kid I ran across was only too happy to tell me all about them. I'll fill you in as we go." He hauled the ensign to his feet by his jacket collar and the El-Aurian chided, "C'mon flyboy, time for another walkabout."

Bajora-Tavan Attack Ship *Meressa* - On Intercept Course with USS *Gibraltar* - Ba'ku System - The Briar Patch (Klach D'Kel Brakt)

Vadark Jobrin squeezed into the tiny command deck of the attack ship, unfolding a stowed jumpseat and easing into it. "Status of our ships approaching the Federation vessel?"

The prylar-captain turned and nodded deferentially to his superior. "Sir, they are about to enter the starship's weapons range. They are awaiting the order to strike."

"Tell them to hold their fire."

The captain looked uncertain. "Do you want them to veer off, Vadark?"

Jobrin closed his eyes, beginning a silent prayer. Softly he intoned, "No, have them maintain course and speed, but they are to hold their fire unless fired upon. How better to truly judge the intent of this Federation captain?"

"It shall be as you say, Vadark."

USS *Gibraltar* - Federation Task Force Peacekeeper - Ba'ku System - The Briar Patch (Klach D'Kel Brakt)

"Inbounds entering weapons range in... ten seconds." Juneau announced evenly.

"Talk to me, Tark." Sandhurst urged, struggling to keep his mounting anxiety out of his voice. "What will it take to cripple them?"

"Two photons apiece, followed by a quantum should do it, sir. I could employ follow-on phaser fire to disable their engines as we pass."

"Good, I want them out of commission." The captain cautioned, "Remember, we'll let them make the first move. I don't want us being responsible for starting a shooting war during a potential First Contact."

To starboard, Plazzi and Ashok sat side by side at their respective stations, working feverishly on a series of computer simulations.

Unable to sit still any longer, Pell rose gracefully from her seat and ascended to the upper deck. She leaned in to whisper to Sandhurst in the command chair, "Have you really thought this through, Captain?"

He replied in the same low tones. "I've a dearth of options here, Ojana. I won't leave our people at the mercy of the Son'a."

"You can't win," was her succinct retort.

"I'm not that picky," he said, smiling grimly. "I'll settle for a draw."

She persisted, "Don't let your ego get us all killed."

Rather than the angry response she'd expected to provoke with that barb, Sandhurst instead looked maudlin for the briefest of moments. He reached up and grasped her upper arm lightly with his hand. "Don't worry, Commander. This isn't ego, it's loyalty. The kind of loyalty you demonstrated when you risked everything to rescue your last captain against standing orders."

She stared, unable to muster a reply to that. Sandhurst gestured to her chair, and Pell resumed her seat wordlessly.

"Inbounds still closing, Captain," Juneau updated. "Their shields are up and weapons are running hot, but they haven't initiated a tactical lock as yet."

"Intercept in thirty seconds," Tark added from the back of the bridge.

"Steady," Sandhurst coaxed as the vessels barreled towards one another.

Bajora-Tavan Attack Ship *Meressa* - On Intercept Course with USS *Gibraltar* - Ba'ku System - The Briar Patch (Klach D'Kel Brakt)

"Vadark, one of our ships on approach to the Federation vessel reports detecting a Bajoran life-sign aboard the craft."

Jobrin's eyes opened suddenly, the silent chant on his lips evaporating at the news. "Confirm that."

Seconds ground past as inquiries flitted between ships over subspace. Finally, the officer turned back to address the vadark. "It is confirmed, sir. There is a Bajoran female aboard the Federation starship."

As he sat forward and now appeared completely alert, Jobrin assessed, "It appears we will not be leaving Ba'ku system as quickly as I'd thought."

Planet Ba'ku - Dorian Mountains

Thanks to Lar'ragos' unique talents, the trio had managed to sneak past the Bajorans' security perimeter surrounding their landed attack ship. They crouched behind a fallen tree fifteen meters from the ship's access hatch, going over their entry plan a final time before bringing it to fruition.

As Lar'ragos checked the charge on his battered phaser rifle, Ramirez noticed the dried blood caked around the El-Aurian's fingernails. "You injured?" she whispered.

Lar'ragos looked down, frowned, then shook his head fractionally. "Not mine," he replied in the same subdued tone.

"Oh." Ramirez knew better than to pry further.

The lieutenant leaned closer to the exec, "If we survive this little op, I'm going to have to put myself on report."

She looked at him curiously, "What for?"

"The information on the Bajorans... it came at a price." He handed Ramirez an isochip. "At the coordinates on this chip you'll find a Bajoran. He's hurt... I hurt him. I left him sedated, and I expect that after a little work from our medical personnel, he'll be fine."

She slid the isonlinear chip into a pouch on her tactical vest. "Not really so very worried about this right now, Pava."

"Even so, Commander, I felt obligated to report it. These aren't bad people. They're just suffering from some serious misapprehensions regarding the outside universe."

"Fine," she said brusquely, ending the conversation. Ramirez shouldered her rifle and flipped up the holographic sight aperture. "Let's do this."

"Right." Lar'ragos motioned Lightner to his feet.

The Bajora-Tavan junior scion finished his sweep of the southwest quadrant, deactivating the thermal sights built into his helmet. As he turned back towards the ship, a volley of phaser pulses cracked into his armored back, hurling him headlong into the unyielding side of the craft with a bone-jarring impact that rendered him insensate.

The three Starfleeters advanced by bounds, one of them rushing forward as the others provided cover. Lightner sent another of the perimeter guards crashing to the ground with a prolonged discharge from his phaser pistol after the man rounded the nose of the ship on his patrol route.

Ramirez reached the hatch first and slapped a flat rectangular shaped entry charge onto the outer airlock door. She set a five-second delay, then sprinted three meters down the flank of the ship to flatten herself against the hull. The charge detonated with an almost inaudible popping sound, the majority of its charge translating into molecular entropy which disintegrated the tritanium hatch.

Lar'ragos was first through, dashing into the craft and butt-stroking the first Bajoran he came across with the stock of his rifle. Hot on his heels, Ramirez stunned another uniformed scion as the man stumbled unwittingly into the midst of their assault in the corridor.

Lightner brought up the rear and paused just long enough to set a portable shield generator on the floor just inside the now open hatchway. He

activated the device; the field would prevent the Bajora-Tava on guard duty outside from reinforcing their comrades within the ship. Lightner turned to see a dark blur rushing towards him down an adjoining hallway.

Prylar-Captain Bral delivered a vicious elbow strike to Lightner's face as he slammed into the younger man, sending the ensign bouncing off a par-steel plated wall, his hand phaser clattering to the deck. As Lightner stumbled forward from the impact, Bral lashed out with a well-executed punch that snapped the ensign's head back and sent him sagging to the floor.

Lar'ragos heard the struggle behind him and turned to engage the Bajoran officer, unaware of the soldier-priest behind him who pivoted around the corner at a low crouch, weapon at the ready. Lar'ragos was bringing his own rifle to bear when a stream of plasma blasts tore into his side, knocking him off his feet and sending a spray of his blood splashing across the nearest wall.

Ramirez replied in kind, her phaser rifle spitting bolts that tore through Pava's assailant and caused the man's lifeless body to topple into the corridor. She spun around to engage Bral, but Ramirez found the man almost on top of her. She tried to bring her rifle up like a pole-arm, but the stronger Bajoran gripped the weapon at either end and drove her backwards while wrenching it from her grasp.

She brought her knee up just as she began to fall backwards, connecting solidly with Bral's groin. As the prylar-captain collapsed on top of her, Ramirez leveraged her knees up and used Bral's momentum to send him up and over her, crashing down on the deck on his back. The rifle skittered noisily down the corridor, just out of reach.

As she came to her feet Ramirez drew her combat knife. Bral rose more slowly, courtesy of his opponent's well placed knee, and drew his ceremonial dagger. Crouched and each taking measure of the other, the two combatants locked eyes. Ramirez could hear the thunder of approaching footfalls.

Bral smiled cruelly at her. "What will it be, Starfleet? Will you taste my blade, or your own? Death or capture?"

Chapter 11

“Given the choice,” Ramirez replied calmly, “I’ll pass on both.” With that she flicked her knife up, grasped it by the blade, and hurled it towards Bral.

The prylar-captain threw himself to the side, colliding with the wall but avoiding all but a grazing slice across his upper arm from the spinning knife. The distraction, however, gave Ramirez time enough to grasp her phaser pistol. She fired off a brief stun beam that caught the Bajoran in the center of his chest. Ramirez rushed forward and moved behind the now tottering man to grasp him from behind. She pulled him into the corner of an L-shaped corridor intersection, using him as cover.

Lightner was struggling to rise when the Bajora-Tava arrived in force. One of the soldiers delivered a swift blow across the back of Lightner’s head with the business end of a plasma rifle. The ensign collapsed to the deck, clinging valiantly to consciousness but unable to offer further resistance.

Ramirez jammed her phaser’s emitter into Bral’s neck as she shielded herself from the responding Bajorans with his body. “Nobody moves, or he dies!” Near as she could tell, she was violating a half-dozen Starfleet regulations and Federation laws by taking a hostage. The act went against all her training and every instinct she possessed, save for the impulse to survive and rescue her comrades.

She spared a brief glance at the motionless form of Lar’ragos who lay splayed in the corridor in a pool of his own blood and felt her resolve firm. Ramirez tightened her arm around Bral’s throat, causing the semi-conscious man to wheeze and sputter. She had hoped to gain a few seconds hesitation from the Bajorans and was surprised to find them looking cautious and uncertain.

One of them inquired, “Prylar-Captain, are you unharmed?” before being silenced by his comrade who cuffed the other man alongside the head.

‘*Prylar-Captain? Oh, Liana, you’ve hit the jackpot*’ she thought with grim amusement. ‘*If you’re going to end your career with a bang, best to go big.*’ To the Bajorans she said, “Drop your weapons and get my man a doctor, or your captain follows him to the afterlife.”

USS *Enterprise* - Federation Task Force Peacekeeper - The Briar Patch (Klach D’Kel Brakt)

He had hoped it would not come to this. A matter settled by force of arms was rarely a long-term victory. Grudges would be held and the deaths resulting from the battle would be the fuel for righteous anger and the thirst for revenge for generations.

They had tried. That was the best that could be said of their noble efforts to stop the bloodshed here. But the Alshain were flush with victory and saw their advance into Son’a space as a renewal of their long-lost empire of ages past. The lupanoids could not be made to see reason, could not be forced to exhibit empathy or mercy, and would not be convinced to take their ill-gotten gains and call it a day.

Diplomacy had failed. Their attempts at peace-keeping had only resulted in needless casualties. The aggressors had no interest in negotiation.

So be it.

The *Sovereign*-class starship was the most formidable vessel in the Federation Starfleet. He would remove all constraints, and against his better nature he would teach the Alshain that the Federation, when justly provoked, did indeed have teeth. Jean-Luc Picard was determined that when he finally lay down his stick, the Alshain would beg for the carrot they’d once disdainfully refused.

So sick was he with the idea of what was to come, Picard had even briefly contemplated retiring to his ready room and letting Riker conduct the strike on the Alshain. However, he and he alone was accountable for this mission, and despite Riker’s tactical acumen, it was the captain’s responsibility to initiate the coming engagement.

“Status?” Picard inquired as he watched the view screen intently. The image on display was that of the stricken starship *Bellerophon* fleeing her pursuers through swirling clouds of orange and burgundy.

Data replied crisply, “Their structural integrity is at thirty-two percent and falling, Captain. Shields are failing, and their tactical systems are largely inoperative.”

“And their attackers?” the captain asked.

“Two Alshain heavy cruisers, two destroyers, and a frigate are continuing their pursuit of the *Bellerophon*, sir. They have initiated what appears to be a Globular-C envelopment formation, a standard Starforce attack pattern.”

On the screen, the wounded starship ducked into a gaseous eddy, launching her last two photon torpedoes at her pursuers, whose detonation barely qualified as harassment fire.

“Distance to the minefield?”

“Five million kilometers, sir.”

Seb N’Saba stepped forward but remained at a respectful distance until Picard had noticed him and gestured for his approach to the command chair. Quietly, N’Saba spoke to the human, his voice free of irony as he offered, “I know this cannot be easy for you, sir. Rest assured; this is one gesture the Exarchate *will* understand.” He looked toward the viewer with his eerily artificial eyes and observed the Alshain flotilla slashing through the nebula as he added, “As for the soldiers who die here today, their Septs will accrue much notoriety and many accolades

for their sacrifice. Any Alshain would be proud to give their lives to bolster their families' standings upon the Great Terrace."

That was cold comfort to Picard. "Thank you, Commander," he said stiffly. "You'll forgive me if I don't share your pragmatic stance on killing." N'Saba gave the Alshain variant of a shrug and returned to his duty station.

"Switch to tactical view, Mister Data."

The hazy image on the screen was replaced by a top-down grid whose contour lines mimicked the local nebular density and striations. The icon representing the *Bellerophon* was quickly approaching the minefield Riker and LaForge had laid hours earlier with multiple shuttle sorties.

"Standing by to activate mines, Captain." Riker stood manning an auxiliary console that had been reconfigured for Tactical control.

Picard nodded distractedly. "Wait until *Bellerophon* has cleared the field, Number One." He glanced back at Captain T'Agdi, whose empty ship now served as bait. Picard spoke, his voice tinged with regret. "Captain, she's your ship. Would you care to do the honors?"

As she rose from where she had sat mutely at an ancillary workstation, the Caitian officer moved to stand next to Riker. "Thank you, Captain." Her finger hovered over the toggle that would initiate the final sequence of the starship's destruct code. At his station, Riker brought the mines to life with a brief, encrypted subspace burst.

The lead Alshain warship blundered into the minefield at flank speed, the charges igniting the dense pockets of metreon gas that littered this region of the Briar Patch. Within seconds, the diaphanous veil around them was illuminated with a flurry of brilliant blossoming explosions that shredded the Alshain shields and rent the cruiser asunder.

The other cruiser moved in from the opposite direction and veered sharply to avoid the blazing maelstrom. Instead, it came face-to-face with the quickly approaching *Bellerophon*. With a final silent farewell to her command of the last four years, T'Agdi sent the coded sequence, adding her ship's antimatter stores to the firestorm.

The blistering tempest of destructive energies consumed all but two of the Alshain vessels, leaving a destroyer and frigate both drifting without power.

"Transporter rooms, standby to beam surviv—" Picard silenced his first officer with a raised hand and a hard look.

"Give them five minutes to launch escape pods, then destroy the two remaining ships."

Riker looked at Picard with evident disbelief, "But Captain, there will undoubtedly be—"

"Just do it!" Picard snapped as he stood abruptly, his frame rigid with anger and shame. He turned for his ready room but paused briefly. "This is a lesson I would rather teach only once, Number One. If this is all they understand, I wish to convey my full meaning with crystal clarity." He stalked to his office, stopping just inside the doors as they swooshed closed behind him.

'This isn't you, Jean-Luc,' he castigated himself. *'Resolve is one thing, sadistic callousness is another matter entirely.'* He tapped his communicator and amended his standing order. "Commander Riker, have the *Bethesda* beam aboard the remaining survivors on those ships and render medical aid to them where appropriate. Leave the undamaged life pods for the Alshain to find."

Back on the bridge, Riker acknowledged the order with a rush of relief. "Understood, sir." As they set about their tasks, the bridge crew was left to ponder the sight of the burning ships as they ejected but a handful of fragile escape vehicles.

USS *Gibraltar* - Federation Task Force Peacekeeper - Ba'ku System - The Briar Patch (Klach D'Kel Brakt)

Sandhurst allowed himself to breathe again only after the two attack ships had passed the *Gibraltar* without opening fire.

"Elisto, who's piloting those things?"

There was a moment's silence from the befuddled Science officer, who then announced with careful precision, "Bajorans," as if trying to convince himself of the scan's validity.

This, naturally, caught Pell's attention, and she quickly slaved her workstation to the Science board to examine the readings for herself. "Confirmed, Captain. Approximately forty Bajorans crewing each of those ships."

From Tactical, Tark announced, "They're coming about and taking trailing positions behind us, Captain. They still haven't armed their weapons."

Sandhurst sat quietly, relieved that they were not yet locked in combat, but anxious to have been bracketed by the corsairs and the oncoming battlecruiser. "ETA to intercept with the Son'a ship?"

"Twelve minutes, sir."

He stood from the command chair and moved to stand beside Ashok as the engineer's viewer displayed an undulating tubule of energy in a computer-generated simulation. Ashok looked up, his expression one of foreboding. Quietly, he addressed the captain. "This won't work, sir. This is a rare phenomenon, only generated by accident on a handful of occasions. At best we'll depolarize the nacelles, at worst we'll end up hopelessly lost or destroying the ship."

Plazzi stepped over from the Science station, "I concur with the lieutenant's assessment, Captain."

Both men shared Sandhurst's sharp look in response to this unwelcome judgment. Sandhurst reached out to touch a series of controls that altered the mathematical assumptions behind the computer model. "You didn't account for the local particle density, gentlemen. The same nebular gasses that prevent us from going to warp in normal space will help to contain and stabilize the conduit."

Plazzi looked appalled and completely forgot they were having a whispered conversation. He blurted, "Based on exactly what, Captain?" He gave Sandhurst a stare of utter incredulity as he motioned towards the simulation. "Where are you getting these figures from, sir? Don't you think if this was even a remotely plausible tactic it'd have been used before now?"

Sandhurst's gaze hardened, and he subconsciously moved a step closer to his subordinate. "I think you need to reconsider your tone, *Commander*."

Pell sensed the mounting tension and stepped into the fray. "Captain, Commander, perhaps we should take this to the ready room?"

"No," Sandhurst replied icily. "I think Mister Plazzi needs to follow his orders and demonstrate a little faith in his captain."

Plazzi pointed at the display, his rising anger a palpable force. "This *isn't* going to work. We still have time to turn tail and run. If we try and fight that ship, we die. If we attempted this ridiculous stunt, we die. I'm completely unable to wrap my head around how sacrificing the entire ship and crew for the away team makes the slightest bit of sense, *sir*."

"I'm not leaving our people behind," Sandhurst said slowly for emphasis. "Perhaps you've forgotten your obligations to your fellow crew on the cusp of your retirement?"

"I'm a Starfleet officer," Plazzi shot back, "not a lemming."

Sandhurst jerked a thumb towards the turbolift as he growled, "That's it. Get off my bridge. You're restricted to quarters, Commander."

The remaining bridge crew were either staring unabashedly at the exchange or were hyper-concentrating on their consoles and pretending not to eavesdrop.

Plazzi shook his head in disbelief as he moved for the turbolift. Sandhurst watched him go, his spike of anger now dissolving with the realization that he had just cast out one of his most experienced and knowledgeable advisors. The captain's pride warred with his pragmatism and won, though only just.

As the turbolift doors closed behind Plazzi, Juneau announced from Ops. "Ten minutes until intercept with the Son'a. Bajoran ships are holding their relative positions aft."

Planet Ba'ku - Dorian Mountains

The Bajoran medic knelt over Lar'ragos and attempted to staunch the severe bleeding from the El-Aurian's wounds. The consternation on his face was proof enough that he was in over his head, which prompted Ramirez make further demands. "Release my people immediately; he needs our medical officer. Get Lieutenant Taiee her equipment and bring her here." Two of the soldiers moved out of her line of sight, though she was unsure if they were actually complying with her instructions.

The Bajorans had refused her earlier command to surrender their weapons, retreating instead to firing positions at the corners of nearby corridor intersections where they awaited a clear shot at Ramirez from behind their captain.

Bral had recovered sufficiently from the stun discharge to speak. "What now, Starfleet?"

"Good question," Ramirez hissed in his ear from behind. "I'm making this up on the fly. Any suggestions?"

"Surrender," he prompted.

"I'd be delighted to accept your surrender, Prylar-Captain."

The man made an abrupt sound that Ramirez guessed was either a cough or a laugh. "Our people are supposedly allies, if what your Ensign Shanthi told me is true. Is this how the Federation treats its friends?"

She dug the phaser's emitter into his neck, eliciting a pained grunt for her trouble. "*You* started this with an unprovoked attack on my team."

"Perhaps so, but there is no escape for you here, Starfleet. They will wait you out, or you'll have to kill me. Either way, you lose. Your doctor is not coming; my men will not release their prisoners, even with my life hanging in the balance." He sounded as conciliatory as he was able with Ramirez's arm hooked around his throat as he added, "If you surrender now, I promise I will have your medical officer attend to your friend there."

"I've got a better idea," Ramirez snarled. She adjusted her gun hand slightly so as to flick open the phaser's casing with one finger. Using her other hand, she adjusted something within the weapon's housing. A low whine started, building in pitch with each passing second. "If I lose, we all lose, Prylar-Captain. Let's go and see your god-damned Prophets together!"

Bajora-Tavan Attack Ship *Meressa* - On Intercept Course with USS *Gibraltar* - Ba'ku System - The Briar Patch (Klach D'Kel Brakt)

"The Federation vessel will be within weapons range of the Son'a in nine minutes, Vadark."

Jobrin studied the tactical readout as if he were deciphering an ancient religious text. “Tell our people trailing the starship that when the Son’a open fire, I want that Bajoran rescued from the ship.”

“That... may prove difficult, sir.”

“Difficulty does not concern me,” Jobrin said coldly. “Results do. When the Federation ship’s shields fail, we’d better have that woman in our hands, or—“ The vadark’s eyes rolled back into his head, and his entire body stiffened as if he were experiencing a seizure.

The ship’s flight engineer hastily unclipped from his safety harness and moved towards the vadark, but stopped in his tracks as the older man’s body appeared to relax. Jobrin’s head tilted forward, his eyes opened wide, now glowing a deep crimson, lit from within. The flight engineer immediately sank to his knees, making a religious gesture of supplication, “Emissary, your presence honors us.”

“As it should,” Jobrin replied, his voice no longer wholly his own. “Continue to see to the vadark’s instructions. The Bajoran onboard that ship is our primary concern.”

USS Gibraltar - Ba’ku System - The Briar Patch (Klach D’Kel Brakt)

The Son’a warship grew large on the viewscreen, and its tactical profile accessible on Sandhurst’s armrest display showed that it was exactly as fearsome an opponent as it appeared to the naked eye.

Ashok turned to face the captain from the Engineering station. “The modifications are in place, sir.” The Bolian sounded defeated, as if he had already made peace with his people’s deities regarding the outcome of Sandhurst’s plan.

The captain looked to Ops. “Still no response to our hails, Lieutenant?”

Juneau shook her head without bothering to look back. “Negative, sir. The Bajoran ships are receiving our transmissions but won’t reply.”

“Tactical, I want a spread of photons for our first volley at the Son’a, followed by four quantum. Target their weapons emitters and propulsion systems.” Sandhurst was suddenly aware of Pell’s hard stare cutting into him from her post down in the well.

A text message scrolled across the captain’s display from his acting exec. *Plazzi’s right. This won’t work. I’m begging, Donald, don’t do this.*

He stared down at the floor for a long moment, using a meditation technique taught to him by his Betazoid counselors. He searched within himself, conducting an emotional self-check as he plumbed the depths of his ego to determine where his sudden affinity for this wild scheme had come from. *‘Is this just hubris?’* he wondered to himself, *‘Am I endangering everyone because I can’t admit the situation is beyond our capabilities... beyond my capabilities?’*

He looked over at Ashok, the large man’s shoulders hunched with coiled tension. On the lieutenant’s viewer was the sum total of Sandhurst’s genius. An artificial wormhole, born of an intentional imbalance in the ship’s warp engines. This phenomenon had once been a very real threat to the newly reconfigured *Constitution*-class starships. Four ships of that class were known to have experienced such phenomena during service in the late 23rd century. Only one, the *Enterprise*, had survived the incident intact. Sandhurst had hoped to use it as a short-range evasive maneuver to tunnel through subspace and do an end run around their Son’a opponents.

