

A Matter of Faith

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A Matter of Faith

by [Gibraltar](#)

Summary

Gibraltar comes to the assistance of a stricken freighter carrying a hunted religious order. Without Starfleet assistance, their young leader could create a diplomatic crisis for the Federation and Cardassia.

Chapter 1

The relief convoy plodded along at a stately warp five, comprised of two dozen of the gargantuan Continent-class freighters escorted by four starships. The convoy's destination was Kontrellis IV, a Cardassian Class-M planet whose atmosphere had been laced with biogenic-disruptors during the final days of the war, a particularly nasty form of nanite engineered by the Dominion.

Over the past year Federation relief teams had made numerous attempts at thwarting the disruptors, but had only found middling success in slowing the planet's ecological collapse. The self-replicating nanites attacked bacteria on the surface and plankton-analogues in the world's oceans, undermining the foundation of all life on the planet.

Now agriculture had collapsed as crops withered and died along with tens-of-thousands of animal species which were unable to take sustenance from the blighted plants and grasses of the once fertile planet.

The convoy's cargo holds were filled with emergency foodstuffs, industrial replicators, and the parts for the first of many atmospheric processors needed to maintain the oxygen-levels in Kontrellis IV's atmosphere as its biosphere died.

Aboard the oldest of the escorting starships, a communications display lit up, indicating the detection of a rare and cherished commodity while on escort duty, something out of the ordinary.

Lieutenant (junior grade) Olivia Juneau's boredom was interrupted by the incoming transmission, weak though it was. She glanced back to the command chair, addressing the ship's first officer. "Commander, I'm picking up what looks to be an automated distress beacon. Point of origin is somewhere in Sector 23448, in the vicinity of the Liko system."

Commander Liana Ramirez set down the padd she'd been reading and tried to stop the look of relief from settling on her features. Someone else's misfortune should never be cause for celebration, she reminded herself, but convoy duty was so damnably dull.

"Try and get a better fix on the origin, Lieutenant," Ramirez ordered before toggling the comms. "Captain to the bridge."

A moment later, Captain Donald Sandhurst and Lt. Commander Pell Ojana arrived from the ready room, their drudging personnel review happily interrupted by the developing situation.

The thin and somewhat gaunt looking Sandhurst seated himself the command chair as Ramirez vacated it and assumed her usual station in the lower bridge well. "What have we got, Olivia?" he inquired.

Juneau rattled off the nature and specific coordinates of the transmission, adding, "I've inquired with the Gormra Array, and they identify a Bajoran Banik-class freighter as being at those coordinates."

Ramirez gave Sandhurst an inscrutable look. "I wouldn't put it past Cardassian insurgents or the Maquis to use a Bajoran freighter to stage an ambush, Captain."

"Certainly smells like a trap, sir," Pell agreed.

Sandhurst cocked his head as though weighing the odds. "Only one way to find out." He gestured at Juneau to open a channel, and as the circuit chirped active he issued, "This is Captain Sandhurst of the Federation starship *Gibraltar*. We have received a distress beacon from your ship. Please relay the nature of your emergency and what assistance you require."

He then eased back into the command chair. "See? Wasn't that easy?"

Juneau touched a hand to the micro-earpiece in her left ear. "Signal from *Königsberg*, sir. Captain Urut is ordering us to break away and investigate the distress call."

Pell frowned, the expression enhanced by her wrinkled Bajoran nose-ridge. "We've got a Defiant-class with us, and Urut wants *us* to go and take a look?"

"We *are* the most expendable," noted Lieutenant Pava Lar'ragos from the tactical station immediately behind the captain's chair, "technically speaking."

Pell directed a piercing look towards the smaller but well-toned El-Aurian man. "You say that like you enjoy getting thrown to the wolves."

Lar'ragos made a show of his exaggerated shrug. "Each according to his gifts."

A smirk flit briefly across Ramirez's features. "So, we go stick our hand in the box to find out what's inside?"

"Right," Sandhurst affirmed. "Operation High Hopes and Low Expectations."

Pell rubbed the back of her neck in a sure sign of exasperation. "You know how this is going to go, right? Does anyone remember what happened last time we responded to one of these?"

"Asteroid belt," Lar'ragos muttered, providing an abbreviated summary as though reciting a shopping list. "Big fight. Maquis. Border Service.

Irradiated captain. Dry-dock repairs.” He smacked his lips, “Andorian *hors d'oeuvres*.”

At Ops, Juneau turned back to shake her head at Lar’ragos, mouthing a horrified, “No!”

“Now, now,” Sandhurst chided. “We have a duty to respond, investigate, and assist where possible, regardless of whatever happened last time.”

“Response incoming, sir,” Juneau announced with a hint of surprise.