Sandhurst sat back in his chair and pushed the button that engaged the seat’s safety restraint harness. He toggled the public address and announced, “All hands, this is the captain. After taking into consideration the advice of the senior staff, I have come to the conclusion that my original plan is unworkable. I still have every intention of rescuing our away team, but we’re going to have to come back at this scenario from a different angle. Everyone, brace for evasive maneuvers.”

“Helm, reverse thrust on the impulse engines, I want those Bajoran ships to overshoot us. Then come to one-eight-zero-mark-zero-two-two and give me every ounce of thrust you can without overloading the impulse manifolds.” He tapped his compin, “Sandhurst to Plazzi.”

The Science officer replied frostily, “*Go ahead, sir.*”

“Elisto, I stand corrected. You were right, I was wrong, and I’m sorry. Get back up here, I’m going to need everyone’s input to get us out of this in one piece.”

Son’a Battlecruiser Ru’afu - Ba’ku System - The Briar Patch (Klach D’Kel Brakt)

Anij looked deeply into Gallatin’s eyes, her concentration focused with such intensity that the air around them actually seemed to shift, to slow. Gallatin had heard stories, fables really, of such things in his youth. Being one of the Ba’ku’s errant ‘far-sighter’ children, he had given such tall tales no serious consideration. It appeared that had been an oversight on his part.

“Stay with me, Gallatin,” Anij whispered. “Hold this moment, right here, right now. Think only of this place and time, *be* this moment.”

And so he was...

Gradually, ever so slowly, the effect began to spread outwards from the cabin. Data systems were the first to fall prey, then power relays, all succumbing to the unique time dilation phenomena.

Gibraltar’s abrupt and unexpected change of course set into motion a chain of events her captain and crew would have found difficult to

fathom.

As *Gibraltar* braked and evaded, thrusting away at half-impulse, the Bajoran corvettes came hard about as they scrambled to reacquire the older starship. The *Ru'afu* altered course to pursue, silently shadowed herself by the cloaked Alshain battlecruiser. The remaining Bajoran ships moved to regroup, determined to extract the Bajoran life-sign from the Federation vessel even if it meant coming to blows with the Son'a that, until just minutes earlier, had been their sole allies in all the galaxy.

Son'a Battlecruiser *Ru'afu* - Ba'ku System - The Briar Patch (Klach D'Kel Brakt)

Now in rabid pursuit of the starship, *Adhar* Wuuten leaned forward in his chair expectantly. "Run, little ship, run."

"Not quickly enough, sir," noted the weapons officer. "They sacrificed too much momentum in their deceleration and evasion maneuver. We will overtake them in three minutes. They'll be within weapons range in twenty seconds."

Wuuten nodded approvingly. "You may open fire when we come in range."

"*Adhar*, forgive the intrusion, but the Bajora-Tavan vessels are moving into a tactical wedge formation. We appear to be the focal point of their maneuver."

Wuuten looked to the tactical plot and frowned at this development. "Fools. I knew they could not be trusted." He shook his head in derision. "Never trust a spiritual people, they will always value ideology over alliance."

From the Engineering station came a troubled voice, "Sir, we're experiencing a power disruption in the habitat modules, sections fourteen through nineteen."

Wuuten's ghoulish features darkened with anger, "Betrayal from all quarters seems to be the order of the day." He gestured to his security head. "Dispatch a team to the guest accommodations, I want that Ba'ku and the traitor Gallatin killed immediately!"

Chapter 12

Planet Ba'ku - Dorian Mountains - Bajora-Tavan Attack Ship *Drosov*

As the overloading phaser screamed, Prylar-Captain Bral readied himself to embrace the hereafter. He looked at his crew, holding their firing positions behind what cover they could find, all of them unwilling to abandon either Bral or their ship to flee the coming explosion. His chest swelled with pride at their courage and tenacity.

However, Bral's refusal to capitulate tore at him. Could he let them die this way, sacrificed for his own conceit, simply because he was unwilling to surrender to this woman?

The Little Orb had given him access to Ensign Shanthi's thoughts. Bral had tasted the young man's hopes and fears and found that despite the fact that the information contained in his mind regarding Bajor contradicted nearly everything Bral held sacrosanct; the pryler-captain could not discount it completely.

The mind of an agent sent intentionally to mislead them would have, *should have* contained volumes of misinformation about the supposed liberation of Bajor from the Cardassians. Instead, to Shanthi, matters of Bajoran history and politics were minor footnotes, trivia that were of little importance to the ensign. The man's major interest in the Bajor system was that the Celestial Temple, the 'wormhole' as it was known to non-Bajorans, which apparently connected two points in the galaxy some tens-of-thousands of light-years apart.

Unfortunately, this only made it all the more credible to Bral.

He did not fear death. Every Bajora-Tavan was raised from birth prepared to give their lives as martyrs upon the pyre of Bajor's freedom. However, his death and that of his crew at this time and in this place would not help his people to accomplish that goal. And if Bajor *had* been freed already, in defiance of prophecy, Bral had to know how and why this had come about.

Bral damned his own insatiable curiosity as he raised a hand. "I yield!" he shouted over the weapon's piercing yowl.

Ramirez jammed the toggle down that would bleed the weapon's excess charge into its heat-sink, stopping the overload mere seconds before it would have become irreversible. She dug the weapon's emitter into Bral's neck, "Your word," she breathed savagely in his ear. "Swear on the Prophets that you'll release my people and give them medical care."

"I swear it. Upon the Prophets, upon Sacred Bajor, you have my oath." There was no trace of fear or desperation in the man's voice, only muted resignation. To his men he called, "Free the prisoners and bring them here quickly. Get their doctor her equipment and help her see to their wounded."

USS *Gibraltar* - Ba'ku System - The Briar Patch (Klach D'Kel Brakt)

The *Ru'afu's* first salvo hammered *Gibraltar's* aft shields with such force that the entire ship bucked. Sandhurst was thrown forward against his chair's safety restraints, his surprised exhalation drowned out by a chorus of gasps and grunts from others on the bridge.

"Rear screens holding at seventy-four percent," Tark noted dourly from the Tactical console.

"Return fire, aft torpedoes and phasers," Sandhurst commanded. He watched the aft view on the main screen as a volley of three crimson photons rifled towards the oncoming Son'a battlecruiser. The torpedoes flared ineffectually against the enemy's shields; followed by orange phaser beams raking across *Ru'afu's* forward grid an instant later that proved equally impotent.

At Ops, Juneau struggled to keep her voice even as she announced, "Negligible damage to their shields, Captain."

"Helm, evasive maneuvers." Sandhurst turned around to face Tark. "How long will it take to move our allotment of quantum to the aft launcher?"

The Tellarite continued to fire at the pursuing Son'a as he referenced his board. "The warheads are too unstable for site-to-site transport and transition to the aft magazine will take upwards of five minutes through the internal transfer conduits, sir."

"That's too long," Sandhurst grouched, "We'll have to come about and bring the forward launcher to bear to have any chance of hurting—"

The ship lurched again, the bridge lights flickering as EPS waveguides overloaded somewhere below decks. "*Engineering to bridge, we're in danger of losing the port/aft EPS coupling. We're going to have to put Decks 9 through 15 on auxiliary power until we can affect repairs.*"

Sandhurst frowned and acknowledged the report as he gestured for Ashok to head for Engineering. The relieved looking Bolian rushed for the lift as the captain swiveled around to address the chief petty officer manning Helm. "Chief, forty-five degree down pitch on the bow. Reduce thrust by ten percent. We want to bring them in closer."

'*Closer?*' Pell mouthed the silent question from her station as she monitored a growing number of damage reports filtering in from across the ship.

"We're more maneuverable," he explained. "I have to put some distance between us if we're going to make a dent. In order to do that I have to draw them in, tuck under them, and sprint for it."

Pell risked leaving the relative safety of her seat to step up the command chair, bracing one hand on the safety railing and the other on

Sandhurst's armrest. In a low voice she urged, "We can't fight them."

Sandhurst looked surprised and replied in an equally conspiratorial tone. "We most certainly *can* fight them, Ojana. We'll lose, of course, but we'll go down swinging." He gave her a sharp look. "This *is* what you wanted, isn't it, Commander? Better to die fighting than running?"

Before Pell could muster a reply, Sandhurst called out, "Helm, hard about, one-hundred eighty-degree turn. Execute another forty-five degree down pitch as we come around."

Another jolt sent Pell tumbling against the chair, where Sandhurst grabbed hold of her and held tight as the nearby Engineering station sparked and crackled.

"Aft shields down to thirty-seven percent," Tark advised. "Dorsal shields at eighty-three percent. Continuing phaser fire, all available banks."

"Acknowledged," Sandhurst said calmly as he released his grip on Pell. "Put a full spread of quantums in the forward tubes. Once we come around, I want to give them everything we have." He cast a quick glance back at Tark as he inquired, "Master Chief, what's their forward shield strength?"

The wizened old NCO locked eyes with the captain, communicating the utter hopelessness of their situation wordlessly before uttering, "The Son's regenerative shield strength is at ninety-four percent and climbing."

Bajora-Tavan Attack Ship *Meressa* - Ba'ku System - The Briar Patch (Klach D'Kel Brakt)

The Emissary watched as the Federation starship struggled to elude her attacker. The vessel laid down a flurry of desperate fire that did nothing to dissuade their pursuer. *Gibraltar* pivoted sharply while pitching relative-downward, cutting back under the enormous crescent-shaped battlecruiser which was forced into a laborious loop to continue the chase. *Ru'afu's* shields were peppered with photon impacts from the starship's aft battery as she completed her protracted maneuver.

The prylar-captain of the *Meressa* called back to the Emissary/vadark. "Munificent One, should the Son's vessel acquire an unhampered firing solution on the starship, there is little chance that we could retrieve the Bajoran from onboard before the ship is destroyed."

"Then let us tell the Son's about it. Order our lead ships to target their weapons systems and open fire."

"As you command, Emissary."

Alshain Battle Fleet - Mobile Assembly Station 1 - The Briar Patch (Klach D'Kel Brakt)

The ancient mobile repair and refueling craft of the Exarchate had not been used in generations, so small had become the sphere of territory claimed by the Alshain. This foray into the Klach D'Kel Brakt symbolized the first significant acquisition by the Alshain in well over two centuries. In the space of eight weeks the Exarchate had effectively doubled the size of Alshain controlled space.

The Starforce had broken the back of the Son's dwindling defenses two days earlier along the main front, and the surviving Ellora and Tarlac crewed ships had fled back into the nebula. Now the early Alshain forays into the cloud would be girded by the arrival of a full battle contingent of twenty-six vessels.

The main task force had moved ahead and left a handful of ships fresh from the fight behind to refuel and rearm.

The mobile base lowered its shields to allow a damaged destroyer entry into a repair berth next to a frigate that was being replenished after having unloaded its ordinance on a Tarlac colony only hours earlier. A swarm of automated refurbishment drones surrounded the destroyer, mending its hull and swapping out battered shield generators.

The patrol ships at the assembly station's defense perimeter had not been given a chance to report. Their comms had been jammed in order to preserve the element of surprise.

Without warning, streams of photon and quantum torpedoes issued forth from the surrounding nebula, slamming into the vulnerable assembly station and many of the surrounding warships. *Enterprise*, *Lexington*, *Kumari* and *Zhukov* raced from their hidden positions, slashing through the remaining vessels in a storm of darting phaser beams and flaring torpedo strikes.

Explosions and spinning wreckage filled the viewer as Picard watched the carnage unfold. He reflected that it would be a shame to end his career this way, cashiered out of Starfleet after igniting a war with the Alshain. Nine years earlier Picard himself had removed Captain Benjamin Maxwell from command of the starship *Phoenix* after Maxwell had provoked hostilities with the Cardassian Union. The bitter irony that Picard now found himself in similar circumstances set like a dead weight in the center of Jean-Luc's stomach.

A handful of surviving Alshain war-craft made a break for it, racing for the nearest gas tendrils in a desperate bid to flee the ambush. Having anticipated just such a tactic, Picard had positioned the *Lakota* and *Progress* to cut off any such escape attempt. The starships' withering fire turned the would-be escapees into scorched hulks drifting in the constant and uncaring hand of inertia.

Data summarized the ensuing destruction with mechanical precision, "One cruiser, one destroyer, four frigates, three scout ships and one mobile logistics platform destroyed, Captain." He refrained from looking back at the ashen-faced Picard as he added, "Sensors indicate fourteen escape vehicles in the vicinity, sir."

"Fourteen," Picard echoed numbly. He cleared his throat. "Make arrangements for the *Bethesda* and *Lexington* to pick up survivors, Data." He

turned slowly to look at Riker and Captain T'Agdi as he swallowed his discomfort. "Captain, Number One, let's move to the observation lounge and select the next target package."

Ba'ku System - The Briar Patch (Klach D'Kel Brakt)

The two nearest Bajora-Tavan ships opened fire on the Son'a with a fusillade of photons, plasma canons, and phaser fire, illuminating the *Ru'afu's* starboard shields with a dazzling display of aggression. The Son'a answered in kind, their dorsal weapons emplacements disgorging an onslaught that sent both corsairs reeling away, their shields overpowered by the battlecruiser's firepower. *Ru'afu* then turned her attention back towards her quarry, only to find *Gibraltar* had gone on the offensive and was bearing down on them.

Son'a Battlecruiser *Ru'afu* - Ba'ku System - The Briar Patch (Klach D'Kel Brakt)

The Tarlac-led security team raced through the corridors towards Anij and Gallatin's guest cabin. As they rounded the corner to their destination their movements became inexplicably impeded. It was like struggling through solidified air, and the alarmed guards began trying to activate their comms, only to find them inoperative when their hands finally managed to reach them.

Then the lights failed.

Adhar Wuuten fumed as the *Ru'afu's* disruptors hiccupped and stuttered, delivering only a fraction of their rated firepower on the starship. "What's causing that?" he screamed in frustration.

"Our targeting sensors are now being affected by the power failures, sir. It's acting like a cascading systems collapse, but it doesn't seem to be slowed by firewalls or anti-invasive subrout—"

"*Make it stop!*" Wuuten shrieked.

Like an inexorable tide, the temporal field moved ever outward, causing system after system to falter. It was as if the entire ship were being placed in stasis, and it was happening right on the cusp of Wuuten's victory.

USS *Gibraltar* - Ba'ku System - The Briar Patch (Klach D'Kel Brakt)

"Master Chief, fire at will," Sandhurst said, his voice harboring an unaccustomed edge. "Indulge yourself."

"Aye, sir," the Tellarite said as he unloaded a barrage of quantum torpedoes and phaser fire at the oncoming ship.

Ru'afu answered with a salvo of her own. One of her disruptor cannons managed to punch through *Gibraltar's* faltering forward screens and scorched across the top of the saucer.

"Structural damage to sections 12-Bravo through 8-Delta, saucer starboard/dorsal section. Hull breach reported on Deck—"

Tark shouted over Juneau's damage assessment, "Their forward shields are down to fifty-eight percent, sir. I think that's the best we're going to do."

"Two photons followed by our last two quantums, Master Chief."

Gibraltar launched a final forward volley as the smaller vessel ducked under its much larger adversary. As the two ships swept past each other, the battlecruiser assailed the *Constitution*-class with a succession of disruptor blasts that savaged her dorsal shields and sent a cloud of fractured hull plating spinning into the vacuum behind the ship like a trail of confetti.

Alarms howled on *Gibraltar's* bridge, and the normal lighting scheme had been abandoned in favor of red emergency illumination. Caustic smoke began to belch from a sizzling console while other workstations flickered randomly as power systems and isolinear computer functions struggled to reroute command and control priorities.

Someone had collapsed at the base of Sandhurst's chair, and amidst the bedlam the captain casually leaned over to check for a pulse, his mind racing with various tactical permutations. The inert form belonged to Tark, whose weak, thready pulse and terribly burned hands and forearms announced the demise of the stand-alone Tactical station behind the captain's chair.

Sandhurst began to retract his safety harness when he saw Pell move up out of the well and take a seat at the auxiliary Tactical console. "I've got it," she said. Some detached part of Sandhurst's mind bemoaned that he would not have the opportunity to personally throw a few last torpedoes at his killers before the end came.

"Get a stabilizer clamp on that conduit now!" Lieutenant Ashok was imposing enough already given his sheer size, but in the middle of the chaotic engine room bellowing orders he was positively fearsome.

Repair crews scurried throughout the adjoining compartments and scrambled to patch up the ship's flagging systems even as the old girl continued to absorb more damage at the hands of the Son'a juggernaut.

"We're losing flow pressure in the main reactor!" shouted one of Ashok's specialists, who was monitoring the matter/anti-matter reaction chamber as she struggled to don a radiation-hardened bodysuit.

"Open the injectors another fifteen percent," he ordered tersely. "Keep the pressure at a minimum of twenty-four kilopascals."

"Dorsal and aft shields collapsing!" This from another engineer manning the master situation board. "Shield generators are overloading in sequen--"

Ashok felt very much like a firefighter from ages past as he sprinted across the trembling deck plates to cut the man off mid-sentence. "Shields won't save us now. You're just soaking fried generators with power needed to reinforce the structural integrity grid."

"But, sir, the captain want—"

He grabbed the young field specialist by the back of his collar. Ashok shook him to dissuade that line of reasoning. "You let the captain fight the ship, Delski. Our concern is keeping her in one piece." He lifted the man off his feet like a kitten carried by its scruff and eyed him intently. "My point is clear?"

"V- very," Delski stammered.

Ashok let him go as someone else cried out, "Coolant line breach, Deck 8!"

Dr. Murakawa had never expected to meet her fate like this. She had always assumed that if she died in the line of duty, it would be serving aboard her beloved *Sutherland* with her friends and crewmates surrounding her. Instead, she was on an outdated escort locked in combat with an alien battlewagon.

Medical technicians and nurses flooded out of Sickbay in response to the first wave of casualty reports. Murakawa remained behind with the others, preparing for a mass-casualty scenario. Fortunately, the ship had been well stocked for this relief mission, though none had known at the time that their own personnel would end up being the beneficiaries.

It was not that she did not trust the ship's captain, or that *Gibraltar's* crew was lacking in some regard. These things happened in Starfleet after all. Starships were damaged, destroyed, or went missing with harrowing regularity, even in peacetime. Theirs was a dangerous occupation.

It was more that she had always relied on Captain Shelby to see her crew safely through whatever danger they had encountered. She didn't know this captain, and it seemed perfectly reasonable to expect that the man might have gotten in over his head.

Regardless, Murakawa had a job to do. Injured crew began to filter in, either carried on gurneys by medical teams or limping in supported by their crewmates. She began to scan the presumably broken arm of a young enlisted woman when the ship jolted from another weapons impact.

"*WARNING: Hull breach on Deck 6 port/aft,*" the computer announced, followed by Juneau's voice from the bridge. "*Containment fields in place and holding. Damage control and medical teams report to corridor intersection 6-Y.*"

Without looking up, Murakawa raised her voice, "Yoichi and Frobrim, get some pressure suits on and get down there. Expect explosive decompression injuries."

The hum of a site-to-site transporter beam became evident at the same time as the intercom blared, *Security to Sickbay, one critical injury incoming via transporter.*"

As she was buffeted by yet another shock, Murakawa mused darkly, '*At least it's not another boring day at the office.*'

Alshain Heavy Cruiser *Venska* - Running cloaked within the Ba'ku System - The Briar Patch (Klach D'Kel Brakt)

Sutahr R'Voss and Captain Yejokk watched the ferocious dance between the starship and the battlecruiser. They noted that the phalanx of smaller ships was now coming in range of the Son'a vessel.

The sutahr looked to his Klingon counterpart as he asked, "Impressions, Captain? Why would the Bajorans be involved here?" Both of them had heard *Gibraltar's* unanswered hails to the compact, lethal-looking corsairs.

Yejokk held his own counsel for a moment before finally grunting with displeasure. "I cannot say, Sutahr. I am familiar with all known variants of Bajoran spacecraft, but I do not recognize these ships."

R'Voss inspected the Klingon's posture and expression. "It does not trouble you to watch your allies being torn apart by the Son'a?"

Yejokk laughed gruffly and sneered. "They are Martok's allies, not mine. The people who provided you this cloaking device believe, as do I, that the Federation must be tamed."

"You wish to see them destroyed?"

"No," Yejokk replied, "That would not serve our goals." His pulse quickened with the battle's approaching conclusion and Yejokk gripped the handle of his *d'k tahg*. "The Federation is too vast for the Empire to easily occupy and control, and its collapse would create economic and political chaos for decades. No, we seek only to see the Federation humbled and its expansion halted."

On the screen the starship was making another turn, coming about on what the spectators guessed would be her final attack run. Glittering

ribbons of leaking atmosphere and radiation trailed the wounded vessel.

The *Ru'afu* loosed another salvo, but it was immediately apparent that something was amiss. The bolts of energy swam free of their emitters with a sluggish torpor, the power contained in the deadly blasts dissipating before they could strike the Federation ship.

Yejokk frowned. "That is... unusual."

"Just so," agreed R'Voss.

"Sutahr, sensors indicate the Son'a shields are collapsing."

Bajora-Tavan Attack Ship *Meressa* - Ba'ku System - The Briar Patch (Klach D'Kel Brakt)

The Emissary leaned forward in his uncomfortably cramped jump-seat to look on with satisfaction as the shield strength on the *Ru'afu* began to wane.

"Split our force, Prylar-Captain. Our ship and two others will recover the Bajoran from the Federation craft. The other five will teach the Son'a some much needed humility."

The captain made the appropriate adjustments to their attack plan, utilizing the Emissary's command override to instantly rally the other vessels in their flotilla.

USS *Gibraltar*

Sandhurst snugged the emergency rebreather mask to his face as his watering eyes stung from the pungent chemical-laced smoke that filled the bridge. Most of the consoles were dead, and the few crew still uninjured were trying to configure those workstations to take the place of the inoperative ones.

Her voice distorted by her own mask, Juneau said, "Captain, the Son'a ship has ceased fire and is moving away. They appear to have come under attack from the Bajorans." She coughed, waving her hand to disperse the drifting smoke above her terminal. "I'm also reading three Bajoran ships on approach with us." She gave the captain a frustrated shrug as she noted with a hint of finality, "Our shields are still down."

Plazzi looked up from where he lay beneath the Science station, attempting to bring that console back to life. "This was your plan? Fly in circles until the enemy gets so frustrated they starting shooting at each other?"

Sandhurst looked down at the older scientist to direct a wry smile at Plazzi from behind his mask. "Innovative, no?" To Juneau he said, "Hail the Bajorans, tell them we appreciate their assistance, and we are formally reques—"

"They're scanning the bridge, sir." Juneau squinted at her readings, "It... it looks like they're attempting a transporter lock."

Sandhurst puzzled that over for the briefest of moments before his eyes were drawn to Pell. She was kneeling over Tark, helping a med-tech apply derma-seal spray to the Tellarite's burns.

Suddenly, he tapped his combadge and shouted, "Security team to the bridge." He then gestured at Pell to back away from the fallen security NCO. Pell appeared perplexed but complied nonetheless.

"Computer, erect a level ten containment field around Lt. Commander Pell."

A bluish cylinder of energy snapped into existence around Ojana. The Bajoran woman stood, giving Sandhurst an expression equal measures concern and confusion.

There was a brief flash of ionization as a transporter beam tried to grab hold of Pell and was rebuffed by the containment field.

"Grab phasers people, we're about to be boarded." Sandhurst moved to the empty Helm console, reaching beneath it to procure the hand phaser stored there. He called to Engineering and the captain urged, "Ashok, we need to get the shields back up. Nothing fancy, just enough to prevent transporter function."

Ashok sounded regretful as he replied over the static filled comm, *We're attempting to restore shield function right now, sir. I can't give you even partial coverage for another half-hour... twenty minutes at the soonest.*

On the verge of castigating the engineer for something beyond his control, Sandhurst instead brought his phaser up as multiple fields of purple energy began to coalesce into Bajoran soldiers. "Nevermind," he murmured absently as he severed the com-link.

Interlude

Captain Sintina Aurelia sat brooding in the command chair of her mighty *Interceptor*-class assault cruiser, which despite all its ferocity was sitting idle, parked in orbit above the capitol arcology of the Alshain Exarchate.

'*Evacuation detail,*' she thought sourly. '*There's a war just started, and I'm babysitting the Federation Embassy to the Alshain.*' It was an undeniably important assignment, made more so by the fact that less than twenty-four hours earlier both the Federation and the Alshain became aware that they were embroiled in a shooting war within the Briar Patch.

Thus far both sides had avoided spreading the hostilities outside the confines of the nebula, but rumor had it that while Starfleet was cobbling together a second flotilla from the depleted assets along the border to reinforce Task Force Peacekeeper, the Alshain were blockading the Nedric Strait, the most oft-traveled corridor into the interior of the Klach D'Kel Brakt.

Due to the exhausted Starfleet presence along the border, any one of several Federation colonies as well as three full-fledged member worlds might provide ripe targets for any potential Alshain reprisals. Once the second task force was underway, it was doubtful that Starfleet could field sufficient forces to successfully intercept an Alshain penetration into Federation territory. Starfleet Command had ordered a fleet-wide yellow alert for the first time since the end of the Dominion War and was drawing assets away from other theaters to bolster their numbers along the turbulent border region.

Independence had been dispatched to Alshain Proper in the heart of the Exarchate days earlier at high warp as an insurance policy against the Federation Embassy coming under attack by the presumably vindictive Alshain. Though experts like Admiral Covey had argued that the ruling class of the Exarchate would rather perish *en mass* rather than suffer the loss of face associated with an attack on a foreign power's embassy on their homeworld, Starfleet Command had insisted on sending Aurelia and her crew to ensure the safety of their diplomatic personnel on the surface.

'*We should be leading the mission to rescue Picard's task force,*' Aurelia fumed, trying to keep her attention on the task at hand. Currently her XO, Lt. Commander Windslow, was planet-side helping to fortify the embassy's defenses. Portable shield emitters, phaser emplacements, and tactical drones were just a few of the surprises in store for any unfortunate Alshain troops that might try to storm the compound.

Aurelia knew that should the worst-case scenario occur, *Independence* had the punch necessary to keep Alshain forces in disarray long enough to evacuate a besieged embassy, as well as the legs to outrun any subsequent pursuit by the lupanoid's Starforce. Nonetheless, she felt as the commander of one of Starfleet's most tactically formidable ships that she should have been in the thick of things.

'*It's almost enough to make me wish the furballs would actually try something,*' she mused darkly, watching the sunlight glint off the cluster of enormous arcologies on the planet's eastern continent.

Chapter 14

USS *Gibraltar* - Ba'ku System - The Briar Patch (Klach D'Kel Brakt)

Sandhurst triggered his phaser before the Bajoran in his sights had fully materialized. As the man regained cohesion, the beam-in-progress caught him in his armored breastplate and launched him into the bridge's safety railing with a loud crack of high-impact ceramic on metal.

From his crouched position behind his workstation's chair, Plazzi directed a stun beam at another of the intruders. The discharge refracted harmlessly off the soldier's armor as another of the Bajorans leveled his rifle to send a series of rapid energy pulses into the older scientist. Plazzi collapsed in a tangle of limbs beneath his console.

Phaser beams and disruptor bolts crisscrossed the bridge in a brief yet telling tempest of violence. The default setting for Starfleet phasers was low-yield stun. Most of the valiant crew who attempted to forestall the attack were given no opportunity to raise their power settings, and the few shots they managed to land on the enemy proved ineffective.

At Ops, Olivia Juneau fought with unexpected tenacity. She blasted one of the attackers off his feet with a heavy-stun beam from her phaser while simultaneously tripping another of them with an extended leg. Her efforts were for naught, however, as the intruder who had eliminated Plazzi as a threat turned his disruptor on Juneau.

Sandhurst was felled by a grazing disruptor pulse to his shoulder, followed by a savage kick to his sternum by a heavily booted foot. He fell backwards and came to rest in an awkward sitting position against the base of a console. His head lolled as he witnessed his crew being overwhelmed by this unexpected enemy. In less than thirty seconds, it was over.

Pell watched the attack unfold from within the containment field, helpless to assist her comrades. She called out, trying to order the computer to establish containment fields around the boarding party, but the ship stubbornly refused to acknowledge her commands from inside the barrier.

The Bajora-Tava moved quickly to secure the turbolifts and prevent additional personnel from reaching the bridge. As two scions spot-welded the lift doors with their rifles, the lead soldier took aim at the overhead emitter in the center of the ceiling. He increased his disruptor to maximum and blasted the device, causing the forcefield surrounding Pell to vanish. She resisted briefly, kicking at the first of the intruders to approach her, but her boot connected harmlessly with his armored thigh and the man cuffed her across the face with the back of a hand sheathed in a weighted tactical glove.

Picking up the female Starfleet officer in his arms, the Bajoran nodded to the team leader, who initiated the transport cycle for the entire team. Purple columns of energy enveloped them.

Sandhurst struggled to rise as he clutched at his aching chest. The responding security team in the turbo-car fought to force the welded doors open. The captain raised an outstretched hand towards the vanishing figure of Pell Ojana, held in the clutches of her erstwhile countrymen. Sandhurst added another name to the list of people he had sworn to recover from the events of this dark day.

USS *Sutherland* - Starfleet Covert Monitoring Outpost Zed-74 - 5 Lightyears from the Federation/Alshain border

Captain Elizabeth Shelby's desk wasn't big enough for the job, so the tabletop in the *Sutherland's* observation lounge was now littered with padds of various sizes. Unexpectedly, Shelby had been tapped by Command to lead the relief mission into the Briar Patch in order to discover what had happened between Picard's Task Force Peacekeeper and the Alshain Exarchate that had brought the two powers to the brink of war.

'*Either my stock's gone up with the brass or they're looking for a fall guy.*' She paused on the cusp of taking another swig of lukewarm coffee, frowned at the cup, and set it back on the table.

The door behind her swooshed open to admit her new first officer, Commander Sam Lavelle. Like her, Lavelle had also served with Picard aboard the *Enterprise-D* and both officers shared a deep affinity for the senior captain. Sam's time under Jean-Luc's command had come as a junior officer fresh from the academy. Lavelle had assumed the post of executive officer aboard *Sutherland* six months earlier, following the promotion and transfer of Christopher Hobson to his own commission, captain of the starship *Perseus*.

"The *Azetbur* and *Djibouti* have just dropped out of warp, Captain. Once the *Gral* arrives on station, we'll be ready to depart."

Shelby rubbed the back of her neck absently to work out a stress-related kink as she noted dourly, "Nine starships and four runabouts do not a fleet make."

Lavelle smirked as he moved to lean against the edge of the table, facing Shelby. "So, what are we calling this little party?"

Shelby glanced up from the padd she was studying, "Task Force Fulcrum."

Lavelle looked disappointed and inquired innocently, "They didn't like my idea?"

She gave her exec a wry smile. "No, Sam, strangely enough they passed on 'Operation Rescue Frenchy.'"

He sighed, "No sense of adventure, those admirals."

Shelby leaned back in her chair, stretching tiredly as she tossed the padd onto the table. "Oh, their sense of adventure is intact, believe me. The punchline is that once we leave with the task force there'll be no one left to defend this sector against Alshain reprisals."

Lavelle raised an eyebrow and appeared surprised. "You think the Exarchate is that serious? A tussle with a handful of starships inside a nebula is one thing. Charging across the border into Federation space is something else entirely. They'd have to know they couldn't possibly win; they couldn't ever hold on to any territory they managed to grab."

As she took a deep breath, Shelby tried to will some of the angst from her weary body. "That wouldn't be the point, Sam. Clobber a few Federation colonies and rattle a couple of member planets, and they'll have more than made their point. For the Alshain, this is more about saving face than challenging the Federation. We *did* go mucking about in their business uninvited, you know."

"You don't think we had cause, Betts? Those bastards were butchering their neighbors and wiping the blood from their hands all over the Federation's good name." Lavelle moved to stand behind her, kneading her shoulders with practiced hands that elicited an appreciative groan.

"Listen, Sammy," she said, returning the exchange of nicknames. "I'd have been delighted to watch the Alshain/Son'a war unfold on a tactical plot map with a bowl of popcorn at my side. However, I don't believe Federation lives need to be expended to blunt their mutual animosity."

"Hey," Lavelle chided gently, "Captain Picard went in there to talk and to save lives. If someone started shooting, you can be certain he wasn't the first one to pull the trigger."

She reached up to place her hand over one of his. "Tell that to the families of the dead, Sam."

He took her hand in his and gave it a little squeeze. "You're worried about Denise, aren't you?"

Shelby nodded slowly, "She's right in the thick of it."

The voice of Sito Jaxa, *Sutherland's* newly appointed Chief Tactical officer, intruded upon their quiet moment. "*Sito to Shelby. Intel's got an update on the Alshain blockade forming up at the Nedric Strait, Captain.*"

She tapped her communicator and Shelby said, "Let's have it, Jaxa."

"Apparently, we're expected and they're laying out their finest dinner service for us."

"Meaning?"

"A minefield, sir."

Planet Ba'ku - Dorian Mountains - Bajora-Tavan Attack Ship *Drosov*

Surgery of this sort would be difficult under ideal circumstances, but Issara Taiee's present situation was anything but. The medical bay of the Bajora-Tavan attack ship was small and under equipped, and her counterpart from the ship's crew was unfamiliar with anything other than Bajoran physiology.

Nevertheless, Taiee endeavored to treat Lar'ragos' potentially terminal wounds, using every piece of equipment she could find in her medical kit, as well as a few of the less primitive looking instruments on the Bajoran's surgical trays. Fortunately, this was not the first time she'd treated the El-Aurian, a man whose body seemed a roadmap of old scars and injuries spanning multiple centuries.

With the Bajoran medic laboring as her assistant, Taiee set to work, her hands wrist deep in Lar'ragos' innards as she fought to stem the bleeding that would kill him in minutes if not stopped.

Just outside the medical bay, Ramirez coaxed a dizzy and irritable Brett Lightner to his feet, following a brief exam by the crew's assistant medic. He touched the sizeable knot on the back of his head and grouched, "Why is it I always get hit in the head?"

Ramirez gave the ensign a condescending smirk, "You'd rather they aim for something vital?" She turned to face Prylar-Captain Bral as she moved to the Bajora-Tavan leader's side. "So, where do we go from here?"

He appeared wholly uncomfortable with the idea, but Bral nonetheless replied, "That is up to you, Commander. We are, after all, *your* prisoners." Bral's entire crew was arrayed in the corridor, stripped of their weapons by Ramirez's reconstituted away team. She had to admit that she was not entirely comfortable allowing her people, who'd just been the Bajorans' prisoners, to now be placed in charge of those very same captors. Ensign Shanthi, in particular, seemed a bit too pleased to be leveling a rifle at the Soldiers of Light. Ramirez hadn't the time as yet to assess the psychological state of her people.

She sized up the man across from her as she came to a difficult decision. Reluctant prisoners were of little use to her. If they were to survive this mission and return to Federation space intact, they'd need something more substantive.

Ramirez reached into her tactical vest to withdraw Bral's sidearm. She turned the weapon around so that it was pointing at her and offered it back to the man. "Prisoners aren't what I need, Prylar-Captain. Allies are. Will you stand with us to rescue the Ba'ku and Son'a from the Alshain?"

Bral eyed the weapon suspiciously as he tried to divine the woman's true intent. Was this a trap? Would taking the disruptor constitute provocation for Ramirez to execute him and his crew? Everything he had learned of these people through his observation and interrogations of their landing party led him to believe that their intentions were not only honorable, but their goals were especially compatible with his own.

The prylar-captain began to extend his hand, only to have it stayed by a sharp cry of, "No!" Bral's head whipped around to find Kuenre Shanthi, the young Starfleet ensign, aiming a Bajoran rifle at Bral's head.

“Ensign, stand down!” Ramirez ordered, a sense of dread knifing into her gut.

“No, Commander!” Shanthi’s eyes were open wide and filled with a mix of fear and righteous anger. “You can’t ally us with these people. You don’t know what he did to us... to *me!*”

Ramirez turned to scrutinize the Bajora-Tavan. “What’s he talking about, Prylar-Captain?” The commander shifted her gaze slightly to the left, making brief eye contact with Saihra Dunleavy, punctuating the gesture with a barely perceptible nod.

For his part, Bral met Ramirez’s eyes unflinchingly. “To determine your origin and intentions, I interrogated five members of your crew utilizing the Most Holy Hand of the Prophets, an apportioned shard of the Celestial Orb of Transcendence.”

Her features tightened with controlled rage. Ramirez whispered dangerously, “I’m not familiar with that technique. Would you care to explain?”

Bral elaborated without a hint of shame. “The Orb gave me access to their thoughts, their innermost hopes and fears. Through them I was able to determine that your people were indeed not a threat to the Bajora-Tava or our goals. It had been my intention to release your crew, and I would have done so had your attack on my ship not intervened.”

On the verge of chastising Bral for his actions, Ramirez suddenly remembered the isolar chip she carried in the pocket of her tactical vest. The chip contained the location of the young man Lar’ragos had likely visited agonies upon to learn the purpose and whereabouts of the Bajorans. She sighed inwardly, *‘Both sides have suffered at the hands of one another. Both are equally guilty of committing sentient rights violations.’*

Ramirez looked again to Shanthi. “I’m sorry for what you were forced to endure, Ensign. This isn’t the academy anymore; this is the real universe. Out here, no matter how hard we try to avoid it, people get hurt. This time it was you.” She kept her eyes focused on Shanthi as Dunleavy slowly brought her phaser up, muting the weapon’s interface and setting it for stun.

“However,” the exec continued, “I am not willing to throw away a chance at peace with these people because of what happened to you.” She fixed his agonized gaze with her own as she radiated strength and assuredness. “I’ll see to it that you get whatever help you need to get past this, Kuenre, but if you don’t drop that weapon I can’t help you.”

Dunleavy leveled her phaser at the ensign’s back, prepared to fire if the young man sought to continue the cycle of violence. Fortunately, the weapon fell from his grasp as his face crumbled, and he turned and bolted out the airlock hatch to the outside with Dunleavy hot on his heels at Ramirez’s urging.

Ramirez turned back to Bral, her features creased with a frown. “I won’t apologize for the ensign’s actions, Prylar-Captain. You brought this on yourself.” She stopped his reply with the upheld iso-chip. “If we are to cement this alliance, you should know that we have behaved no better. You and I need to go and collect one of your men.”

Alshain Heavy Cruiser *Venska* - Running cloaked within the Ba’ku System - The Briar Patch (Klach D’Kel Brakt)

Captain Yejokk of Qo’noS spoke softly, a tone with which he was unaccustomed, most especially when aboard a ship preparing for battle. “Is this wise?”

The deep braying of Alshain alert klaxons drown out the Klingon’s words to all but their intended recipient, Sutahr R’Voss. The lupanoid shipmaster looked askance at his guest, “A Klingon is asking *me* if attack is the proper course of action? Two of our enemies lay prostrate before us, their ships helpless and without power. Their one-time allies, the same Bajoran mercenaries who attacked and wrecked the battlecruiser of my cousin R’Vor, also sit before us, completely unaware of our presence.” The sutahr’s disbelief radiated clearly, even through his non-humanoid features. “If I attack now, I will slay Son’a, Federation, and Bajoran alike. Normally, I would need a squadron of ships to achieve such a marked victory, but today I can accomplish the same feat with but one vessel.”

Yejokk, ever the swordsman, parried the Alshain’s verbal thrust easily. “You have collected valuable intelligence on your enemies this day, Sutahr. As you say, they are unaware of your presence. They are also unaware that the Alshain possess a cloaked warship. Should just one of those Bajoran ships escape following our attack, Klingon complicity in this endeavor will be evident. Like you, the warrior in me screams to attack, but the soldier in me urges caution.”

R’Voss snarled, “Is your people’s empire the result of your *caution*, or your *daring*?”

Yejokk refused to be baited and replied evenly, “An empire over ten times the size of the Exarchate, Sutahr. An empire that took the Klach D’Kel Brakt from your people in battle when your Starforce outnumbered our early navies three-to-one. The warriors of Qo’noS know well the difference between daring and recklessness.” To underscore his point, Yejokk quoted an aphorism once uttered by Kahless himself, “Only a fool sacrifices the chance to win a war for the opportunity to claim victory in but a single battle.”

As his eyes narrowed and his ears pinned back in annoyance, R’Voss grumbled, “You have had your say, Klingon. Your words are well spoken, but I choose to taste victory in the here and now.”

Yejokk folded his arms across his chest and made peace with that fact. “Unsheathe your blade and let the contest begin. *Qapla!*”

R’Voss seated himself in his command chair as he ordered, “Ready disruptors and exciser cannons, standby swarm-missiles and torpedoes. Prepare to drop the cloaking field.”

USS *Enterprise* - Federation Task Force Peacekeeper - The Briar Patch (Klach D'Kel Brakt)

The sneak attack on the Alshain supply convoy had been a success and had netted four warships destroyed along with eight cargo carriers heavily laden with war materiel. More troubling was the inexplicable disappearance of the starship *Zhukov*, which had been assigned to scout for Alshain reconnaissance units moving in advance of the convoy.

Picard had divided the remaining starships into groups of three, dispatching them on overlapping search patterns in an effort to locate the wayward vessel.

N'Saba had been busy studying some irregularities he had discovered in the manifests of the stricken Alshain cargo ships. The science officer had identified a substantial number of previously unknown components of Alshain manufacture that did not appear to be related to that species' known technology. Loath as he was to admit it, N'Saba would require assistance to solve this mystery. He could let it go, of course, simply not mention this irregularity to his superiors to avoid having to confess his ignorance. But whatever else Seb N'Saba was, he was a Starfleet officer. The same Alshain genetics and upbringing that often made him insufferably haughty also instilled in him a sense of duty to his cohort, his Sept, his crew.

He turned in his seat to address Data at Ops. "Commander, may I have a moment's consultation with you?"

Data stood from his workstation and approached, leaning in to examine the lupanoid officer's console. "How may I be of assistance, Mister N'Saba?"

N'Saba quickly outlined his conundrum, not sure if the android would dismiss his concerns out of hand. He still had little experience with this particular ship and crew, and as close-knit as they appeared, he'd feared he would not be accepted as anything but an interloper for the duration of this assignment. To his surprise, however, Data immediately understood the nature of the science officer's apprehension.

Data took a seat at the auxiliary station beside the Sciences console as he set about scanning through a series of technical schematics with such speed that N'Saba had to briefly look away from the display. "Computer," Data instructed, "Display technological artifact D723-44N and graphically separate into individual components." The computer completed the requested function, and a spherical object on the screen divided into pieces. Data then rotated the highlighted segment until it matched the configuration of the component N'Saba had detected aboard the Alshain cargo ships.

The android's brow furrowed with worry lines, "I have identified the device in question, Commander N'Saba. Having done so, I am now experiencing the unique emotional state of wishing I had not."

N'Saba frowned, his ears twitching with restrained curiosity.

"Captain Picard," Data spoke into his combadge, "your presence is requested on the bridge."

They found her six hours later, adrift in an eddy of nebular gases, surrounded by the asteroidal debris of a long-ago shattered moon. It appeared that *Zhukov* had fled here, presumably trying to hide from pursuers. The scorch marks on her superstructure attested to a fight, but there were no hull breaches, no internal damage to explain the absence of life signs aboard.

A more detailed analysis showed much higher radiation levels than normal on the *Ambassador*-class vessel. The ship's structure had absorbed a mega-dose of radiation from an unknown source, killing all aboard. It took the senior staff of the *Enterprise* only a few minutes to piece together the puzzle.

The fully assembled devices, whose components N'Saba had scanned aboard the Alshain cargo ships, were littered throughout the planetary rubble in this quiet corner of the Briar Patch. The acetone assimilators hidden among the asteroids had drained *Zhukov's* power and used the ship's own energy to bombard the vessel with fatal amounts of radiation. Data estimated the ship's already depleted shields had held out for a little over an hour before falling to the assimilators' onslaught. Lethal exposure occurred within minutes.

Picard stood and stared at the sight of the dead ship on the viewer. He turned to examine the tall, lupine science officer and held tight the reins of his emotional control as he asked, "How is this possible, Commander? Prior to today, only a single space vessel in the last thousand years has fallen victim to this Menthar tactic... mine."

N'Saba was calm, despite the inflammatory nature of the accusation. "If you are implying, sir, that I leaked information regarding this kind of booby trap to the Alshain Starforce, that is not the case."

Riker rose to his feet, fists clenched, and moved to stand beside Picard. "Then explain this, Mister N'Saba."

N'Saba looked at both men in near disbelief. "I'm rather shocked that you don't know, sirs. The Alshain Exarchate fought three separate conflicts with the Menthar Ascendancy over a span of four centuries. Dozens of Starforce vessels were lost to similar circumstances during that period." The scientist rose to his full, formidable height, his countenance proud and defiant. "But if it is easier to blame me for the results of your hubris, so be it."

A glowering Riker moved toward N'Saba but was stopped by a firm hand from Picard on his arm. "Mister Data, can you verify this historical account?"

After a brief pause as Data accessed his neural net, the android replied, "I can, sir. Millennia before mutually annihilating both themselves and the Promellians at Orelus IX, the Menthars did in fact engage the Exarchate in a number of prolonged territorial conflicts, Captain."

Picard's jaw worked furiously, "You have my sincerest apologies, Commander. It was inappropriate for me to have jumped to an unwarranted conclusion." He abruptly turned to look at Data and the captain inquired, "Our encounter with these devices and our escape technique were on

file in *Zhukov's* database. Why didn't they simply duplicate our maneuver?"

Data consulted his readouts. "The design of the trap has been modified with the addition of tractor field emitters, sir. It appears the *Zhukov* was forcibly held in place to prevent escape using the ship's maneuvering thrusters."

Picard set his shoulders as he drank in the image of the stricken starship, committing every line and curve of the vessel to memory as he issued a silent prayer in honor of the over six-hundred dead contained within her hull. "May I assume that there is no viable way of salvaging her?"

"No, sir," Data replied, sounding suitably regretful. "Any vessel entering the assimilators' perimeter would suffer an identical fate."

"Very well," Picard replied. "Arm photon torpedoes, and lock target on the *Zhukov*." The captain moved to the Tactical station, gesturing for the lieutenant manning the console to step aside. "This is my responsibility." He paused before launching the missiles towards their sister ship. Picard inclined his head towards Riker. "Once we've finished here, set course for the Ba'ku system, Commander. *Gibraltar* is overdue."

Chapter 15

USS *Gibraltar* - Ba'ku System - The Briar Patch (Klach D'Kel Brakt)

“Ashok,” Sandhurst practically gasped from the captain’s chair as the med-tech attended to his cracked sternum. “What’s our status?”

The Bolian’s report from Engineering was typically succinct. “*It’s bad, sir, but it could be worse. The mains are offline, but we’ll have restored warp power in the next forty-five minutes. The impulse manifolds are another matter. We’re going to have to swap out some major components in the impulse drive before we can push the ship any faster than one-eighth impulse speed, Captain.*”

Sandhurst glanced over his shoulder at the master systems board at the back of the bridge with its cutaway cross-section of the ship. He took account of the multiple zones of flashing crimson as he inquired, “And the structural integrity grid, Lieutenant?”