“Patch it through,” Sandhurst ordered, turning to share a raised eyebrow with Ramirez.

“Federation vessel, this is the Bajoran transport Rushaan, in transit from Bajor IV to the Nyberrite Alliance with passengers and cargo. We have been attacked by a Yelnar combat skiff and were able to make an escape. Due to damage suffered in that exchange, our warp engines have now failed and we are restricted to sub-light speeds. We believe more Yelnar ships are on the way to intercept us.”

Sandhurst turned to give Ramirez a questioning expression. “Yelnar, Commander?”

“A former vassal species to the Cardassians, sir. Their planet was conquered at roughly the same time as Bajor. However, the Yelnar were employed by the Cardassians as enforcers, keeping other subject species in line. Their planet was freed from occupation half a decade before Bajor, and they’ve kept a pretty low profile since then. They don’t trade with their neighbors much, and tend to stick to themselves.”

“Any idea why they’d jump a Bajoran transport?” he asked quietly.

“None, sir.”

Sandhurst looked to Pell. “Ojana, anything?”

The Bajoran officer shook her head. “The Yelnar were notorious on Bajor for being the lapdogs of the Cardassians, but I can’t recall any of them ever being posted there. We occasionally ran across them at Cardassian installations off-world when I was with the resistance. I don’t think there’s any diplomatic or commercial contact between Bajor and Yelna now, at least none that I know of.”

Sandhurst opened a navigation display on his armrest console, checking figures before toggling the comms open. “*Rushaan*, we are presently five hours from your location at maximum speed and are on our way. You may want to look for a good spot to hole up until we arrive.”

“Understood, Gibraltar. We’ve located a tendrill of the McAllister nebula that we can reach at impulse within the hour. I’m sending you the coordinates. We’ll see you when you arrive.”

“Any idea why the Yelnar would attack you?” Sandhurst inquired. “It’s a bit out of their way, and according to my officers they’ve never been known to engage in much piracy.”

There was a pregnant pause before the voice responded, “*No. No reason we can come up with, Captain.*”

Pell snorted and Ramirez made a skeptical face.

“Mister Lightner, set coordinates for that rendezvous and engage at warp eight.” Sandhurst turned to Pell, raising a finger to belay the protest she’d opened her mouth to voice. “Yes, I know this whole thing reeks of ambush, but we’ll take every precaution.”

“Hmm,” Lar’ragos mused from behind him. “Reeks of Ambush.”

“Don’t say it!” Juneau called back from Ops.

“Good band name,” Lar’ragos assessed with mock gravity.

Juneau groaned.

Sandhurst sighed.

* * *

Chapter 2

The tactical reconnaissance drones dematerialized, recalled by *Gibraltar* as the captain of the *Rushaan*, Dever Olos, looked on. He turned to regard Ramirez with a half-smile as he remarked, "Would I be correct in guessing that you've had some bad run-ins out here? You came aboard like we were carrying a legion of Jem'Hadar."

"Bad' would be something of an understatement, Captain," Ramirez replied in a conspiratorial tone. She glanced towards the other away team members, finding Lar'ragos and his four-person security detail outfitted in armored vests and cradling high-powered phaser rifles. The drones had beamed over first, and once the ship appeared secure, Ramirez and the security team had followed.

Now that she and they had given the craft a cursory once-over, Ramirez was prepared to bring the rest of the away team aboard. She tapped her combadge, "We're clear here, *Gibraltar*. Code Orange. Repeat, Code Orange. Send over the rest of the party."

The hum of the transporter sounded again, this time depositing the ship's hulking Bolian engineer, Lieutenant Ashok, alongside the comparatively diminutive chief medical officer, Lieutenant Taicee. Accompanying them were an additional medical technician and three more junior engineers.

Captain Dever led the group to the engineering compartment, a relatively cramped workspace that housed the old freighter's antiquated warp drive, a copy of a long-retired Cardassian drive system from the late 23rd century. Ashok and his team set to work as Taicee and her med-tech made their way to the ship's wardroom which served as a makeshift sickbay and began treating injured crew and passengers. Lar'ragos assigned two of his security personnel to each compartment.

As they left the medics to their work, Ramirez and Lar'ragos followed Dever into a dimly lit, congested corridor filled with exposed conduits. One of Dever's crewmen, a Bajoran man of impressive stature, brought up the rear and nearly filled the whole width of the passageway. "Interesting that your ship has a Jem'Hadar polaron cannon among its armaments, Captain," Lar'ragos noted.

"Helpful is the word I'd choose to use, Lieutenant," he replied amiably. "It gives us ten-times the punch we used to have, though as you've seen, it the power requirements play hell with our old engines."

"May I ask where you acquired such a weapon?" Ramirez queried.