“*With respect, sir, we can worry about shoring up the hull after we’ve re-established main power and our defenses.*”

Sandhurst pushed down the urge to chide the engineer for his bluntness. He realized the man’s assessment and candor were both correct and appropriate. “Acknowledged, Mister Ashok. Bridge, out.”

“Captain...” Juneau looked up from her sensor display at Ops. “I’m reading a tetryon-surge at two-seven-eight-mark-two-four-four.”

The med-tech finished mending Sandhurst’s sternum with a portable ostio-knitter. Sandhurst tilted his head to one side as the medic injected him with a pain-abating analgesic while he queried, “Source?”

Juneau eyed her readings, then shot him a disbelieving look. “Vessel decloaking, Captain. Alshain by configuration, a heavy cruiser!”

He brushed past the medic and Sandhurst made for the unoccupied Helm station.

As her cloaking field dissipated, the *Venska* opened fire on the hapless quarry in her sights. First to fall was one of the Bajoran attack ships, whose shields were already depleted from her brief skirmish with the Son’a battleship. The stout little craft erupted in a blaze of escaping gas and debris as the warship’s exciser cannons and disruptors tore into its superstructure.

The remaining Bajora-Tavan craft reacted with surprising speed, scattering outward and reforming into two-ship hunter/killer pairs. Dozens of torpedoes and plasma bolts, followed by strobing pulses of golden phaser fire crashed against the *Venska*’s shields, as the Army of Light sought to avenge their fallen brethren.

Bajora-Tavan Attack Ship *Meressa* - Ba'ku System - The Briar Patch (Klach D'Kel Brakt)

“Emissary, the recovery team is aboard. They report they have the Bajoran female.”

The Emissary nodded with the vadark’s head, “Excellent.”

An alarm wailed at the weapon’s console as the Alshain warship decloaked and opened fire. “Emissary, we have been engaged by the Alshain. Moving to evade.”

“Have the other ships screen us, Prylar-Captain. Make whatever sacrifices are necessary to ensure our survival and that of our ‘guest.’”

“It shall be done, Emissary.”

The lead ship wheeled around and fled as its fellows ran interference, peppering the heavy cruiser with fire. Unprepared for the ferocity of the Bajorans’ defense, the *Venska* was forced to break off from her attack run on the *Ru’ajo* and *Gibraltar* to fend off the squadron of doggedly persistent attack ships.

USS *Gibraltar* - Ba'ku System - The Briar Patch (Klach D'Kel Brakt)

Sandhurst took the Helm and used the only means of propulsion left to them, the reaction control thrusters. He fired the thrusters on full as he commanded the sluggishly responding starship to dip beneath the larger Son’a battlecruiser, shielding *Gibraltar* from the guns of the oncoming Alshain warship. He knew the tactic would not work for long. Without shields, the destruction of the Son’a battlewagon in such close proximity would spell doom for the starship as well.

He turned to look behind him as he took stock of his remaining crew. Plazzi was unconscious and being attended to by medics, and with the exception of Juneau his other senior staff were either trapped down on the planet or otherwise incapacitated. Sandhurst checked the sensors and ran a quick scan of the Son’a vessel. The battlecruiser was still intact, and whatever had knocked out power aboard the ship was now abating. The captain surmised the Son’a would restore full power in only a matter of minutes.

Sandhurst inclined his head towards Juneau and said, “Lieutenant, you have the Conn.” He stooped to pick up a pair of phasers from the deck, then tapped his combadge. “Captain to Security, I want a heavily armed detachment in transporter room one ASAP, prepared for boarding action.” Another tap, “Sandhurst to transporter room one, beam three stun grenades onto the bridge of the Son’a vessel immediately. Five seconds after they detonate, initiate a site-to-site transport and put me on the bridge of that ship.” As an afterthought, he added, “And put

proximity-fuse stun grenades into the lift cars and adjoining corridors of the Son'a vessel, I don't want anyone interrupting us over there."

Juneau remained at the Ops console as a senior enlisted crewman took over at Helm. She gave Sandhurst an incredulous look, clearly mystified as to his reasoning. He directed a fatalistic smile at the young woman. "*Gibraltar's* out of commission for the moment, so I'm borrowing a bigger ship for a little while. Be prepared to leave at best speed when Ashok gets the impulse engines back online. If you lose contact with me over there, you are to assume I am dead or captured and you are to fall back to the task force, and do *not* attempt a rescue. Your first responsibility is to the crew and the ship. Am I understood?"

She nodded numbly, still processing the unusual order.

Sandhurst's combadge chirped, "*Chief Townsend to the Captain, make ready for transport.*" He extended a phaser in each hand and stood in front of the main viewer as he prepared himself. The transporter field engulfed him...

...Only a single crewman was still moving on the bridge of the *Ru'afu* when Sandhurst materialized. A heavy stun discharge solved that problem. Sandhurst approached the command chair, taking measure of the gruesomely disfigured Son'a *adhar* in charge, now slumped insensate in his chair.

"Thanks for being so accommodating on such short notice, *Adhar.*" He holstered one of his phasers and used his free hand to pull Wuuten out of the chair, dumping him unceremoniously onto the deck. As he took the seat, he pulled a console interface to him and began familiarizing himself with Son'a systems layout.

The hum of an incoming transporter beam presaged the arrival of *Gibraltar's* security team.

Sandhurst greeted the assembled crew without looking up. "Welcome aboard the newly rechristened SS *Bitter Irony*, gentlemen. Please see to our privacy as I attempt to access their intruder control systems."

Son'a Battlecruiser *Ru'afu* -- Ba'ku System - The Briar Patch (Klach D'Kel Brakt)

Anij sank to the deck, the effort of having generated such a large and prolonged temporal inversion had drained her considerably. The cabin lights flickered on as the field-effect withered away, and Gallatin's first thought was of the armed security contingent just outside their quarters, doubtless with orders to kill the both of them.

He struggled past the shuddering pneumatic door as the entrance's circuitry struggled to reassert its control over the hatch. He pounded down the corridor and turned the corner just in time to see the security team still moving at a sluggish pace, obviously disoriented by the experience. As Gallatin approached the first of them and reached for the man's holstered sidearm, neurozine gas began to pour into the passageway.

Bajora-Tavan Attack Ship *Meressa* - The Briar Patch (Klach D'Kel Brakt)

Having fled into the surrounding miasma, the Emissary's ship made good its escape. Now, no longer imperiled by the Son'a or the Alshain, the Emissary had the time and opportunity to thoroughly interrogate the Bajoran Federation officer.

He wielded the energies of the Orb of Transcendence and probed her thoughts, combing through her memories as he mined everything he could regarding the last fifty years of Bajoran history.

What he found dashed eons of hope and decades of careful planning. He withdrew slowly from her mind, easing back the tendrils of his consciousness that had slithered along her neural pathways.

She regained awareness slowly, her eyes finally fluttering open to find him staring at her. "Wha—" Pell sputtered as recently occluded synapses resumed old relationships. "Who are you?"

The Emissary raised a trembling hand as if to study it. "At the moment I reside within Vadark Jobrin Adnai of the Bajora-Tava. As for a name of my own, my true designation is beyond the vadark's vocal capabilities." His eyes glowed amber briefly as he reasserted control over Jobrin's body. The man was a willing vessel, but the physiology of the possessed would on occasion try to expel the Emissary's consciousness of their own accord, like an organism trying to overcome a viral pathogen.

Pell's eyes narrowed. "I know you, demon," she hissed. "*Kosst Amojan!* Deceiver, betrayer, false Prophet, and enemy to the true gods of the Celestial Temple."

He smiled in response, "Yes and no, my child. I did once dwell with the others in the Temple, but I was not cast out like my wicked cousins. I left of my own volition."

Pell was unconvinced, and replied, "More lies from the king of deceit."

"I have no reason to lie to you, child. Indeed, you and the rest of the Bajoran people are the ones who've been betrayed and abused by your so-called Prophets. It was my attempts to help the Bajoran people that resulted in the denizens of the Temple turning their backs on me."

Pell studied him in sullen silence.

The Emissary sighed, "I see your indoctrination in the liturgy has left you unable to consider alternative avenues, Ojana." He leaned forward, tapping a finger to his temple. "Stop reacting like a devout Bajoran for a moment and put to use the keen mind that Starfleet trained you to think objectively with. The species that inhabits the Celestial Temple is both powerful and wise, but we are not gods. The Prophets flatter themselves by encouraging your worship, and all the while they toy with your people's culture, bending your beliefs to fit their whims."

"The Prophets are the protectors of the Bajoran people!" she spat defiantly.

"Oh, really?" he chortled. "Then how do you explain the Cardassian Occupation? The Prophets could have cast the Cardassians out at any time with almost no effort at all. Don't forget, Ojana, when in the Celestial Temple we exist outside the confines of linear time. The fact the occupation would occur was known by the Prophets long before your people were walking upright, but they never warned you, did they? Oh, they alluded to it in vague prophecies, but nowhere did they set a date or instruct you to raise up armies to defend yourselves against their eventual incursion."

Pell shook her head, "Lies! I won't hear this!"

"Deny the truth all you want, child. It won't change the simple facts. The Bajorans have been lied to and manipulated for countless generations. It is the destiny of the Bajora-Tava to end that crime, to correct the sacrilege that has festered among your people for far too long."

"You can't be one of the Prophets, you don't even sound like one of them."

He smiled wistfully. "That's because I've lived among the Bajorans for millennia, Ojana. I was sent from the Temple to walk as a man, to gain a greater understanding of your people and to convey that understanding to the others. At times I jumped from person to person, often simply observing your ways and not interfering. When I finally felt I understood you enough to actually live as one of you, I found a succession of men and women, many of them unrepentant criminals, whose only contribution to your society was inflicting pain and misery on others.

"These people's bodies I used for my own. I married, raised families, and worked as everything from a share-cropper in Rakantha Province to the Most Solemn Kai of the Vedek Assembly. Eventually, the others felt I had become *too* enamored of the Bajoran people, and my desire to protect your people from harm was seen as being blasphemous to their ideology. The gates to the Celestial Temple were forever barred against me, and I have wandered as a disembodied specter ever since."

Pell stared at him, the weight of his words sinking into her soul. "This goes against everything I was ever taught" she said, voice barely above a whisper.

"I know, child, and I'm sorry. When I led the first of the Bajora-Tava away from Bajor only months after the Cardassians' arrival, it had been my intent to forge a holy army capable of wresting Bajor back from Cardassian hands. Now I come to find that the occupation is long over, and the faith of my misguided brothers and sisters has infected every facet of Bajoran society."

"What will you do?" Pell asked fearfully.

"The only thing I can do, child. I will lead the Army of Light back to Bajor and drive out the evil that now resides there."

Tears flowed down Pell's cheeks at the thought of Bajor once again engulfed in turmoil and bloodshed. "Please, don't do this," she begged. "We've only just begun to recover from the depredations of the occupation. Bajor needs peace and stability, not a holy war."

"Bajor needs truth, child," he said heavily. "And if that truth must be accompanied by fire, then so be it."

Planet Ba'ku - Dorian Mountains - Bajora-Tavan Attack Ship *Drosov*

Issara Taiee sat in the corner of the attack ship's tiny operating theater and wept. She was emotionally and physically spent. Three hours of intensive surgery following her capture and interrogation by the Bajora-Tava had tasked her almost beyond imagining.

It had been a near thing. Lar'ragos' injuries had come frighteningly close to overwhelming her capabilities. She had lost count of the number of times she had paused during the procedure, prepared to ask the non-existent EMH its opinion of her handiwork, or to assist at a particularly dicey moment.

Dr. Murakawa had been right. She was far too dependent upon the hologram's abilities and advice, and that dependence had almost cost Pava his life.

She glanced up at the bio-monitors, which showed the El-Aurian's biometrics reading steady and stable. He would survive long enough for more comprehensive follow-on care aboard the starship.

Shuttle *Heyerdahl* - Planet Ba'ku - Dorian Mountains

High mountain peaks loomed over them as Ensign Lightner maneuvered the shuttle towards the mouth of the cave. Crouched near the open rear hatch, Prylar-Captain Bral shook his head in disbelief. "This *other* Emissary is a human? How can that be? How could the Prophets allow such a thing?"

She squat next to him and Liana Ramirez chuckled softly. "You'd have to ask them, Bral. The Prophets apparently selected *him*, and Kai Opaka sanctified his arrival on Bajor seven years ago. It is said that Sisko now dwells with the Prophets in the Celestial Temple."

“Heresy” was Bral’s only comeback.

Now in position, the shuttle turned slowly to allow the joint-Bajoran/Starfleet search and rescue team to offload at the mouth of the same cavern complex that had sheltered the Ba’ku months earlier during the standoff with the Son’a. Other teams were proceeding on foot back up the mountain trail, checking other potential hiding places along that route.

They jumped down off the back of the shuttle, moving in covering fire-teams to the cave mouth. Ramirez shone her beacon-light into the blackness as she shouted, “I’m Commander Ramirez of the Federation Starfleet! We’ve come to rescue survivors of the Alshain attack. We have food and medicine.”

At first there was no response. Then, ever so slowly, figures began to move in the darkness. Shuffling into the light of Ramirez’s beam, a Ba’ku male clutching a small child blinked against the harsh glare as his face registered the onset of the recently unfamiliar emotion of hope.

Alshain Heavy Cruiser *Venska* - Baku System - The Briar Patch (Klach D’Kel Brakt)

R’Voss was jostled in his seat as the cruiser was buffeted by another Bajoran salvo. The attack ships were proving formidable and elusive; large enough to pack a serious punch, yet small enough to make targeting them difficult at close range.

“Shields holding at sixty-three percent, Sutahr,” announced the young oyan manning the secondary tactical post.

Three more of the Bajoran ships had fallen before *Venska*’s torpedoes and exciser cannons, but that still left five to contend with.

Captain Yejokk looked on with frustration as the inexperienced gunners sought to obtain weapons locks on their cagey opponents. He grabbed two handfuls of thick fur and yarded one of the gunners out of his seat, taking the Alshain’s place at the weapons console. “You must use manual targeting,” he snarled, “and allow the reticule to float until you are prepared to target and fire simultaneously.” By way of demonstration, Yejokk locked on to one of the attack ships and sent a flurry of swarm missiles at the nimble vessel, which was rocked by multiple impacts.

As the stricken attack ship tumbled through space out of control, her sister ships broke formation and scattered, following the Emissary’s retreating craft.

The bridge of the *Venska* trembled unexpectedly as a volley of five photon torpedoes and a brace of disruptors hammered her starboard-aft quarter. A sputtering console ignited the fur of one young officer, who was quickly engulfed in flames and began to flail wildly, one of his blazing arms nearly hitting Yejokk at his gunner’s station. In response, the Klingon drew his sidearm and vaporized the howling oyan as he announced, “Starboard-aft shields have failed, Sutahr. That strike came from the Son’a vessel.”

R’Voss let out a low growl from the captain’s chair. “Not so incapacitated as they let on.”

Son’a disruptors lanced into *Venska*’s hull through the gap in her shields, blasting the ship’s forcefield generators all along the port side. The bleating alarms became almost deafening on the bridge, where R’Voss tried to sort out this suddenly catastrophic turn of events.

“Sutahr, all shielding along the port side is gone... and we are being hailed by the Son’a.”

“Ignore them and cloak!” the Sutahr ordered.

“Damage to the shield grid has overloaded the cloaking device, sir.”

R’Voss’ heart sank at this latest news. He hoped to bide some time and he instructed, “On screen.” Yejokk barked out a curse and ducked behind his console as the viewer flickered to life.

It took R’Voss a moment to decipher the image on the viewscreen. Rather than a ghoulish Son’a officer, a human male in a Starfleet uniform sat staring at him from the *adhar*’s seat.

“Good day to you, sir,” Sandhurst offered with mock joviality. “I’ve already accepted the Son’a’s surrender, and I’m prepared to hear yours as well.”

“I’d sooner die, as would my crew,” R’Voss answered fiercely.

Sandhurst shrugged indifferently. “This ends now, or I’ll transport your entire crew into vacuum and take your pretty ship.” He leaned forward, smiling confidently. “I’m gathering quite the collection today as you can see, and I need yours to complete the set.”

R’Voss stalled. “You’re Starfleet, and Starfleet follows guidelines, even in a time of war. Your threats are empty ones.” Without looking, R’Voss used one hand to quickly type a text message to the weapons stations as he maintained eye contact with the human, *Wait until they lower shields to transport and then obliterate them.*

In response, Sandhurst murmured, “Now, Mister Juneau.”

Roughly half the members of *Venska*’s bridge crew vanished in humming transporter fields. Sandhurst cautioned, “You forget, Sutahr, I have *two* ships. I needn’t lower *Ru’afu*’s shields to fulfill my obligations. And I’d urge you to take a good look around. There’s an entire nebula between myself and the rest of Starfleet. What happens in the Briar Patch *stays* in the Briar Patch.” He sat back in his chair, his body visibly knotted with tension. “Oh, and tell that cowering *petaQ* hiding behind the console to stand and show himself.”

At that, Yejokk rose from behind the tactical station and mustered as much dignity as he could under the circumstances. The Klingon’s eyes shot daggers at Sandhurst.

“There now, doesn’t everyone feel better now that everything’s out in the open?” The condescension in Sandhurst’s voice was unmistakable. “Speak, Sutahr. Do I leave your people bouncing around inside my transporter buffers, or do I materialize them in the cold of space?” He added, “You’ll be the one who has to tell their Septs the circumstances under which they died.”

R’Voss stood as unmoving as a statue, his mind racing with calculations of his potential loss in Alshain social standings should he surrender, versus his family’s accrual of prestige should he die honorably in battle. With his cousin R’Vor’s recent defeat, R’Voss’ Sept could absorb no more blemishes.

He clasped his hands behind him and the sutahr bared his menacing teeth. “I will die with my crew, human.”

Yejokk gave the Alshain an approving look as he moved to fire one last fusillade against the Son’a warship.

Sandhurst sighed, “We do this the hard way, then. Juneau, do it!”

Multiple stun grenades took shape upon the *Venska’s* bridge, deposited by transporter. The pulsing flashes of energy permeated every centimeter of the command center, sending its remaining occupants sprawling across seats, consoles, and onto the deck. Simultaneously, the Alshain that had been beamed off the bridge were transported into one of *Gibraltar’s* cargo holds that had been preemptively filled with anesthazine gas.

Within moments, it was over. As his security teams, bolstered by regular *Gibraltar* crew, fanned out aboard the Son’a and Alshain warships to secure both vessels, Sandhurst could scarcely believe their outrageous luck. He had kept expecting the proverbial bottom to fall out from under the audacious plan, but there had been sufficient distractions present that the combatants had virtually ignored the small Federation ship and its crew.

As his adrenaline ebbed, Sandhurst remained in the chair, forcing himself to relax. There was still the matter of Ramirez’s away team, which had been out of contact for over a day, not to mention Pell Ojana’s abduction at the hands of the mysterious Bajoran sect. There was still much to be done.

Chapter 16

Shuttle *Heyerdahl* - Outbound from Planet Ba'ku - Ba'ku System

The Starfleet shuttle and the Bajora-Tavan attack ship *Drosov* raced upwards and away from Ba'ku in tandem. Ramirez glanced back from the cockpit into the passenger compartment, where between the two rows of seated crew Lar'ragos lay atop a litter, his vitals being closely monitored by Taiee.

The rescued Ba'ku villagers were safely ensconced aboard the *Drosov* and the two ships were now venturing into orbit to discover the fate of their comrades, both Bajoran and Starfleet. While Ramirez's landing party had been completely cut off from the *Gibraltar*, Bral's ship had received a garbled transmission from his squadron that suggested a multi-party battle had broken out within the star system.

Ramirez had briefly flirted with the idea of a short reconnaissance hop into orbit to take a look around. She had finally decided with Bral's input that if the system was occupied by enemy forces, it was better to know sooner than later, and that the two craft together might help one another to evade pursuit if they rose to meet a worst-case scenario.

Though skeptical of *Gibraltar's* chances in a major tactical engagement with either the Son'a or Alshain, Ramirez had learned the hard way never to bet against the plucky little ship and her valiant crew.

She opened a channel to the Bajoran craft to contact Bral. "Prylar-Captain, our sensors aren't detecting any signs of your ships."

"We confirm your readings, Commander," Bral replied. "However, we are detecting a Bajoran comms buoy in orbit. Give me a few moments to decode its message."

"Acknowledged, *Drosov*."

"Damn," hissed Lightner as he eyed his sensor readouts. "There's two warships holding position approximately ten au's out from the planet, one Alshain, the other Son'a. They've got *Gibraltar* bracketed, sir."

Ramirez observed the ships with similar dread, but her alarm was short-lived. It became apparent after just a moment's study that none of the ships were maneuvering, let alone firing. A more detailed scan indicated the presence of Federation species aboard both the enemy craft. She barely repressed the uncharacteristic giggle of pure relief that threatened to escape her as she muttered, "I see it, but I don't quite believe it."

Lightner looked over at her display, blinking confusedly at the sensor returns. "We... won?"

She shook her head in disbelief as she assessed, "So it would appear, Ensign."

Her comm-link came to life once again. "*Drosov to Heyerdahl, we have received new orders and must depart immediately. I regret we will have to load the villagers into our escape capsules and jettison them. Please standby to carry out recovery operations.*"

Ramirez looked utterly perplexed as she stammered, "Bral, wait... I don't understand-"

"I am truly sorry, Ramirez, but apparently your people and mine have fought during our absence." Bral sounded genuinely regretful, "I must take evasive action to avoid pursuit by your ship."

"Damn it, Bral, can't we talk about this? *Gibraltar's* in no shape to be pursuing anyo-"

"I have my orders, Commander. I know you understand." The *Drosov* veered sharply away, ejecting life pods as she maneuvered hard. The attack ship arced back towards the planet, undoubtedly intending to use its mass to shield their departure from the starship's battered sensors.

Ramirez pounded her fists against her console in sheer frustration, uttering the most obscene Cardassian invective she could summon.

"Orders, sir?" Lightner asked meekly, clearly not wanting to incur the XO's ire.

She sighed heavily. "Come about and start collecting those escape craft." Ramirez shook her head angrily as she added, "And get me *Gibraltar* on subspace..."

Forty-five minutes later, Ramirez stepped out of the crowded shuttle into a landing bay filled with frenetic activity. Upon their making contact with the ship, *Gibraltar* had scrambled her remaining auxiliary craft, which were helping to tractor in the Bajoran life pods packed with Ba'ku survivors.

Life capsules, work-bee pods, and shuttlecraft littered the hangar deck as crew members rushed to attend to the disoriented and frightened refugees. Ramirez drank in the sight, thankful despite her disappointment with Bral's flight from the system that they had finally accomplished the mission they had set out on two and a half days earlier.

Med-techs moved to assist Taiee and the security team with Lar'ragos, transferring him from the collapsible litter onto an anti-grav gurney and spiriting him away to Sickbay.

Ramirez turned to acknowledge her away team members individually as they disembarked the shuttle, clapping them on the shoulder and offering words of praise and encouragement. Last off was a sullen looking Kuenre Shanthi, who had said almost nothing to anyone since his outburst onboard the *Drosov* the day before. Dunleavy had tried to get the young man to talk, but he stubbornly refused to engage anyone about what he had experienced at the hands of the Bajora-Tava.

She stopped him with a gentle hand around his bicep, and then pulled the much taller man aside. She led him across the bustling shuttlebay deck to a relatively quiet maintenance alcove. Ramirez turned to face him and studied the young man's dark features. "Talk to me, Ensign."

"I have nothing to say, sir," he replied, voice barely above a whisper.

"Kuenre, I promised I'd get you help, and I will. You don't have to do this alone. It was my mission, and I'm responsible for everyone who participated in it. If you want to blame someone, blame me."

He met her gaze with listless eyes, "That ship's already gone to warp, sir."

"Damn it, Ensign, if you won't talk to me then at least speak with *someone*."

He just stared, not blinking, not responding. Ramirez knew she should order him to Sickbay, see to it that he got a full psychological workup. She was at a loss to explain precisely why, but at the moment she couldn't bring herself to push the issue.

On some level Ramirez acknowledged that she had pulled the away team's fat from the proverbial fire with guile and determination, but in the process this young man had been crushed underfoot. His trauma was as much due to her inattention as it was Bral's mind probe.

"Permission to be dismissed, sir?" he croaked lethargically.

She closed her eyes as she released her grip on his arm. "Granted."

USS *Gibraltar* - Ba'ku System - The Briar Patch (Klach D'Kel Brakt)

Sandhurst strode into the brig, his eyes taking a moment to adjust to the reduced lighting levels. He spied their Klingon prisoner sitting defiantly atop a bunk in one holding cell, while the Alshain sutahr occupied another nearby unit. In yet another cell stood *Adhar* Wuuten, glowering at his captors from behind an invisible containment field.

The captain approached the Son'a leader first. "*Adhar*, I realize I've no reason to expect your cooperation, but for the moment you and I have a common antagonist. This Bajoran sect abducted a member of my crew at the same time as they were betraying your alliance." He gave Wuuten his most earnestly reasonable expression. "I'm interested in knowing where their base of operations is located."

Wuuten's venomous stare was accompanied by silence.

Sandhurst shook his head. "Whether you choose to believe it or not, I wasn't lying about the reason behind our mission here. We came to rescue Son'a and Ba'ku survivors of the Alshain invasion. I understand you harbor animosity towards the Federation over the attempted Ba'ku relocation, but none of that changes the fact that your empire is gone, destroyed. You need our help, and we're offering it. We can relocate all of you to any number of uninhabited Federation planets, and give your people a chance to rebuild."

"Live as beggars and refugees at Federation expense?" Wuuten spat. Never."

Sandhurst held his gaze. "What other options are there, *Adhar*? Your military has been routed, your planets occupied, your colonial holdings laid waste. The Son'a Imperium now exists only as historical fact, and if the Alshain have any say in it, perhaps not even as that."

"We will take back what is rightfully ours. A mere handful of us forged an empire out of nothing once before, and we shall do so again."

The captain nodded with resignation and allowed, "Then I wish you well, *Adhar*. Once you've made reparations for the deaths of seven of my crew and spent some time weighing your options in a Federation penal settlement, perhaps our offer will appear more attractive."

Sandhurst moved on, taking up station in front of the Klingon's cell. As he was pondering what he might say to the recalcitrant warrior, Tark approached. The flesh on the backs of the grizzled old Tellarite's hands retained the artificial sheen of synthskin grafts which would soon be replaced by his own healing dermis. "Progress report, Captain."

As he gestured to the specialist manning the security console, Sandhurst had her engage the cells' audio filters, thereby leaving their occupants effectively deaf to outside sounds. "Go ahead, Master Chief."

"We've finished beaming the last of the Alshain prisoners to the surface."

"I take it you found a suitable place for them?"

Tark grinned toothily. "Aye, sir. A remote island, hundreds of kilometers from any other land masses."

"Sounds perfect. They have ample supplies?"

"Yes, sir. Standard Starfleet survival shelters, minus the communications and replicator equipment. They won't be comfortable, but they will be protected from the elements."

"And food?" the captain inquired.

Tark held up a foil packet and snuffled with dark humor. "Starfleet emergency rations, sir. Dr. Murakawa confirmed they should prove nutritionally adequate for our furry friends."

Sandhurst shared in the noncom's wicked grin. "My compliments, Master Chief. You've constructed a living hell for our Alshain guests that nonetheless adheres to all the stipulations of the Seldonis IV Convention."

"Yes, sir." Tark confirmed proudly.

He inclined his head towards Yejokk and Sandhurst asked, "Anything on our Klingon friend?"

"Quite a bit, actually, sir. Our database identifies him as Yejokk, son of Drast, formerly of the House of Kett. He currently holds the rank of captain in the Defense Forces."

"Formerly?"

"The House of Kett was dissolved following the Klingon Civil War nine years ago. Apparently, they'd sided with the Duras sisters, and had earned themselves Gowron's wrath." Tark paused to glance over at Yejokk, who still managed to retain some of his martial dignity, even while clad in a bland form fitting one-piece jumpsuit. "No, he's one of General K'Vada's cronies, sir."

"K'Vada?" Sandhurst uttered the name like a curse. "There's someone whose name I could go awhile without hearing again."

"Aye, sir." Tark agreed wholeheartedly. "We had to strip search the bastard, run a half-dozen security scans on him, and then have him checked over by Dr. Murakawa before I'd let him walk around unrestrained, even behind a forcefield."

Sandhurst raised an eyebrow.

"Weapons, captain," Tark elaborated. "He had a pulse-bomb secreted in a fake fingertip, and his incisor teeth were loaded with injection ampoules of neurotoxin. And that's after we found all the obvious stuff. The Tellarite bobbed his head admiringly, 'I'm still not convinced we've found everything.'"

Sandhurst smirked and deadpanned, "So, what I hear you saying is that he might be dangerous?"

"Just a bit, sir."

Sandhurst turned to examine the Klingon, who made a show of ignoring the both of them. "Any point in my talking to him?"

"None, sir."

"Didn't think so. Anything else, Master Chief?"

"That's it, sir."

"Thank you," Sandhurst said, dismissing the man to return to his duties. He paused thoughtfully to examine the three threats currently on display in the holding cells. After a few moments, he tapped his combadge. "Lieutenant Ashok, I know you're shorthanded as it is, but I'm going to need two of your deflector-shield specialists to join me aboard the Alshain ship in ten minutes. Have them meet me in engineering."

"Aye, sir," the Bolian replied sullenly.

Sandhurst pressed the door chime for the third time as he balanced on the knife's edge of impatience. He reminded himself that his friend had just undergone reconstructive surgery in Sickbay only fifteen hours earlier. In deference to the dozen or so Ba'ku refugees, compounded by injured *Gibraltar* crew as well as wounded Son'a, Tarlac, Ellora and Alshain prisoners, Dr. Murakawa had granted Lar'ragos permission to recuperate in his own quarters.

Lar'ragos' voice sounded tired but still recognizably his own as it issued forth from the panel. "Come in."

The captain stepped into the sizeable compartment and was surprised to find Lar'ragos awake, lying back in a reclining chair with a hardbound book resting in his lap. He looked curiously at his friend and Sandhurst remarked, "You didn't hear the door?"

Clad in a loose-fitting sleep tunic and resting under a blanket, Lar'ragos shook his head. "I heard it, Donald. I just wasn't up for company."

Sandhurst was taken aback by the El-Aurian's demeanor and turned back towards to the door. "My apologies, I'll come back another time."

"No, it's fine." Lar'ragos said wearily.

Sandhurst shrugged as he moved to examine the cabin and its contents. Senior officer's quarters, on the leading edge of the saucer, offered a rectangular viewport that now presented a view of the surrounding nebula. Upon first seeing it days earlier, the captain had thought the Briar Patch to be spectacularly beautiful. Now, though, he saw only an occluding mass, capable of hiding endless numbers of enemy craft from his sensors. There was no beauty here, just death and desolation.

"You're looking better than I expected, considering your injuries," Sandhurst said vacantly, still transfixed by the nebula's intoxicating view.

"Higher metabolism," Lar'ragos remarked, "Faster recovery time than you puny humans."

Sandhurst tore himself away from the viewport, and walked a slow circuit around the cabin, inspecting the various baubles and artifacts that represented cultures from across the galaxy collected by Pava over the centuries. Among the memorabilia was an old-style framed photograph, showing an even younger looking Lar'ragos shoulder-to-shoulder with a group of burly men, all dressed in some sort of military fatigues. The inscription on the plaque read: 507th Royal Fusiliers and was followed by a quote from the 20th century Terran writer, George Orwell - *'People sleep peaceably in their beds at night only because rough men stand ready to do violence on their behalf.'*

Behind another, much larger frame on the inside bulkhead was a tattered and singed Federation flag. He gestured to the shabby yet still-noble

standard and Sandhurst asked, "What does this represent to you, Pava?"

"Big cats and close calls," Lar'ragos answered cryptically.

"The Federation," Sandhurst clarified. "What does it represent to you?"

An exasperated Lar'ragos snapped closed his worn copy of Koloth's *Bloodwine in a Time of Honor* and threw the dog-eared edition onto an end table with a loud clap. "I think we covered this subject about fifteen minutes after we met at the academy, Donald."

"Humor me."

"Fine," Lar'ragos muttered as he collected his thoughts. "The Federation represents hope. The hope of peace, of enlightenment, of cooperation between species... rather than the chaos, bloodshed, and imperialism that stains much of the rest of our galaxy."

"And where does torture fall into the Federation's credo?"

Lar'ragos sighed as he finally intuited where the conversation was inevitably headed. "I didn't torture anyone. The kid wouldn't stop fighting, so I immobilized him. At that point he was probably convinced that I was certainly capable of torturing him. He offered up his information freely."

Sandhurst merely offered a cynical smirk, calling Lar'ragos' attention to his own statement's hypocrisy.

"I didn't have a lot of options, Donald," Lar'ragos said defensively. "Believe me, it wasn't my first choice. And lest you forget, *they* ambushed *us*."

"Irrelevant," Sandhurst countered. "That kind of behavior is absolutely unacceptable, and I won't have someone who practices it aboard my ship."

"You'd rather I'd have done nothing and allowed our people to remain prisoners of the Bajorans?" Lar'ragos struggled out of the chair with a concerted effort, his face pinched with pain at the exertion. "I saved the damn away team... I saved *the mission!*"

"You crippled a young man during his people's First Contact with the Federation, Pava. You dishonored your uniform, this ship, and you spit in my face while doing it."

"You?" Lar'ragos snarled, "What the hell does any of this have to do with you?"

Sandhurst turned so quickly that Lar'ragos hadn't quite processed what was happening before the captain had him pinned to the viewport. Sandhurst's face was only inches away from Lar'ragos' own as he seethed, "You don't know what the Baron did to me, Pava! You don't know the half of it. He turned me inside out, crushed my mind and my spirit... and the thought... the thought that my friend, my oldest and dearest friend is capable of that same kind of inhuman savagery makes me sick beyond words!"

He wheeled around and turned his back on Lar'ragos, unable to look at him any longer. "This is your last warning, Lieutenant. If anything even remotely similar to this happens again, I'll see that you spend the next quarter-century of your extended lifespan contemplating the interior layout of the stockade on Jaros II."

A pale and trembling Lar'ragos watched his captain and friend stalk out of his quarters before the El-Aurian's legs gave out and he slid down the wall to his haunches. He fought back tears as his friend's anguished words washed over him, his mind pulling images of Donald's ordeal at the hands of the Baron from the ether and displaying them vividly for him to savor. In moments like these, his species' gifts were a curse.

USS *Enterprise* - Federation Task Force Peacekeeper - Entering the Ba'ku System - The Briar Patch (Klach D'Kel Brakt)

Jean-Luc Picard sat ramrod straight in his command chair as the task force pushed through the diaphanous veil into the Ba'ku system. He had already steeled himself against what he was certain to find, another starship destroyed, and his friend and lover Anij killed along with the last of her people.

'*The village*,' he thought mournfully. The beautiful, tranquil hamlet was the antithesis of everything else in his life. The idea that someone, even the Alshain, could obliterate such a peaceful and non-threatening place was almost beyond imagining. Picard noted that Troi was doing her level best not to look over at him as he wrestled with the twin demons of doubt and regret.

The other ships were spread out, maintaining visual contact with one another yet remaining far enough apart not to endanger the entire formation from a single weapons burst.

Data announced, "Sensors clearing, Captain."

It took enormous self-discipline for Picard not to stand and pace; nothing would be served by making his agitation apparent to the crew.

With cool efficiency, the android noted, "Detecting one Son'a *Shrike*-class battlecruiser and one Alshain *Hunter*-class cruiser, sir."

"Any sign of *Gibraltar*?" Riker queried.

"Not as yet, Commander. However, both the identified vessels are in close proximity and yet neither have shields raised or active weapons systems." Data leaned forward, glancing over his shoulder at Picard and Riker. "This is somewhat atypical, considering the state of hostilities between their peoples."

"Indeed," Picard remarked distractedly. "Status of the Ba'ku village?"

"Indeterminate, sir. The village is on the far side of the planet from us at present."

N'Saba looked up from his Science station to fix the captain with his lupanoid stare, compounded by his bio-synthetic ocular implants. "Sir, I'm reading a complete absence of Alshain lifesigns from their vessel."

Picard appeared puzzled and raised a curious eyebrow. "The ship is empty?"

"No, sir. I am detecting over two dozen bio-signatures, most of them human."

As his console's subspace transceiver began warble, Data said, "The Son'a ship is hailing us, Captain."

Picard stood, "On screen, Mister Data."

The image coalesced into that of Captain Sandhurst sitting in the regal command chair atop its dais on the bridge of the Son'a warship. "Welcome to Ba'ku, Captain Picard."

Picard was momentarily at a loss for words but recovered gracefully after a brief pause. "Captain Sandhurst, I'm relieved to find you unharmed. *Gibraltar* was overdue with its regular check-in."

Sandhurst inclined his head, "My apologies, Captain. During our reconnaissance of the system, a flotilla of Son'a and unidentified craft entered the system. When we announced our presence, the ships attacked, and were then joined by an Alshain vessel that had been lurking in-system under cloak. It turned into a bit of a free-for-all. We were ultimately able to turn the tables and successfully board and secure both warships."

Picard's eyes narrowed, "And where is your ship, Captain?"

Sandhurst tapped his communicator. "Lieutenant Juneau, you can bring her out."

"Vessel decloaking at coordinates zero-four-mark-one-one-eight, sir." Data said with the merest hint of surprise in his voice. "It appears to be a Federation starship, *Constitution*-class."

Gibraltar emerged from behind her borrowed cloaking field to take position in between the captured Alshain and Son'a warships.

Picard's expression grew pinched as he said, "I'm more than a bit surprised, Captain. You realize, of course, that a Federation starship operating a cloaking device is a violation of the Treaty of Algeron."

Sandhurst nodded in reply, "I do. However, under the circumstances, I felt abrogating that treaty in this limited circumstance was preferable to my battle damaged ship being destroyed by the next Alshain or Son'a craft to wander into the system."

Picard bobbed his head curtly. "I await your report then, Captain." He changed the subject abruptly and the senior captain pressed, "Any news as to the status of the Ba'ku village?"

He summoned his most somber mien, and Sandhurst answered, "I regret that the village was destroyed by Alshain orbital bombardment. Our away mission managed to locate fewer than twenty survivors."

Picard's face became a stolid mask to hide his roiling emotions as he inquired icily, "The vessel you captured is responsible for this?" Troi sat forward in her chair, her captain's visceral response triggering a wave of anxiety in her.

"No, Captain. From what we've been able to determine from the *Venska's* data banks, the attack on Ba'ku was carried out by a different ship some days ago. I would note that their computers do contain a wealth of information regarding the Exarchate's battle plans for the conquest of the Briar Patch. This, of course, is in addition to a cloaking device of Klingon manufacture and the presence of a Klingon national."

"I'd wager that data will prove most valuable, Captain. We should meet as soon as possible."

Sandhurst offered, "I'm at your disposal."

"My ready room in thirty minutes, then," Picard instructed, then terminated the link.

He turned to Riker, who was giving him a concerned look. The younger man wanted to say something consoling in regard to the loss of the Ba'ku village, but mere words seemed trite. Instead, he noted, "A ninety-year-old escort captures two heavily armed warships? That ought to be some report, Captain."

As he headed for the privacy of his ready room, Picard mused absently, "I suspect you're right, Number One."

Sandhurst turned to Lar'ragos, who was giving him a hesitant expression from the Son'a Tactical station. Two days had passed since their confrontation in Pava's quarters, but they had given each other a wide berth in the interim.

"He looked surprised," the El-Aurian stated. "And by reputation he's one that doesn't surprise easily."

As he gave Lar'ragos an uneasy glance, Sandhurst replied, "I only hope he finds my explanations suitably compelling."

"If you're going over to stand tall before the man, I'm going with you," Lar'ragos declared.

Sandhurst climbed down from the elevated chair and headed for the lift. "Why not? Misery loves company."

Lar'ragos' fell into step behind him. "I think we can put a sugar-coating on this bitter pill, captain-my-captain."

"Do tell, Pava."

Will Riker and Deanna Troi were waiting when the trio from the *Ru'afu* materialized on *Enterprise's* transporter pad. Both their eyes widened as they recognized Anij of Ba'ku standing between the two Starfleet officers.

"Captain Sandhurst, reporting as ordered," Donald announced.

"Welcome aboard, Captain," Riker said before his eyes were drawn to the man clad in a service's gold undershirt who accompanied the captain. After a moment Riker recognized him as the officer who had turned down the *Enterprise's* Security/Tactical billet less than a year before.

As Sandhurst and his party stepped down off the pad, the captain paused to look up into the larger man's face. "Don't worry, Commander, I left Ramirez behind this time."

Riker repressed a frown as he remarked, "So noted, sir." He shifted his gaze and Riker's eyes fell on the Ba'ku woman, causing his expression to soften. "It's good to see you, Anij. I know the captain will be especially pleased to know that you're well."

She received his welcome coolly. "Very few of my people are, Commander Riker."

Troi stepped forward to place a hand on Anij's shoulder, the Betazoid's eyes radiating sympathy. "I'm so sorry for your loss, Anij."

Anij replied in kind and grasped Deanna's shoulders. "Thank you, my friend. Nearly everything has been lost, or it would have been, if not for Captain Sandhurst and his crew. Once again, we have Starfleet to thank for our lives."

Troi turned to the captain and Lar'ragos. She seemed on the cusp of addressing Sandhurst when her eyes darted towards the El-Aurian man beside him. Her countenance hardened inexplicably, and Lar'ragos responded to the accusatory glare with a broad smile. "A pleasure to make your acquaintance, Counselor. The captain speaks very highly of you."

Troi extended a hand reluctantly, her dark eyes probing Pava's face. "High praise, Mister..?"

"Lar'ragos, sir," he responded, shaking her hand lightly. "Lieutenant Pava Lar'ragos."

She tore her gaze away from the lieutenant and turned to Sandhurst. "Donald, how are you?"

Sandhurst smiled at his former therapist and answered genially, "I'm well enough, Deanna, given the circumstances. This mission has turned out to be more... complicated than I'd anticipated."

She spared a glance at Riker as she bobbed her head in acknowledgment. "Perhaps, Captain. However, you and your crew have survived the storm. That speaks to your abilities."

"Or our luck," Sandhurst countered.

Riker gestured towards the exit and fell into step behind the group as they moved into the corridor. Will gave Deanna a pointed look, inquiring through their mutual telepathic link, *'What was that about? Do you know Lar'ragos from somewhere?'*

'No, it's not that, Imzadi,' she replied. *'What bothers me is that I can't read him; I get nothing at all from him. Psionically, he's a void, as if he were an android or a hologram.'*

'He's El-Aurian, Deanna,' Riker explained. *'I interviewed him for our security post just six months ago.'*

'So?' she parried. *'Guinan's El-Aurian, and I can read her just fine.'*

'Interesting...' Riker mused.

Chapter 17

USS *Enterprise* - Federation Task Force Peacekeeper - Ba'ku System - The Briar Patch (Klach D'Kel Brakt)

The briefing had grown to include Picard, Sandhurst, Riker, Lar'ragos, and Troi, as well as Captain T'Agdi of the late starship *Bellerophon* and thus had been moved to the observation lounge.

Picard listened intently to Sandhurst recount the events that had occurred since *Gibraltar* had entered the Ba'ku system some five days earlier. The pitched battle for control of the system, as well as Ramirez's planet-side encounter with the Bajora-Tava figured prominently in his report.

As he spoke, Sandhurst had to focus to keep his attention on his narrative. Part of his mind reeled at the improbability of his briefing the legendary captain. Picard was the man who had overcome the Borg on two separate occasions, a man credited for nearly two dozen First Contacts and the person responsible for continuing the legendary exploits of successive starships *Enterprise*.

Sandhurst concluded the tale, having downplayed his own personal actions while emphasizing the role his crew had played in their hard-won victory.

Picard was silent for a moment as he digested the tale in its entirety. "You and your people have overcome substantial odds to secure this system, Captain. You are to be congratulated for your resourcefulness and fortitude." Picard shifted in his seat, clearly uncomfortable with his next statement, "However, I have grave concerns over some of your actions and those of your senior staff. Your threats to beam the Alshain into space, for instance, and Ramirez's taking the Bajoran captain hostage. These decisions strike me as being incompatible with your Starfleet training and oaths. Then there's the matter of the cloaking device..."

Sandhurst nodded somberly as he replied, "I share your concerns, Captain. These measures were not taken lightly, or without forethought to the eventual consequences. To be frank, we did what we had to in order to survive and overcome our opponents. By all rights, we should be dead..." Sandhurst gestured out the viewport to where the comparatively diminutive *Gibraltar* held station, "...and yet here we are."

"So, the ends justify the means then, sir?" Riker asked pointedly.

"That's rich coming from the guys in the *Sovereign*-class ship," Lar'ragos offered from his seat farther down the table.

Sandhurst silenced Lar'ragos with a look and turned to engage Riker, his expression earnest. "Under these circumstances, I believe they did, Commander." He focused his attention back on Picard and continued, "It wasn't only our lives on the line here, but those of the Ba'ku survivors, as well as the entire task force, should the Alshain have gotten a hold of the tactical data in our computers."

"Convenient excuse," Riker muttered. Picard gestured for his exec to let it drop, but not before Riker's outburst had goaded a response from Lar'ragos.

"And I suppose ambushing Alshain convoys and repair craft is perfectly acceptable though," the El-Aurian remarked dryly.

"This is war, Lieutenant," Riker shot back.

"I agree, Commander," Lar'ragos rebutted. "So, it's a bit disingenuous of you to damn us for bending the rules in order to survive a shooting war that *you* started."

Sandhurst gave his security chief a withering glare. "Pava, knock it off."

Picard sighed, closing his eyes and rubbing the bridge of his nose absently. "You see my dilemma then, Captain. I can't very well castigate you for your actions, when my own have been equally questionable, to say the least."

"Captain, I hardly think they're comparab—" Picard silenced Riker with a dismissive wave.

"Our own activities in the past week have been every bit as damning, Number One."

Captain T'Agdi addressed the group and offered, "Respectfully, we can sit here wringing our hands for eternity, and it isn't going to either undo what's been done or get us any closer to accomplishing our mission." Her whiskers twitched with irritation.

"Agreed," Picard murmured, sounding a note of finality.

"Sirs," Troi interjected, speaking for the first time since the meeting started. "It's obvious that our current predicament has sparked powerful emotions in all of us." She scanned the assembled officers, her eyes once again lingering a second longer on Lar'ragos. "There will be time enough later to face our cumulative demons, but for the moment we need to consider our position. We are tactically vulnerable here, and Alshain forces are on the hunt for us."

At Deanna's prompting, Picard brought himself back to the task at hand. "Well said, Counselor." He referenced a padd on the table in front of him and noted, "The task force is currently holding some four-hundred Alshain prisoners, in addition to over a thousand refugees. Is there room enough on this island holding center you've established for the Alshain detainees?"

"I wouldn't see why not, Captain," Sandhurst replied. "So long as your people can assist us in expanding the number of shelters and in providing additional emergency rations, they should be just fine until the next Alshain patrol enters the system."

"What's our next target of opportunity?" T'Agdi asked.

Sandhurst looked surprised as he glanced from one captain to the other. "You're not prepared to leave the Briar Patch? I'd thought the original mission parameters had been met."

"We're not done here," Picard said grimly, the tenor of forged steel in his voice.

"I'm relieved to hear that, Captain" Sandhurst remarked. "I'd like your permission to track down this Bajoran sect and recover my abducted crewmember."

Now it was Picard's turn to look surprised. "Splitting up the task force at this time would be tactically unwise, Captain."

"I wasn't referring to any other ships but my own. I was asking permission to take the *Gibraltar* in search of our officer."

His expression incredulous, Riker posited, "You think you stand a chance by yourself out there, Captain?"

Sandhurst allowed the commander's disbelief to wash over him and refused to be baited. "With a cloaking device, I believe our chances are quite good, actually."

Picard shook his head. "I cannot allow further use of a cloaking device by a Federation vessel. We'd only be compounding the existing treaty abrogation."

"With our current battle damage, *Gibraltar* will be more liability than asset for you," Sandhurst pressed.

Picard fixed him with a wry smile, "Your recent accomplishments here say differently, Captain."

Sandhurst was unwilling to let it go and persisted. "You've nothing to lose and everything to gain by detaching us for this recovery mission. These Bajorans are an unknown variable in an already dangerously complex equation, Captain. My exec's report indicates we're dealing with religious extremists, a militaristic cult that's been out here for half a century sharpening their knives for an impending holy war against Cardassia to free Bajor. There's no telling how they'll react to the news that Bajor's been freed without their help, and what they may do to Commander Pell in order to silence such knowledge."

"I'm sorry, Captain," Picard sounded genuinely regretful. "I cannot spare your ship, and leaving the cloak aboard is out of the question."

Sandhurst steeled himself for the coming unpleasantness. "I *am* prepared to pursue this course without your consent, Captain Picard."

Picard stared at him, his expression tinged with disapproval. "Are you making a threat?"

As he sat forward in his chair, Sandhurst's eyes searched Picard's and seemed to plead for another more subtle level of understanding. "One might believe I was offering you plausible deniability."

Troi broke into the tense silence that followed. "Captain Sandhurst, it's obvious even to someone without empathic abilities that you have strong feelings towards the officer in question."

He faced the Betazoid counselor and Sandhurst offered a wan smile. "That's true enough, Deanna. Ojana and I used to be involved romantically, and we've only recently renewed our friendship. I freely admit to having personal, as well as professional reasons for wanting to recover her safely."

Sandhurst turned back to Picard and noted bleakly, "Captain, I've been forced to leave people behind before, and it's something I swore to myself that I'd avoid at all costs in the future."

A brief flicker of empathy shone in Picard's eyes. "As starship commanders, that is the kind of promise that we are sometimes unable to keep, no matter how much we might wish otherwise."

The *Gibraltar* captain continued, sounding a confessional note. "I signed on to this mission because I believed in its goals, Captain. I still do. My participation was as much predicated upon my trust in *you*, in your leadership. I knew however bad it got within the Briar Patch, I could rely on your reputation for diplomacy, for clear thinking in a crisis, and for your fairness. Were our situations reversed, and you found yourself without Riker, Troi, or LaForge, you'd move heaven and earth to see that person safely recovered." Sandhurst held the older man's gaze. "I'm asking for that same latitude."

"And were I to refuse?" Picard asked pointedly.

"I'd rather not visit that eventuality unless absolutely necessary," Sandhurst replied cautiously.

T'Pol interceded, her voice carrying the enormous weight of deep personal loss. "Believe me, Sandhurst, I understand your feelings. My entire away team came under attack by the Alshain. Twenty-six souls, including my first officer. I couldn't go back for them without losing my ship. I wanted to, more than anything."

Sandhurst glanced towards his Caitian counterpart. "I'm sorry for your loss, Captain, and I certainly don't mean to minimize the sacrifice made by your brave crew. However, the situations are appreciably different. Your people were involved in a dangerous away mission and volunteered to stay behind... while in my case Commander Pell was forcibly abducted from the bridge of my ship."

Troi felt competing emotions in Riker, a sneaking admiration vying with irritation. Will felt a kinship with Sandhurst, whose innovative tactics had stolen victory from the jaws of defeat, but he harbored a resentment towards the man for his stubborn refusal to acknowledge Picard's authority as task force commander. Riker found his voice amidst his warring sentiments, "Throwing away a promising career to search for a needle in a haystack the size of the Briar Patch makes no sense, sir."

"I'm getting her back." Sandhurst uttered the words as a statement of fact, an oath. "I'd much rather have your approval, but I'll go it alone if

necessary.”

They had reached an impasse. Picard fell silent as he weighed his options. “This is unacceptable,” Picard fumed after a moment’s consideration. “That we should find ourselves pitted against one another while behind enemy lines is utterly ridiculous.” He turned to look at Sandhurst and the senior captain intoned, “So long as you’re willing to accept the consequences of your actions vis-à-vis the cloaking device, I’ll free *Gibraltar* to track down your missing crewmember.”

Sandhurst inclined his head, the tension visibly ebbing from his body. “Thank you, Captain.”

Picard shook his head ruefully, “Don’t thank me, Sandhurst. When I’m done with my report from this mission, we’re all likely to end up facing courts-martial.” He addressed Riker and T’Agdi, “The task force will move out from here and set course for the Nedric Strait. *En route*, we will continue to engage Alshain logistics convoys entering the Briar Patch. With any luck, we’ll arrive in time to join up with whatever follow-on forces Starfleet’s been able to piece together in our absence.”

Riker acknowledged Picard’s plan, then looked askance at Sandhurst. He asked, “What had you planned to do with the *Ru’afu* and *Venska*, Captain?”

Sandhurst shrugged in response, “I don’t have sufficient crew to staff either ship for the duration, Commander. Seeing as we’ll be leaving to find Pell, I figured I’d turn them over to the task force.” Sandhurst turned towards the Caitian, “I don’t suppose you’d be interested in taking command of a warship with armaments on par with those of a *Sovereign*-class, Captain?” He quirked an eyebrow at the task force leader as he added, “With your approval, of course, Captain Picard.”

Picard nodded his assent and looked to his exec. “T’Agdi and her people will take *Ru’afu*. Will, I want you to pick a crew and take command of the *Venska*.”

T’Agdi purred ever so slightly as she murmured, “Whatever shall I do with all that firepower?”

“Former *Subahdar* Gallatin of the Son’a is aboard and will be able to assist you and your crew with any technical issues, T’Agdi. I’ve already adapted their command interface to an LCARS analogue for ease-of-use,” Sandhurst added.

Sandhurst glanced at Picard and asked hopefully, “We could use some help with repairs prior to our departure, Captain, if you could spare some of your engineering staff?”

Picard agreed. “I’ll authorize Commander LaForge to coordinate with your engineering department.” He looked around the briefing table and took note of the expectant faces. “I thank you all for your input. I know the coming days will pose many challenges for us, but I’m confident in our ability to adapt and overcome. This mission hasn’t turned out as any of us had hoped, but we’ve succeeded in rescuing over twelve-hundred refugees from multiple worlds within the nebula. I believe we’ve also given the Exarchate pause, and the losses they’ve incurred might help convince them that this offensive is more expensive than they’d anticipated.” He brought the briefing to an end. “Dismissed.”

The various officers rose from their seats and headed for the exits. Only Troi and Picard remained. After Sandhurst and Lar’ragos had departed, Deanna turned to face her captain. “As you may have already guessed, Donald’s recent experiences have made him hyper-protective of his crew. I’d note for the record that his fear of losing Pell was only slightly greater than his fear of earning your disapproval.”

Picard sighed, absently drumming his fingers on the tabletop. “I hope for his sake he finds her... and manages to come out of this with his career intact.”

Troi offered an ironic smile, “At this point, that’s a healthy aspiration for all of us.”

USS *Sutherland* - Federation Task Force Fulcrum - Tactical Assembly Point Alpha

“Status report,” Shelby instructed as she stepped out of the lift onto the bridge.

Lavelle surrendered the command chair, referencing a padd as he replied, “*Malinche* and *Decker* have finished corralling the last of the debris, and *Budapest* has advised they’ve completed recalibrations to their phasers for drilling.”

“Good,” she said.

“And...” Sam reminded her hesitantly, “Admiral Jellico is holding for you on subspace. Priority One.”

Shelby sighed. “Right.” She pointed towards her office. “Route it to my ready room.”

She took a moment before activating her desk terminal. This wouldn’t be pleasant, but stumbling into the Alshain blockade of the Nedric Strait completely unprepared would have been infinitely less so.

Jellico’s face appeared on-screen as she touched the control. “How can I help you, Admiral?”

As expected, the man was infuriated, “Where the hell are you, Captain? You were projected to arrive at the Briar Patch seven hours ago.”

“I took us on a brief detour, sir,” she replied calmly in the face of his bluster. “We’re on the outskirts of the Deltived system.”

Barely keeping himself in check, Jellico fumed, “I expect you to be *where* I ordered, *when* I ordered.”

“Under normal circumstances, sir, I would have been. These are far from normal circumstances, however.” Jellico began to reply heatedly, but

she raised a hand and he fell silent. "Admiral, you appointed me to lead this task force. We both know I don't have nearly enough ships to run the Exarchate's blockade, especially considering the fact that Intelligence reports they've established a mine field to prevent transit of the strait."

She leaned back slightly in her chair, focusing her most reasonable expression on her superior. "I'm sure you'll agree that my rushing in there and getting this flotilla shot out from under me isn't going to help Picard or anyone else." Her reasons having been stated, she offered an olive branch. "I do have a plan, one that I feel has a high probability of success, sir, if you're prepared to hear me out."

He sighed angrily then nodded, "Very well, Captain. Let's hear it."

Ministry of War - Central Ministries Complex, Governance Archology - Alshain Proper

The War Cabinet had convened in an emergency session to discuss the quickly deteriorating situation facing the Alshain Starforce in and around the Klach D'Kel Brakt.

War Minister Orthlin C'Oemnm had opened the meeting with a grim report on their losses, first at the hands of the now-defeated Son'a military, as well as the more recent depredations of the meddlesome Federation.

C'Oemnm gestured to several highlighted areas on a slowly rotating holographic image of the nebula as he summed up their current circumstances. "Our attrition rates are thirty-seven percent higher than we originally anticipated when we began our advance into Son'a territory. Most of this has come as a result of losses suffered within the Klach D'Kel Brakt. Until a few hours ago, we'd believed these casualties were due to desperate suicide tactics by the Tarlac and Ellora that were retreating from the last of their pre-prepared defensive positions. However, I've just received a report that confirms that many, if not most of these losses can be attributed to the rogue Starfleet squadron operating within the nebula."

The holo-image shifted to display a horrific sight that prompted sharp intakes of breath from a number of the attendees. The shattered carcasses of a number of Alshain vessels drifted against the ethereal background of the Briar Patch, surrounded by a cloud of debris that spoke of utter chaos and devastation.

Exarch Jedalla, clad in rather mundane business tunic in lieu of the traditionally gaudy robes of the aristocracy, growled with displeasure. He directed his anger towards the admiralty and glowered at Nauarch Yol A'Yaud, the ranking flag officer present. "You'd said this Federation task force was not a threat to our plans. So, what is the explanation, Nauarch? Are you blindly incompetent or merely unbelievably stupid?"

A'Yaud looked formidable in his most auspicious dress uniform, which was adorned by numerous medals and pendants earned by successive generations of his ancestors. Despite his standing, A'Yaud was caught off-guard by the exarch's harsh scrutiny. The stammering admiral struggled to deflect the onslaught. "Your Eminence, every indication has been that the Starfleet task force was a humanitarian relief mission. Individually, some of the ships could be considered quite formidable, but against the full might of our forces I hardly think..."

"Yes," Jedalla seethed, "you hardly think. I agree wholeheartedly with that assessment, Nauarch."

C'Oemnm pressed on, secretly relieved that Jedalla had identified the military as the weak point in this equation... at least so far. "At this present rate of attrition, we will find it especially difficult to hold on to the territory gained in our offensive. Diffused enemy units within the Klach D'Kel Brakt will likely be able to wage a long-term guerilla campaign against our occupational forces, much as the Cardassians are doing now with the Federation and the Klingons. The more craft we lose now, the fewer we'll have to patrol these nebular backwaters in the coming months."

Jedalla, his ears twitching in irritation, focused on his war minister. "What of the retaliatory plans we'd drawn up? The ones for sending a strike group into Federation space?"

C'Oemnm pressed a stud on his hand-unit and again changed the holo-display which now showed a formation of Alshain warships deploying a sizeable minefield at the mouth of the nebula's entrance. "Those plans were put on hold, Eminence, when I was forced to divert the ships assembling for that potential mission to the Nedric Strait. The 5th Squadron, 3rd Fleet reserves are blockading the strait to prevent Starfleet from reinforcing their original task force."

Jedalla digested this in livid silence before finally speaking. "And if I still wish to hurt the Federation, to make them pay for their interference? Do you think you could manage to find me a handful of ships capable of a one-way trip across the border?"

C'Oemnm looked to Nauarch A'Yaud, who sat forward suddenly as he came face-to-face with the exarch's impenetrable stare once again. He cleared his throat and the officer said, "What did you have in mind, Sire?"

"How many of those Son'a subspace weapons do we still have?"

A'Yaud's response was prompt, "*Venska* was issued four of the weapons, Eminence. We are still in possession of twenty-three devices."

Jedalla's lips pulled back in a predatory sneer, exposing the artificially enhanced teeth that intentionally reinforced his alpha-male status. "I want twenty-three of our fastest Starforce vessels readied with one each of those magnificent weapons. Should I find it necessary, I will give the order to dispatch them against the nearest inhabited Federation planets."

A'Yaud blinked, looking stunned. "Sire, that... that would be an act of war on an unprecedented scale."

Seemingly unperturbed by the notion, C'Oemnm carried out a series of quick calculations on a padd. He looked up from the results to give the exarch an unabashed look of respect. "Eminence, if my figures are accurate, by striking the closest twenty-three Federation outposts, colonies, and member planets with subspace weapons, the Federation would incur somewhere in the vicinity of one-hundred and sixty million

casualties.”

“That is, I believe, more than the total civilian casualty count suffered by the Federation during the Dominion War,” A’Yaud noted, looking suddenly quite haggard.

“They ignored our repeated requests not to interfere in our internal security matters,” Jedalla intoned. “Our demands fell on ears so deaf that they then sent a flotilla of ships to attack us. With this one act, we will be heard. In a single stroke, we can cause the Federation more pain than the cumulative losses of their last two centuries of conflict.”

The vote that the exarch presided over was more formality than anything, a way for the individuals present to accrue greater prestige with their Septs. Nonetheless, it was unanimous.

USS *Enterprise* - Federation Task Force Peacekeeper - Ba’ku System - The Briar Patch (Klach D’Kel Brakt)

Sandhurst and Lar’ragos approached the transporter room, preparing to return to *Gibraltar*. “That went better than I expected,” Lar’ragos said.

Still in a dour mood following the tense briefing with Picard, Sandhurst muttered, “That was the easy part. Now we have to locate Pell while staying two steps ahead of the Alshain.”

As they stepped into the transporter room, a broad smile emerged on the captain’s features at the sight of Lt. Commander LaForge manning the control console. A fully equipped engineering team stood by on the transport pad. “Geordi!” Sandhurst approached the man, shaking his hand vigorously. “How’s the best engineer in the Fleet these days?”

LaForge laughed as he replied, “Wait, I thought *you* always claimed to be the best of the best.”

“I was,” Sandhurst deadpanned, “but then I promoted.”

Lar’ragos moved towards the dais, stepping up to take one of the last open pads as the two old friends got reacquainted. Pava frowned, the idea of old friends suddenly seeming inexplicably relevant to him. Something was amiss, but he couldn’t quite put his finger on it. It was as if... someone were looking for him.

The doors out to the corridor opened, and a colorfully clad figure topped by a broad hat stepped across the threshold. LaForge glanced past Sandhurst, wearing a look of mild concern mixed with curiosity. “Guinan, can I help you?”

Her expression characteristically serene, the El-Aurian woman smiled slightly at LaForge. “No, thank you. Everything’s fine, Geordi.” She turned to the transport pad to state matter-of-factly, “There are so very few of us left that it’s generally a cause for celebration when we encounter another of our kind.” She locked eyes with a reticent looking Lar’ragos as she asked, “You weren’t even going to say hello?”

Sandhurst looked from Lar’ragos to the mysterious woman, frowning. “Do you need a minute, Pava?”

Lar’ragos stepped down off the pad and nodded. “Aye, sir. Thank you. I’ll catch up with you, Captain.” With that he followed the woman in the large hat and flowing orange dress out into the passageway.

She led him down the corridor and into a small auxiliary crew lounge, currently empty. As she took a seat at one of the tables, she gestured for Lar’ragos to join her. He sat slowly, as if thinking better of it.

“It’s been a while, Pava.”

He nodded almost imperceptibly. “Almost, what... sixteen years?”

“Sounds about right. Haven’t seen you since we ran into each other on Alcent. I missed you last time you were aboard.”

Lar’ragos looked momentarily confused before finally grasping the reference. “Oh, the interviews. Yes, I believe you were off the ship at the time.”

“Any particular reason you passed on the job?”

He grinned self-consciously. “The crew has a lousy reputation. Statistically speaking, Captain Picard and his people save the entire Federation much less often than they used to.”

She smirked in response. “Funny guy. Nice to see you’ve got a sense of humor now.”

“I didn’t before?”

“You did, but it was... darker.”

He shrugged. “That’s just me, I suppose.”

“I suppose,” she echoed. She spared a quick glance out the viewport before setting her gaze back on him. “I didn’t even know you were aboard; do you know that? I can feel some of the others from over a sector away, and here you are barely sixty meters from me and I haven’t a clue. And don’t even get me started on Troi, you’ve probably got her spinning circles trying to figure out why she can’t read you.”

He frowned and said defensively, “I wasn’t aware I owed anyone an explanation.”

“I didn’t say you did.”

Lar'ragos shifted uncomfortably in his chair. "Guinan, what do you want?"

"You avoid us, Pava. Why? There are over two dozen of us living in Federation space, and yet you pass up every opportunity to meet with us."

He shook his head slowly. "What would the point of that be? Rehash old times, perhaps? Gosh, you remember those Borg fellows, weren't they strange? Do you see any of the old gang from the Diaspora? I'd heard a bunch of us were caught up in that whole mess on Jehord'Msna... what a tragedy that was."

Her expression darkened and Guinan's voice lowered an octave. "You're going to trot that out now? They were offering us a home, a life. It turned out badly, yes, but I couldn't have known that. And it isn't as if you were there with us. I believe you were off playing soldier at the time."

Lar'ragos touched a hand to his chest, mimicking shock, "What, us? Courtiers to the Yearling Jihad? Root out your enemies for coin and country?" He gave her a hard look. "Tell me, Guinan, what was it like being a two-legged blood hound? Considering that I've been chased by some of the best, you can call this professional curiosity."

She inspected him closely. "Now you're deliberately trying to provoke me. More than anything you want me to end this conversation and go away. Any particular reason for that, Pava?"

"Maybe I don't have a lot of things to look back on favorably after four-hundred years, Guinan. Perhaps I don't want to be reminded of everything that we lost. Maybe I'm depressed by the fact that even here within the Federation we'll never be able to rebuild our society. How each and every one of us is missing a piece of ourselves, how we're inexorably intertwined with the damnable Collective and those of our kind still enslaved by them."

Her face softened as his anguish washed over her. "We all lost somebody to the Borg, Pava. And we lost others along the way. But the fact that some of us made it here says something about our people, our hopes, and our strength."

Lar'ragos looked disgusted as he stood abruptly. She reached across the table and grasped his forearm. "I know you blame yourself for what happened then, and after, but people in that much pain do horrible things... to themselves and to others."

"I'm a killer, Guinan" he blurted suddenly. "Ours was a race of philosophers, scientists, and poets, and my noble contribution to that legacy is that I use our talents to kill with ruthless efficiency. My parents would be so very proud."

She let him go, finding him not so terribly different than he'd been nearly two decades earlier. '*Go in peace, Pava Lar'ragos*' she prayed. '*Or whatever passes for peace in your world.*'

Chapter 18

USS *Gibraltar* - Federation Task Force Peacekeeper - Ba'ku System - The Briar Patch (Klach D'Kel Brakt)

Ramirez found him on Deck 14, leading a repair team in the engineering access shafts that ran parallel to the starboard nacelle's plasma transfer conduits. She squatted down and called into the Jefferies tube, "Captain, a moment of your time?"

Sandhurst acknowledged the request, carefully backing out of the conduit and squeezing past the other engineers. He had forsaken his duty uniform for a bright yellow non-conductive engineering jumpsuit. He clambered awkwardly out of the hatch and directed a questioning expression at his exec.

"Ashok reports nearly all necessary repairs have been completed, sir. Everything that remains is largely cosmetic, and can wait for our next starbase layover. We'll be ready to get underway within the hour."

"But to where?" Sandhurst asked sourly.

Ramirez smiled in response and held up an isolinear chip "The Son'a computers proved more forthcoming than our prisoners, sir. We found coordinates to a single Bajora-Tavan asteroid base. The Son'a surmised the Bajorans had numerous outposts scattered throughout the Briar Patch, but this was the only one the Bajorans let them know about."

Sandhurst took the chip in hand. "Do we have Plazzi to thank for this?"

She chuckled, "Mr. Geology? No, sir, this comes courtesy of young Ensign Shanthi and the Son'a defector, Gallatin. Apparently, computer science is one of Shanthi's specialties."

He nodded appreciatively as he mused, "The kid's paying off already." Sandhurst raised his eyes to meet his first officer's, "And how is Kuenre doing?"

Ramirez's smile faded. "Not so well, sir. I've tried to talk to him, Plazzi's tried, and I even ordered him over to *Enterprise* to meet with Commander Troi. The counselor couldn't be too specific without violating confidentiality, but she says he's fit for duty, despite having some lingering emotional trauma from his experience with the Bajoran mind probe."

Sandhurst pursed lips and appeared lost in thought for a moment. "That's unfortunate. I hope he can get past this. From what I've observed so far, he's got a promising career ahead of him."

"I'd agree with that assessment, Captain." Ramirez gave Sandhurst a lingering, meaningful look. "But in the past two months he's suffered the loss of the first ship he was assigned to, the death of his lover, and now this. I wondered if someone else speaking with Shanthi might be more effective, someone who's been through something similar and survived..." She let the idea hang there in silence, having baited the hook nicely.

"I'll... consider it, Commander" was all she could get from Sandhurst on the subject. The captain glanced at the padd in his hand, then knelt down at the mouth of the hatchway. He called inside, "Chief, here's the rest of the specs on the plasma induction rig. I think we're over the hump with the damned thing. You shouldn't have any more problems." He tossed the padd inside the Jefferies tube to the crew.

"Did you have a talk with Lar'ragos, sir?"

He nodded slowly, rising to his feet. "Of a sort. I think we're clear on the subject."

"In his defense, sir, he got the job done. Only later we'd found out that Bral had one of his teams staking out the shuttle. If Lightner and I had tried to get aboard, we'd have been captured as well."

"Your reasoning is noted, understood, and dismissed as immaterial, Exec."

She looked surprised by the rebuke. "Sir?"

"He's a Starfleet officer, Commander. There are two hundred years of rules, regulations, and ethics behind this organization, and they exist for a reason. Lar'ragos thinks he can cherry-pick those that suit him and discard the rest."

Ramirez raised an eyebrow. "Like my taking hostages, or like you threatening to kill members of Sutahr R'Voss' crew after you beamed them off his bridge, Captain?"

Sandhurst didn't have an answer for that, but his eyes flamed.

"All three of us have compromised our values and ethics on this mission, but for some reason you're holding Lar'ragos to a higher standard." The iron behind her eyes softened somewhat, "I know you've put him on a pedestal since your academy days, Captain, but those days are long past. You're not cadets anymore, and despite his age and his experience, he's your subordinate now. He's not human, but Pava is most definitely fallible. Don't crucify him for failing to live up to your unrealistic expectations."

The anger in Sandhurst's expression flickered and died, leaving him looking gloomily thoughtful. He turned and headed for the nearest turbolift. He called back over his shoulder to announce, "I'll be on the bridge in thirty minutes. Have all hands prepare for departure."

USS *Sutherland* - Federation Task Force Fulcrum - Approaching the Briar Patch (Klach D'Kel Brakt)

Sam Lavelle leaned in towards Elizabeth Shelby, observing a low tone to keep their conversation confined to the command well. “You sure about this?”

She nodded wordlessly, reviewing the latest status reports from the other task force vessels on a padd.

“There’s still time to call this off,” he pressed.

She turned slowly to look at him, her expression guarded. “Sam, there are Starfleet officers in there who are fighting for their lives against the Alshain. I won’t abandon them.”

“I wasn’t suggesting turning our backs on our comrades, Captain. I was asking if the tactic you’ve chosen to employ here isn’t more than is warranted... more than is *justified* by the circumstances?”

She averted her gaze to stare at the orange/crimson cloud on the main viewer as she murmured. “Give me another option, Sam.”

He dipped his head, then raised it to examine the image of the approaching nebula for himself. “I... don’t have one.”

“Exactly, Commander,” she said, sounding oddly distant. “This constitutes one of those ‘hard choices’ they always told us about at the academy in those neat, clean little prepackaged scenarios. Only this one isn’t neat or clean, it’s dirty as hell.” Her jaw set stubbornly, and her concentration seemed to bore a hole through the viewscreen. “And if I can’t make the big decisions, then I have no right to sit in this chair.”

From behind them at the Tactical station, Sito announced, “Sensors now picking up an additional five threat vessels lurking in the periphery of the nebula, Captain. That makes a total of thirty-four ships, in addition to five automated weapons platforms, and one-hundred seventy-one antimatter mines.”

“Open a channel to the Alshain, Sito.”

“Channel open, sir.”

Shelby suppressed the urge to stand, as Picard might have under similar circumstances. She wanted the enemy to see her ensconced among her crew, seated and ready for what was to come.

“Alshain Starforce, this is Captain Elizabeth Shelby of the Federation starship *Sutherland*. We have been dispatched to locate and retrieve the Federation task force that entered the Briar Patch a week ago. I would respectfully request that you stand down and allow us safe passage so that we may accomplish our mission and leave you in peace.”

As she awaited a reply, Shelby hoped against reason that the response would be favorable, that the commander on the other end of the transmission would value the lives of his or her people more than the Exarchate’s stance on the ongoing conflict. That, she knew in her bones, was asking for too much.

Sito announced stoically, “We’re receiving a reply, Captain.”

“On screen, Lieutenant.”

The image of a tall, regally fearsome looking Alshain appeared on the viewer. His dark military uniform seemed to accentuate his thick black fur, streaked with grey. Shelby recognized his rank insignia as that of nauarch, an admiral in the Starforce. However, his uniform was noticeably devoid of the typical ancestral medals and awards that were encouraged by the Sept familial systems.

“I am Nauarch Edim S’Elani, leader of the 5th Squadron, 3rd Fleet of the Alshain Starforce. I too would rather avoid unnecessary bloodshed here today, Captain. Be warned, however, that my orders are to prohibit the entry of any more Starfleet vessels into the Klach D’Kel Brakt.” S’Elani inclined his head fractionally, his predator’s eyes focused intently on Shelby, “I intend to follow those orders.”

Shelby swallowed hard, her gorge rising as the moment of truth quickly approached. She stood, bracing her legs and maintaining eye contact with S’Elani. “Nauarch, I am certain your vessels are crewed by many fine people. Your people deserve better than what I may have to serve them today. Please do not misunderstand, I am not blustering for the sake of hubris. You simply cannot win. Events have been set in motion that will ensure our victory, but that victory will come at a terrible price.”

S’Elani’s mouth drew into the Alshain approximation of a smile, a discomforting sight for other species who perceived only the rows of canid teeth on display. “I’d much rather you were raging and slinging idle threats, Captain. Under those circumstances, I’d probably believe you were just trying to frighten us with your words. The fact that you seem so terribly uncomfortable with all this leads me to think that you are speaking truth.” S’Elani drew himself up to his full height, “Regardless, I am charged with maintaining this blockade, and my orders care nothing for my personal feelings towards this mission or the welfare of the crews under my command.”

The officer at the Helm console noted, “Captain, we will be within Alshain weapons range in twenty seconds.”

“Notify all task force ships in the first wave to drop out of warp, Mister Lavelle.”

“Aye, Captain.”

As *Sutherland* and her escorts dropped to impulse speed, Shelby tried one last time to avert tragedy. “Nauarch, please... just turn around and take your ships home. I don’t want this, not for us, and certainly not for you.”

“We both have duty to answer to, Captain,” S’Elani answered firmly. “Our paths here would seem clear. It will be an honor to do battle with you, Captain Shelby. As the Klingons are so fond of saying, may you die well.”

“And you...” Shelby replied, almost choking on the words as the communication terminated.

She had killed before, both face-to-face and in ship-to-ship combat. But never like this. Never with so much calculated forethought and preparation. It seemed like cheating, in a way. Stubborn and arrogant as the Alshain could be, they were not the soulless Jem'Hadar or the oily, atavistic Cardassians.

Shelby looked back at Lavelle and said quietly, "Remove the safety interlocks, Commander. The second wave will continue as planned."

Lavelle took some measure of pride in the fact that his voice remained even as he replied in the affirmative, and his hands did not shake when he moved to input the appropriate commands.

Alshain Predator-class Battlecruiser *Ancestral Fury* - Blockading the Nedric Strait - The Briar Patch (Klach D'Kel Brakt)

"Nauarch, the Federation squadron has dropped to impulse just outside our weapons range. Sensors indicate nine starships, and five smaller craft. Their second formation is still on approach at Warp 5 and appears to be comprised of two dozen vessels."

S'Elani absorbed this, his mind racing with tactical permutations on Shelby's opening gambit. "They're trying to draw us out. They want us to break defensive formation and engage their first wave so that their follow on ships can punch through the gaps in our line. Inform all vessels to hold position and await further orders."

"Sir, yes, sir."

The admiral watched with keen interest while counter to his expectations, the Starfleet task force vessels bunched together tightly, rather than spreading out to tempt his ships into breaking formation and making an ill-advised attack run.

Suddenly, the Alshain sensor net began to fray, assaulted by the combined interference of Shelby's first wave of ships. A volley of torpedoes from the Starfleet task force that erupted in a magnificent electro-magnetic storm between the two battle fleets only made matters worse.

"Nauarch, our scanning capacity has been reduced by three-fifths."

S'Elani moved around his bridge to examine the readings for himself. He fumed, "They're trying to blind us to hide the strength and intentions of their second wave of ships. Have all vessels and the weapons platforms standby to open fire. They may try to send a formation of drones or decoys against us first, so make sure our gunners exercise strict discretion."

As his crew scurried to carry out his orders, S'Elani was torn between the excitement of impending battle and the nagging doubt instilled in him by Captain Shelby's words. He had clawed his way up the ranks of the Starforce, despite his having come from a lower-middle ranked Sept. However, S'Elani had been denied leadership of one of the battle fleets that had shattered the Son'a defensive lines, finding himself instead commanding a motley assortment of ships originally tasked as a ready reserve force. Now, finally, he was leading men in battle against a worthy opponent, an action that he hoped would accrue both he and his Sept many honors.

"Sir..." the sensor-operator's voice was tinged with alarm, "The second formation of Federation ships is not dropping out of warp. They are still on an intercept course. If they continue, they will converge with our formation in fifteen seconds."

S'Elani stared at the unlikely tactic as the oncoming element of Federation craft became visible through the surrounding sensor interference. "Are they mad?" he wondered aloud. "Unless they've become inexplicably suicidal, I think..." then, remembering Shelby's prescient admonition, the nauarch was torn by sudden dread, "Fire! All ships and platforms, fire every weapon and brace for impact. Shields to full!"

Twenty-five asteroids, measuring between Class-2 and Class-4 in mass, had been accelerated to warp speed through the ingenious use of warp-sustainer engines and the warp-tugs provided by the expansive asteroid mining operation located in the Deltived system. Once brought up to speed, the sustainer engines implanted on their surfaces kept the giant rocks at warp and on course for the Briar Patch. Sensor decoys placed on them gave off erroneous sensor returns, making each look like a certain class of known Starfleet vessel.

Now, as the enormous chunks of planetary debris bore down on the tight-knit Alshain formation at the mouth of the Nedric Strait, the quantum warheads buried deep within each of them detonated. The result was that the blockaded area was suddenly awash in tens of thousands of hurtling pieces of rock traveling at hyper-relativistic speeds. Even if the Alshain had activated their navigational deflectors in concert, such a massive onslaught of destructive mass would have easily overwhelmed them. With all power dedicated to their weapons and shields, the Alshain formation was essentially naked before the force of the oncoming storm.

The Starforce vessels opened up with everything they had, for all the good it did them. It was like firing a shotgun into a descending avalanche of rock, a desperately empty gesture. The warp velocity shards sliced effortlessly through their shields, rending ships apart with unbelievable ease and engulfing the minefield in a fratricidal spasm of mutual annihilation. In less than one one-hundredth of a second, thirty-one Alshain warships, all five weapons platforms, and ninety-six percent of the minefield had been completely destroyed. The three remaining ships were holed-through, spilling atmosphere and radiation into the void as they hung uselessly in space, defenseless.

"Send to all ships," Shelby said as she surveyed the carnage on the main viewer. "Approach with caution to collect survivors and deactivate the remainder of the minefield. Inform Admiral Jellico that we've broken the blockade."

USS *Enterprise* - Federation Task Force Peacekeeper - Ba'ku System - The Briar Patch (Klach D'Kel Brakt)

Picard's finger hovered mere centimeters from the door chime, his heart thudding so loudly in his chest he feared it would be audible to the crew members passing by in the corridor.

He wanted desperately to see her, to hold and comfort her. Despite those yearnings, another part of him dreaded their reunion. Anij's home had been wiped out, her species very nearly rendered extinct, and Jean-Luc Picard had as much as allowed it to happen.

Had he wanted to badly enough, Picard knew he could have broken with his orders and proceeded to the Ba'ku system weeks ago. It would have cost him his captaincy, to be sure, but he was certain the *Enterprise* and her exceptional crew could have held the Alshain at bay long enough to rescue the planet's inhabitants. And now, in light of his actions as task force commander, Picard would likely still lose command of his beloved ship, and that failure would burn alongside the destruction of the Ba'ku on the pyre of his indecision.

It was, perhaps, his own gnawing sense of regret over this tragedy that had convinced him to allow Sandhurst to go in search of Pell Ojana. As much as he himself had wanted to come to Anij's rescue, he felt he could not in good conscience hold the *Gibraltar's* captain in check. Damn the cloaking device. Damn protocol and precedent. If he could help Sandhurst rescue a Starfleet officer who was coincidentally Donald's former lover, then perhaps at least one positive thing might yet emerge from this calamity.

He gathered his nerve and Picard pressed the button. Anij's voice issued forth a moment later, bidding him to enter.

He stepped inside to find her standing silhouetted against the viewport, every bit as radiantly beautiful as he remembered. At a loss for anything else to say, Picard said, "I hope the accommodations are to your liking."

She moved toward him suddenly, hugging him tightly in an urgent embrace that was more visceral need than passion. "Oh, Jean-Luc" she murmured. "They're gone. All of them, dead." The brave façade she'd worn for the others collapsed in the heat of Picard's presence. "I waited for you, but you never came..."

He closed his eyes and willed himself to be strong for her. He owed her that much, at least.

USS *Gibraltar*

Taiee walked into Sickbay in response to Dr. Murakawa's summons. She experienced a momentary flutter in her stomach as she reminded herself that this was no longer *her* domain. The fact that Murakawa had been proven right in regards to Taiee's dependence upon the medical holograms only salted the wound to the lieutenant's pride.

Murakawa was waiting for her at the door to the CMO's office. She gestured for Taiee to enter first, and Murakawa followed the nurse practitioner inside, unexpectedly taking a seat in a chair on the guests' side of the desk. Taiee hesitated and gave the doctor a confused look. Murakawa merely smiled patiently at her, "It's your office, Lieutenant."

Taiee sat gingerly in her chair, looking almost as if she expected some kind of booby-trap. None was forthcoming, and Taiee gestured to the padd in Murakawa's hand. "Something you needed me to see, Doctor?"

Murakawa nodded as she elaborated, "It's your department's personnel files, Lieutenant. I was trying to chase down the details behind some glaring discrepancies that I've discovered in your Sickbay staffing."

'*So there it is,*' Taiee thought sourly, '*The sound of the other shoe dropping.*' Carefully reigning in her response, she replied as evenly as she could manage, "And what are those, Doctor?"

Murakawa shook her head in evident disbelief. She set the padd on the tabletop between them and pushed it across to Taiee. "These aren't the people I've been working with the past two days while you've been planetside."

Taiee's confusion only deepened, and her irritation percolated to the surface. "Explain yourself, Doctor" she snapped tiredly.

As she turned to face the transparent partition, Murakawa gestured to the staff in the main Sickbay ward that were presently caring for Elloran, Tarlac, Son'a, Ba'ku, and Alshain patients under the watchful eye of the security division. "From their service jackets, your staff appear to be made up of some very unremarkable personnel, some of whom appeared to be on their last legs in Starfleet Medical."

Taiee leaned forward on the cusp of launching into a vehement defense of her people, but Murakawa's curious smile brought her up short.

The physician gave Taiee a strangely approving look. "Your people are good, Lieutenant, quite good. Their triage work and mass casualty typing are outstanding. However, according to their performance evaluations from their most recent assignments prior to *Gibraltar*, most of them were listed as merely meeting their basic service requirements. I'm trying to figure out how such people have unexpectedly gelled into a first-rate medical team."

"We train hard, Doctor, and this ship has seen its fair share of action."

"No doubt," Murakawa responded. "That being said, the only common denominator I'm able to come up with in this equation... is you."

"Me?" Taiee frowned, uncertain as to where this was headed.

"Look, I still think I'm right about your over-reliance on the EMH, but I've found out that in all other respects, I've underestimated you, Lieutenant, and I'm sorry. I'd become so wrapped up in trying to mold you into my idea of the perfect Chief Medical officer that I didn't take the time to appreciate the effect you've had on this ship as a whole, and your department in particular. I've discovered that to this crew, you're quite a bit more than just the CMO. In fact, I've heard more than one person describe you as being the emotional center to the ship, something like a combination of den mother and counselor."

"I... uh... thank you" stammered Taiee, thrown by conversation's sudden shift in direction.

"Of course," Murakawa amended, "I'm still of the opinion that as good as you are, you could be better."

Taiee reddened slightly, “I’d come to uncomfortable realization that you were correct about the EMH, Doctor. Down on the planet, I had almost none of the proper equipment to conduct surgery on wounds as severe as Lar’ragos’, and I kept having to remind myself that I couldn’t have the hologram advise me, or step in to take over.”

Murakawa nodded. “Listen, I apologize for inflicting the 24/QPS on you and your staff so suddenly. I still believe you and they are more than capable of completing that evaluation scenario, if you put your minds to it. That being said, it’s not a requirement. As it appears this mission is coming to an end soon, I’m turning control of the ship’s medical department back over to you. Until I leave, I’ll remain in an advisory capacity, assisting where needed.”

Taiee generated her first genuine smile since before the away mission to Ba’ku. “Thank you, Doctor. I appreciate the kind words, as well as the firm kick in my complacency.”

Ministry of War - Central Ministries Complex, Governance Archology - Alshain Proper

Nauarch Yol A’Yaud paused for the briefest of moments before delivering the report. He knew it would spell the end to his illustrious military career, and perhaps his life as well. He girded himself for the exarch’s reaction as he announced, “I have... unfortunate news from the Nedric Strait, Sire.”

Jedalla, now dressed in the traditional robes of his august station, held very still in his seat at the head of the massive briefing table. The exarch’s ears twitched ever so slightly as the hair on his muzzle bristled. “What news is this, Nauarch?”

“Apparently, the 5th of the 3rd has been completely wiped out by the follow-on Starfleet task force. We’re still not certain precisely how.”

“Wiped out,” Jedalla echoed with disbelief. “Over thirty warships, supported by five heavy-yield weapons platforms and backed by your precious minefield. All gone, you say?”

A’Yaud blanched beneath his fur. “Yes, Sire. Unfortunately so.”

Jedalla’s calm only set A’Yaud more on edge. “How could this happen, Nauarch? How could you have *let* this happen?”

“Until I have more information, Eminence, I cannot answer that.” A’Yaud approached the exarch and knelt next to his seat to extend his head forward and bare his open throat to Jedalla. It was the ultimate sign of submission in their culture. “I beg of you, Sire, to make it a swift death.”

Jedalla gestured for his senior-most admiral to rise. “Spilling your blood won’t bring back our fleet, A’Yaud. The Federation will be made to pay for this crime, as well as their other transgressions against Greater Alshain.” With a note of weariness, the exarch settled slowly back in his chair. “Prepare the strike package we discussed earlier, Nauarch. I wish to see Federation worlds burning by nightfall tomorrow.”

Chapter 19

USS *Gibraltar* - Federation Task Force Peacekeeper - Near Bajora-Tava Forward Observation Post B'hala - Aulerg Moon - The Briar Patch (Klach D'Kel Brakt)

The bridge lights were cut to one-quarter illumination, the blue-tinged glow a visual cue that the starship was running under cloak. On the main viewscreen was the image of a small moon, more a rogue asteroid as Plazzi had pointed out, surrounded by over forty vessels of various configurations.

"Looks like someone is packing up to leave," remarked Sandhurst from the command chair.

"Or assembling a battle fleet," Ramirez posited from the well.

Lar'ragos zoomed the viewer image to enlarge two ships that were quite obviously transports of some kind, their exteriors dotted with cargo pods.

"Can we tell what's inside those, Lieutenant?" Sandhurst asked.

"No, sir. While cloaked we're restricted to passive sensor readings only."

Sandhurst turned to his senior officers and solicited input.

"I'd suggest decloaking and disabling the engines of those transports. That should be sufficient to get their attention, as well as underscore the vulnerability of their situation," Ramirez offered.

Lar'ragos countered, "True, sir, but if we open fire first thing, we'll have completely discounted the possibility of dialogue."

Sandhurst put on a look of mock surprise. "Dialogue, Pava? You?"

Lar'ragos bore a mysterious smirk. "You know what they say about El-Aurians, Captain. No better listeners, no worse enemies."

"Right." Sandhurst managed a tight smile. Turning to Ramirez, he ordered, "Back us off into the nebula. We'll decloak under cover and appear to have just stumbled upon their position. If they won't talk, we'll keep our cloaking advantage a secret until it's needed."

The crew moved to carry out their orders, and moments later, *Gibraltar* decloaked and nosed through the miasma, coming into full view of the Bajora-Tavan flotilla. The lozenge-shaped corsairs threw up a hasty picket defense between the starship and their vulnerable transports.

"Shield status, sir?" This from Ramirez, who watched with growing unease as multiple target locks centered on *Gibraltar* from the Bajora-Tavan vessels.

"Keep the shields down and our weapons systems cold, Commander. I don't want to give them any more provocation than we already have." To Ops, Sandhurst ordered, "Hail them, Mister Juneau."

There was a brief pause as the young woman had to force her eyes down to her console from where they'd been glued to the Bajoran formation on screen. She cleared her throat nervously, then announced, "Channel open, sir."

"This is the Federation starship *Gibraltar* to the Bajora-Tava. We respectfully request the return of our officer, Pell Ojana." He gestured for Juneau to mute the audio pickups.

From behind Sandhurst at Tactical, Lar'ragos said quietly, "And now what?"

Without looking back, the captain replied, "Now... we wait."

Tense moments crept past, until finally there was a terse audio reply. "*Federation starship, you will withdraw immediately or be destroyed.*"

Sandhurst sighed, "Great. More posturing." He stood from the command chair, walking to the front of the bridge as he gestured for Juneau to reopen the channel. "Bajora-Tava, I have approached you peacefully because there has been enough fighting and death in recent days. I know you have our officer, and I am prepared to withdraw immediately upon her return."

Another minute of excruciating silence ticked by, then the image of a Bajoran male in what appeared to be a strange combination of religious vestments and military uniform appeared on screen. "*I am Vadark Jobrin Adnai, leader of this grouping. To whom am I speaking?*"

"Captain Donald Sandhurst."

"*Very well then, Captain Sandhurst. We have you at a disadvantage. Although I can appreciate your peaceful intent, we are involved in a complex operation at this time. Due to our relative vulnerability at this moment, I'm sure you can understand the necessity of your departing this area immediately.*"

Sandhurst inclined his head toward the viewer, "And we shall, as soon as Commander Pell has been handed over."

"*And why do you believe your Commander Pell is among us?*"

The captain paused briefly to close his eyes and rub his temples tiredly. "Vadark, your people ambushed our away team to the surface of the Ba'ku planet and then attacked my ship and abducted a member of my crew while seriously injuring several others in the process. In short,

you've given me more than sufficient provocation to employ more active means to secure her release." He looked up and directed a serious expression towards the man on the other end of the transmission. "I'd rather avoid that scenario if at all possible."

"Are you making threats, Captain?"

He sidestepped Jobrin's pointed question and replied, "You are dealing with one of two possible situations, Vadark. The first possibility is that I have more than the one ship you see before you, and that the others are awaiting my word to determine whether to approach as friends, or to attack."

Jobrin's expression darkened. "And the other possibility, Captain?"

"The other is that you are facing an extremely determined man who is either angry or unstable enough to take a single ship into the midst of your fleet. A man who might harbor deep feelings for Pell Ojana, and would do almost anything imaginable to see her safely returned to her ship and crew."

Sandhurst took a step closer to the screen. "Imagine what such a man might do if he thought Ojana was either dead or beyond his capacity to recover?" Sandhurst's red-rimmed eyes shimmered brightly, hinting at the roiling sea of emotion contained within him. "Personally, if I were you, I'd hope the man I was facing merely had a hidden fleet of ships at his disposal. Safer for everyone, I'd think."

The vadark took stock of the situation, weighing what he knew of Sandhurst through the Emissary's exploration of Pell's mind via the Orb of Transcendence. Ultimately, he decided that the man might be capable of just about anything. The vulnerability of the Bajoran fleet was too great. The presence of thousands of women and children meant the very essence of the next generation of their culture was at risk. Besides, he mused, his people might yet require some leniency on behalf of the Federation in the struggle yet to be waged for the hearts and minds of the Bajoran people.

Ramirez's gaze was directed at Lar'ragos, who held it steadily. His finger hovered over the control that would raise shields and bring the ship's weapons systems to life.

"I agree to your terms, Captain. Pell Ojana will be returned to you in one hour. Remain exactly where you are and make no changes to your present posture. Any signs of shields or weapons going online will be assumed to be gestures of hostile intent and we will act accordingly."

"Very well," Sandhurst replied. "One hour." He gestured behind his back for Juneau to cut the transmission, and the screen went dark. Sandhurst turned to look at his senior staff, most of who were staring at him in disbelief. Lar'ragos directed a relieved smile at Ramirez who merely shook her head bemusedly. A wry grin flitted across Sandhurst's features as he admonished the crew, "Oh, ye of little faith..."

This time the Emissary inhabited the body of a low-ranking technician. Only the soft red glow of his eyes and the presence of the Little Orb in his hands gave his true identity away to the guards assigned to watch Pell's cell.

She awoke slowly after he entered the modest yet comfortable living space. Pell blinked, stretching as she sat up and stared at the man in confusion. "Can I help you?" Then she noticed the eyes, "Oh... it's you."

"Hello again, Pell Ojana."

Pell rubbed the sleep from her eyes and muttered icily, "What do you want?"

"It is nearly time for you to go home," the Emissary said, opening the small case to expose the shimmering hourglass that Pell had come to fear.

"Yes, you'd mentioned your designs on Bajor earlier," she said, frowning at what normally would have been a religious icon to her.

"You misunderstand, Ojana," the Emissary explained patiently. "Though the Bajora-Tava will go to Bajor in due time, you are being returned to your ship."

"Aegis?" she asked, still throwing off the last vestiges of her torpor. "No... of course not, you must mean *Gibraltar*."

"Precisely so, Ojana. Your friend Sandhurst is apparently quite persistent."

She sat up, "If I'm being released, why put me through this again?"

The Emissary conveyed passable regret through the technician's features. "I'm afraid you cannot be allowed to upset our plans, Ojana. Your knowledge of my intent... of *our* intent... is too great."

"You think you can move your whole society fifty light-years across Federation space to Bajor without being detected and intercepted? That's ludicrous." Pell shook her head.

"I have planned for just such an eventuality since first transporting the Bajora-Tava to the Prophets' Veil, child. We will move slowly, biding our time, but we will eventually cast out the false gods and see a day when Bajor is truly liberated."

"You're mad," she hissed.

"Perhaps, child, to see beyond time and to exist without physical limitations is a form of madness. If so, I will accept your diagnosis. It changes nothing." He moved the shimmering orb shard toward her.

Pell recoiled, pressing herself against the wall on the other side of her bunk as she tried to fortify her mind against the intrusive assault. It was

to no avail, and as the Emissary slipped into the substance of her consciousness, he began his work.

USS Gibraltar

Pell Ojana materialized on the transporter pad looking disoriented. She took a hesitant step forward, only to collapse, falling into Sandhurst's arms as he rushed the platform. Taiee helped the captain place Pell upon the waiting a-grav gurney, then she and a medical technician spirited the Bajoran out into the corridor.

The captain stood there, clearly struggling against nearly overwhelming emotions as Pell was whisked out of the room. He felt a hand alight atop his shoulder, and looked back to find Lar'ragos behind him, offering silent comfort. He took his friend's strength as his own, steeled himself, set his shoulders, and followed the medical team in the direction of Sickbay.

USS Enterprise - Federation Combined Task Force Iron Fulcrum - Departing The Briar Patch (Klach D'Kel Brakt) at Warp 7

"...and we have avoided any further encounters with the Alshain Starforce as our newly combined task force exits the Briar Patch, sans the Gibraltar. Captain Shelby is to be commended for her creative and effective tactics in overwhelming the Alshain blockading force, and thereby affecting a rescue of Task Force Peacekeeper. I have ordered a complete withdrawal from former Son'a territory, leaving behind many fine men and women from the Argonaut, Bellerophon, and Zhukov. Their sacrifices will not be forgotten."

Picard ended his log entry and turned to stare out his ready room's viewport at one of the retreating tendrils of the Briar Patch. He drew his gaze away from the maudlin sight as he picked up a padd and once again read its contents, shocked at the implications of the document.

His door chimed and he bid the person to enter. Riker stepped through, wearing an incredulous but clearly upbeat expression. "I take it you've read it, sir?"

Picard nodded slowly and set the padd down gently, as if to do otherwise might jostle the enclosed data and alter the significance of the vital message. "Indeed, Number One. I don't mind saying this comes a something of a surprise. I hadn't even dispatched my complete after-action report."

"Maybe that's as intended, Captain." Riker stood before Picard's desk, hands resting atop one of the chairs opposing the workstation. "Perhaps if the president knew the full details of what went on in the Briar Patch, he'd have been less likely to issue a blanket pardon of all Starfleet personnel involved in the mission?"

Picard blew an irritated breath through his nose before he reflected, "That sounds damned cynical, Will, especially as this action will undoubtedly prove the last nail in Santiago's political coffin."

"Cynical but correct," Riker countered.

"Probably," Picard conceded dourly. "I came here to forge a lasting peace between these peoples, and instead started a shooting war that's left thousands dead and created tens-of-thousands of refugees. I feel like I failed the man in every respect."

"The president knew it was a gamble, Captain. In the end, if we'd sat by and done nothing, we'd have become morally complicit in the Alshain atrocities, and most of those people we've rescued would have died as a result." Riker bowed his head slightly, "We've done good works here, sir, and saved a great many people from certain annihilation. If nothing else, I'd hope you'd take some solace in that fact."

Picard offered his exec a wan, distracted smile. "I do, Will, I do. I simply don't like the fact of not only failing the original mission, but being given what amounts to a free pass in regards to some of our more questionable actions."

Riker quirked an eyebrow. "Would your conscience feel better if we'd been ordered to fall on our swords instead, Captain?"

"In fact, it would, Number One, no matter how illogical that sounds." Picard shook his head. "Cheating death I can live with. Cheating responsibility, that's another matter entirely."

Riker sought to change the subject and hopefully lighten his captain's mood, "And where to now, sir?"

As he gestured to his desktop computer terminal, Picard revealed, "We've been ordered to rendezvous with Admiral Jellico aboard the *Challenger* and transfer over our Son'a and Klingon prisoners to Starfleet Security."

"Well," Riker remarked dryly, "there goes my day." He gave Picard a self-deprecating grin, "It's bad enough having to call Shelby 'sir' now... do I really have to play host to Edward Jellico too?"

It was the first genuine laugh Picard had mustered all day. "I'll tell him you were unavoidably detained, Commander."

Ministry of War - Central Ministries Complex, Governance Archology - Alshain Proper

Exarch Jedalla, flanked by his security detail and trailed by his entourage moved briskly through the crowded concourses of the bustling Ministry of War. The exarch had, as he'd so delicately put it earlier that morning, a 'date with destiny.' On this day the Federation would howl in agony, suffering the consequences of their arrogant interference in Alshain affairs.

As he approached the heavily guarded entrance to the Strategic Operations Center, Jedalla caught sight of a syndic, a member of the elusive

priesthood. Those of that arcane order typically eschewed such mundane matters of governance as the waging of wars, so the presence of the old priest, clad in competing folds of gold and crimson was clearly anomalous.

Jedalla slowed to observe the man, who turned suddenly and lunged towards the exarch with something in his hand. Jedalla and his retinue were sprinkled with a red, viscous substance before members of his security detail tackled the priest to the floor. In the man's hand he clutched the skull of a juvenile Itrob, its eyes and mouth leaking the same red fluid. "May your Sept die with you," hissed the old man. "Weakness, indolence and idiocy I curse upon your children as I revoke the heavens' mandate!"

Jedalla's paladin bodyguards quickly disarmed the priest of his consecrated yet otherwise harmless decanter. The exarch experienced a cold chill of recognition as his mind finally grasped the significance of what had just occurred. He looked down to see splashes of red upon his regal cloak, and bile rose in his throat as he saw it for what it was... the mingled blood of the lowliest tier of Alshain society, the Outcasts. By spraying Jedalla with the stinking, cloying blood of the unwashed and invoking his curse, the syndic had symbolically neutralized Jedalla's exarchal powers, leaving him vulnerable to...

"Weapons down!" The cry echoed from multiple directions at once. From within the great, milling crowd of officers and enlisted personnel, a heavily armed strike team emerged, their aimed weapons several orders of magnitude more formidable than the largely ceremonial pistols and blades carried by his paladin escorts.

A polemarch, a general in the Exarchal Guards Army, stepped forward with his teeth bared and his ears pinned back with aggressive intent. "Jedalla, tell your men to stand down! I have no desire to see more blood spilled, most especially noble blood."

'Jedalla,' the exarch noted bitterly, "*Not Sire.*" He worked to keep his voice steady as he ordered his men to disarm. The sullen paladins looked as though they would still fight, with or without weapons, but they dutifully obeyed Jedalla's command.

The soldiers enveloped the paladins, marching them away as another group of officers encircled Jedalla. "You'll come with us," growled the polemarch as he moved to the head of the procession.

The walk was a short one, leading to a modest sized meeting room off the operations center. As Jedalla entered, the soldiers in front of him parted to reveal a group of Alshain nobles seated around the table. They represented some, though clearly not all of the Peerage, the quasi-representative body that served to advise the exarch.

"What is this?" Jedalla snarled. "Betrayal of your oaths of fealty? Each of you will see your Septs stricken from history for this affront!"

War Minister Orthlin C'Oemnm appeared to speak for the group. "Exarch, I would apologize for this unprecedented act, but you left us little choice. Your planned attack on the Federation cannot be allowed to take place."

Spittle flecked Jedalla's bristling muzzle as his eyes widened with disbelief. "You would see us cower before the Federation? Will you be the first to prostrate yourself before their ambassador, C'Oemnm?"

C'Oemnm appeared decidedly uncomfortable in the face of his sovereign's anger, but he continued in the same patient cadence. "Such a brazen assault on Federation citizens would give their government little choice but to retaliate, and despite the recent cooperation of the Klingon dissidents, the Empire would be obligated by treaty to join the Federation in a retaliatory attack. The end result would find the Exarchate in similar circumstances to the Cardassian Union, our infrastructure utterly destroyed and what remains of our grand cities occupied by enemy soldiers."

"They would not dare!" Jedalla roared. "After their nearest colonies along the border were obliterated, the Federation would fear that we had more of these Son'a weapons and would sue for peace while holding their Klingon allies in check."

C'Oemnm sighed in exasperation, "We cannot take that chance, Exarch." He looked to the man beseechingly as he, "Each of us here has the greatest respect for what you have accomplished. The Exarchate is once again an ascending power in the quadrant. We have crushed the Son'a and their slave races, annexed their territory and resources, and in so doing our people have experienced a rebirth of their collective pride and national identity."

"Then trust me now, Orthlin! Release me and I will lead us to even greater heights. In time, even the Klingons will kneel before the might of our armed forces."

"Perhaps someday," C'Oemnm replied sourly, "but not today." He turned to look at the polemarch, the war minister gestured for Jedalla to be removed. As he looked back at his now imprisoned monarch, C'Oemnm said quietly, "You will not be harmed, Exarch. Merely... detained, until such time as we have regained our footing. Then we will re-examine your place in the Exarchate."

Jedalla's defiant screams could be heard echoing throughout the halls of the Ministry of War as he was dragged away to begin his long term of banishment.

Camp Khitomer Compound - Khitomer Colony, Klingon Empire

Vice Admiral Jellico materialized alongside Captain Yejokk, prepared to surrender his prisoner to the custody of the Klingon authorities. Strangely, the reception committee had no weapons or restraints in evidence, and the two Defense Force officers present acknowledged Yejokk's arrival with respectful nods.

Jellico touched his combadge and relayed an order to the orbiting starship to release Yejokk's restraint manacles. Seconds later, the large cuffs snapped open and clattered to the stone floor.

Jellico turned to face the rogue Klingon officer. "You've performed a great service for both our peoples, Captain. You have my personal

gratitude, though unofficially, of course. My only regret is that your participation in this affair was discovered.”

Yejokk smiled grimly in response. “My capture was unfortunate, but it was a calculated risk, Admiral. In the end, our task was accomplished. The Alshain hunger for territory has been sated, and they will be hard pressed to maintain their grip on the Klach D'Kel Brakt. I doubt the Exarchate will prove a viable threat to either the Federation or the Empire in the coming decade.”

Jellico nodded cautiously, “The deception was unpalatable, but necessary.”

“Such clashes are inevitable after a conflict as destabilizing as the Dominion War has been, Admiral” Yejokk offered. “Think of this as a cleansing brush fire, burning away the detritus and preventing a larger, more destructive confrontation at some later time. The subterfuge may not have been honorable in the strictest sense, but it was essential.”

He generated a half-hearted smile and Jellico observed, “Well put, Captain. With the exception of your capture, the remainder of the operation proceeded as planned. Neither President Santiago nor Captain Picard appears aware that they’ve been maneuvered into playing unwitting parts in our little production.”

Jellico spared a quick glance around the premises, noting the Klingon banners hanging from the vaulted ceilings overhead, each one emblazoned with the name of a family touched by the Romulan attack on Khitomer a generation earlier. The names of Ra’Skan, Kathul, Mogh, and a procession of others; each a stark reminder of the price of allowing one’s enemies to pursue aggression unchecked. Jellico looked back to Yejokk, “And how will you fare?”

“K’Vada is not unreasonable, nor unmerciful. I will continue to play the role of the renegade provocateur for public consumption, no matter what the personal cost. If I must die for my failure, at least it will be a quick death.”

“I hope,” Jellico said, tapping his communicator, “that when I meet my end that it will be for as noble a purpose.” Just before the transporter beam engulfed him, the admiral said, “Die well, Yejokk, son of Drast.”

Epilogue – Tidying Up

There was a moment's hesitation between Sandhurst pressing the door's enunciator, and Plazzi's reluctant sounding invitation to enter. He stepped into the stateroom and Sandhurst found Plazzi busy packing up his belongings; an assortment of cargo boxes and suitcases littered the cabin.

"You don't waste time, do you, Elisto?"

The older man smiled mirthlessly as he folded a shirt and placed it into a carryall. "I've got to do this before I lose my nerve, Captain. That's what kept me in Starfleet so long my first time around; I'm a sentimental fool who gets too attached to his shipmates."

Sandhurst nodded wordlessly as he looked past the science officer and out the viewport where white stars shone against an obsidian backdrop, all signs of the accursed Briar Patch now far behind them. Sandhurst glanced at a framed picture of Plazzi and a woman Donald presumed to be his wife. The two were smiling broadly and were surrounded by children and grandchildren. "The feeling is mutual, you know," the captain said finally.

Plazzi paused from his task to look up. "I know, and I'm sorry I'm leaving on a sour note."

Sandhurst frowned, "How so?"

"Popping off at you like that on the bridge, it was inexcusable." Plazzi shook his head, his cheeks coloring as he recalled the incident. "That was the big clue that it's time for me to get a nice, cushy planetside assignment until Starfleet ends the stop-loss order and I can muster out again. When you wanted to try that stunt with the engines to get around the Son'a, all I could think of was my family. I'm ashamed to admit that at that moment nothing else mattered, not you, not the away team. Nothing.

"You didn't fail in your duty, if that's what you're afraid of, Elisto. If anything, you, Pell, and Ashok may have talked me out of a suicidal plan that would have resulted in disaster."

Plazzi grimaced, "That's not the point, sir, and you know it. A captain's orders must be followed, most especially in a crisis, or lives can be lost. I... I just can't do that anymore."

"Fair enough," Sandhurst conceded. "I told you before that the moment you gave me the word, I'd have you to the nearest starbase as fast as possible." He met Plazzi's trouble gaze, "You're sure this is what you want?"

"Captain," Elisto said softly, "the word is given."

Sandhurst extended his hand. "And so it is. We're heading for Starfleet's new shipyard at Pacifica to make repairs. You can catch a transport from there back to Earth."

Plazzi shook the captain's hand firmly. "Thank you, sir. It's been a pleasure serving with you these last six months."

"Likewise, Elisto. Likewise."

Sandhurst's next stop was two decks down, a smaller interior cabin whose door tag still shown blank, it's occupant as yet undecided if *Gibraltar* would be his new assignment.

Ensign Kuenre Shanthi stood awkwardly from his dining table as Sandhurst entered the cabin at the younger man's prompting. He smiled, "Relax, Mister Shanthi. Might I have a moment of your time?"

"Of course, sir." Shanthi moved to the sitting area and gestured for Sandhurst to have a seat across from him.

Sandhurst settled into a chair and spared no time in getting to the meat of the matter. "Commander Plazzi's leaving at our next layover. I need a new chief science officer. The job is yours if you want it, Ensign."

Shanthi looked painfully uncertain. "I've given it a lot of thought, Captain, and I'd previously decided to accept the post if you offered... but now..."

Sandhurst leaned forward, "Ensign, I'm truly sorry for what happened to you on Ba'ku. With time and the proper medical intervention, you *will* get better. Take it from someone who knows. But, in the words of a famous starship captain, risk is our business. I can't promise you that nothing bad will ever happen to you again. No one can."

Shanthi stared off into the void, a distant look affixed to his features. "I realize that, sir, but I'm having trouble shaking this off and getting past it."

As he sounded an empathetic note, Sandhurst countered, "Something that awful, that *invasive*, will be with you for a long time to come. Regardless, you have to decide where your career goes from here. You're in a unique position, as I'm sure you're well aware. At a word, you could have nearly any science posting in the Fleet..."

"Captain, I'd never—"

Sandhurst waved him off. "I'm not suggesting that you would, Kuenre. I'm merely noting that you have an option available to you that few others have. The pressure of having that 'out' only adds to your burden, am I right?"

Shanthi nodded grudgingly.

“So, what’s it to be? Do you spend the rest of your career safe behind a desk or in a laboratory someplace, or do you spend it out here, where your strength, courage, and knowledge will be put to the test on a regular basis?”

The young man looked torn.

“Kuenre, I know that you want to make your own way in Starfleet, to chart a course different from that of your mother. *Gibraltar’s* as good a place to start as any. You can be sure that serving on this ship, nobody will be able to accuse you of currying favoritism with Admiral Shanthi, or anyone else.”

The young man’s resolve seemed to firm before Sandhurst’s eyes. The look of consternation on his face was replaced by one of cautious optimism. “I accept, Captain.”

Somewhere in the Cerulean Sea...

The outgoing tide lapped at the white, crystalline beaches of Isla del Cristal, a resort island in Pacifica’s Crescent de la Luz chain. Sundancer palms waved in the warm breeze under a blazing yellow sun, making the setting the personification of many humans’ ideal of paradise.

Donald Sandhurst, clad only in a pair of Bermuda shorts, lay comfortably atop a lounge chair, a tall sweating glass of some tropical drink concoction grasped lightly in one hand. “Sorry I had to drag you back here,” he noted languidly to his friend. “I know it’s hell, but this was the closest shipyard available.”

“Mmmm,” Pell Ojana replied noncommittally from beneath her shaded eyewear, “Marooned on Pacifica twice in as many weeks. If this is part of Starfleet’s post-prison supervision plan, I’ve got to say, I approve wholeheartedly.”

Sandhurst marshaled his strength and committed fully to the arduous task of having to raise his glass to his mouth and take a long drink from the straw. “Speaking of plans, Commander, do you have any thoughts on your next posting?”

A pregnant pause followed, and Pell finally replied just as Sandhurst was mustering the energy to turn his head to look at her. “I know a delightful little escort ship in desperate need of a diplomatic officer. I’m good friends with the captain. I don’t think getting assigned there will be much of a problem.”

“I can’t imagine it would be,” Sandhurst agreed. “In fact I can think of one admiral right off the top of my head who’d be tickled to sign the transfer orders.” He turned his head, squinting in the direct sunlight. “Increase sunscreen another ten percent,” he instructed the silently hovering servitor drone. The small floating sphere ionized the air over the pair and reduced the glare accordingly. “What about Glover?” he asked cautiously. “I’m sure he’ll be getting another ship soon.”

She sighed, as if the very question was an intrusion upon her present blissful state. “I can’t be around Terrence and Jasmine right now. Too much angst there, and if I’m near either of them I’m going to end up in the middle of it.”

The sudden tension that had set in Sandhurst’s shoulders when he posed the question ebbed quickly. “You know,” he teased, “most ships our size aren’t assigned a diplomatic officer.”

“Now you’re complaining?” she asked, her voice laced with mock consternation. “Remember, I’ve read your ship’s logs, Sandy. Believe me, you *need* a diplomatic officer. You and your crew operate with all the subtlety of a brick through a glass window.”

Sandhurst chuckled at that as he fished around in his glass for a piece of ice which he then drew up Pell’s exposed stomach beside him. Rather than the indignant howl he’d been aiming for, instead his efforts elicited a low moan. “Naughty captain. You’ll have to wait for that, sir. Dinner first, then aerobic activity. I’m not *that* easy after all.”

“That’s my girl,” he replied lazily.

The combadge in his pocket vibrated, and the tiny comms earpiece he’d inserted came to life. “*Captain, have you got a minute?*” It was Ramirez.

“Mm-hmmm,” he sub-vocalized in response.

Just then, as luck would have it, Pell sat up. “Okay, I’ve reached maximum thermal absorbance. Time for a swim. Care to join me?”

“I’ll sit this one out, thanks.”

“Your loss.” Pell leaned forward and kissed him. It was a passionate, lingering kiss full of promise. Then she turned and ran down and into the breaking surf.

A shadow fell across Sandhurst, who looked up to find a winsome female standing over him, wearing a revealing bikini top with a sarong wrapped around her waist. The captain blinked as the woman stepped through the lensing sunblock field, disrupting it. He squinted around a raised hand and held up his drink, “Thanks, but I’m only half finished with this one.”

“I guess it’s a good thing that I wasn’t offering to refill it for you, sir,” Ramirez noted with a wry smile.

Sandhurst jerked forward and sloshed his drink onto his lap, “Oh, *frinx!*” Ramirez couldn’t be sure if he was merely sunburned or blushing as he contritely offered, “Apologies, Exec. I didn’t recognize you.”

“So I gathered,” Ramirez said distractedly, her eyes on the figure now swimming out beyond the breakers. “Anything from the experts?” she asked.

“No,” he replied as he dabbed at his lap with a towel. “Nothing the Vulcans or Betazoids can detect, anyway.”

Ramirez asked pointedly, “What do you think?”

He followed her gaze out to where Pell cut through the water with sure strokes, and Sandhurst’s voice tightened. “I honestly don’t know. She seems fine. Better than fine, actually, more content than I’ve seen her in years. As for whether she’s a ticking time bomb for the Bajora-Tava... only time will tell.” He abandoned the straw and took a long draught of his drink, finishing it. “Needless to say, Starfleet wants us to steer clear of Bajor for awhile.”

“That makes sense.”

He shifted topics and asked, “Everything ready to go for Plazzi’s farewell party tonight?”

“Yes, sir. We’ve reserved the community hall and all four of the resort’s holodecks, room enough for about four hundred people. With the SCE puttering around on *Gibraltar* for the next four days the entire crew’s freed up to attend. Taiee and her people are putting up the decorations right now. Should be a smashing get together.”

“And Plazzi?”

Ramirez glanced up at the sun, then turned and pointed out to the horizon using dead reckoning. “He’s out deep-sea fishing with Pava, about two-hundred kilometers that way. They’ll be back before nightfall, though.”

“Sounds like you’ve covered all the bases, Commander. Nicely done.”

“Thank you, sir.”

His brain crunched the numbers a bit more slowly due to the heavily lubricated state of his synapses. Sandhurst frowned suddenly. “Wait, did you say four hundred? Isn’t that overkill? Our entire compliment is only one-hundred forty-three.”

“We’re expecting company, sir.”

He looked puzzled. “Odd, I thought we were the only Starfleet ship in orbit right now.”

Ramirez smirked as she explained, “Captain Shelby wants her chief medical officer back ASAP, and arranged to pick her up here. *Sutherland’s* due to warp in at nineteen-hundred hours.”

“Wait... you don’t mean...”

His XO nodded, grinning. “Oh, yes sir. Once I’d explained we were having a party, well... you know.”

“*Sutherland*,” Sandhurst echoed numbly. “Heaven help us.”

“Just so, sir.”

Three weeks later...

The transporter deposited them on a cobblestone pathway leading to a charming two-story country cottage, surrounded by meticulously trimmed foliage and blooming flowers. Anij looked around, drinking in the gently rolling hills in the distance, acres of land covered in some kind of harvestable vegetation.

“What are those, Jean-Luc?”

He smiled, “Those are vineyards, my dear. The people of this region grow a fruit called grapes that’s made into wine.”

She turned back to the house. “And the home?”

“It belongs to my family. This is La Barre, my home.”