"The Dominion War left a lot of wreckage behind," Dever clarified. "I'm sure I don't need to explain standard salvage rights to a Starfleet officer?"

"Just as I'm sure I don't need to remind you that the Bajoran government has several agreements in place that require their military and civilian ships to surrender any such armaments to the nearest allied outpost?" Ramirez retorted.

Dever ducked his head as the quartet passed through a pressure door. "No, I understand that. I also reserve the right not to give a damn about Federation restrictions." He glanced back, favoring Ramirez with a sly grin. "My crew and I do the run from Bajor to the Nyberrite Alliance twice per standard year. It's a six-month trip each way at warp five, with plenty of opportunity to get jumped by all manner of low-life characters. I've tangled with Tzenkethi, Breen, and Nausicaans just since the end of your war. We're in Federation controlled space for approximately a week of that journey, and the rest of the time we're very much on our own."

"Sounds familiar," Lar'ragos grunted, eliciting a sharp look from Ramirez.

"So what enticed the Yelnar to attack an outbound heavy cargo freighter so close to well-patrolled space lanes? They could have followed you and attacked later at a much safer location for them." Ever the tactician, the inconsistencies in Dever's story had been bothering Ramirez since their first subspace contact with the vessel.

"No idea, Commander. I haven't had any run-ins with the Yelnar before, and there weren't any survivors from the skiff that attacked us, so I have no clue as to what their goals were."

"Strange, that," Lar'ragos observed. "We scanned the wreckage on our approach to your position. That skiff was only about twice the size of a Starfleet runabout."

Dever stopped, turning to look past Ramirez at the El-Aurian. "Your point?"

"Nary a whit of cargo space," Lar'ragos replied. "Why attack a freighter if you can't make off with anything of value?"

Dever's expression hardened. "Perhaps I stuttered, Lieutenant? I just said that I don't know their motivations."

Lar'ragos nodded agreeably, producing his tricorder and opening the device. He held the display up for Dever to see. "Perhaps we should ask the six individuals to whom these Yelnar life-signs belong, Captain? They're only sixteen meters away, after all, in what I believe is a small compartment that doesn't appear on your manifest or schematics."

The phaser that suddenly appeared in Ramirez's hand stopped Dever's hand in its place, halfway to the Cardassian phaser secreted at the small of his back under his tunic.

"Let's revisit the 'I don't know' portion of your story, Captain," Ramirez pressed.

There was a heavy thud as the large crewman behind them collapsed to the deck, the weighty metal spanner he'd raised over his head now slipping from his insensate fingers.

"Oops," Lar'ragos offered.

* * *

Chapter 3

Ramirez had immediately called in additional security personnel and within ten minutes the freighter *Rushaan* had been secured and its crew detained.

"I want a complete manifest of everything and everyone aboard ASAP," Ramirez instructed Lar'ragos. "This might just be a smuggling operation, but I've got that itch in the back of my skull again. Something's just not right here."

"On it, sir," Lar'ragos affirmed, moving off to carry out her instructions.

She turned to Pell Ojana, who stood nearby looking morose. "You okay?" Ramirez asked her.

Pell started slightly, drawn from her reverie. "Hmm? Oh, yes, I suppose so. It's just that a Bajoran freighter is the closest I've been to home in a long time. The smell just got to me. Incense and hasperat, if I'm not mistaken." She offered a wan smile that was clearly forced.

Ramirez recalled that since *Gibraltar* had encountered an outlier Bajoran militant sect months earlier, Pell had been *persona-non-grata* on her homeworld. She had been in the presence of what the Vedek Assembly had categorized as a Pah-wraith, and was summarily judged to be spiritually contaminated by that event, despite all evidence to the contrary.

She offered Pell a supportive smile in return. "For what it's worth, I think the Vedeks are full of crap."

"You'll get no argument from me, Commander."

With that, the two officers moved through a narrow hatchway into the ship's hidden compartment, guarded on both sides by *Gibraltar* security personnel. Within the small hold was what appeared to be some manner of religious shrine, containing six members of the Yelnar species.

The Yelnar were a humanoid race whose most notable feature was a raised fleshy spine or ridge in the middle of their head, bisecting two separate patches of hair on either side. Their eyes were both larger and more widely set than Humans or Bajorans, and they were on average somewhat taller than either of those species.

Four of the Yelnar, three males and a female, were wearing what appeared to be uniforms adorned with rank insignia. They were each armed with a plasma pistol and Ramirez had decided to allow them to retain them for the time being in the interest of diplomacy. The two other Yelnar were females, one aging and the other an adolescent. The older woman was dressed in ornate and complex robes that suggested high office or status of some kind. The adolescent was garbed in a simple shift and leggings.

As Ramirez and Pell entered, the four probable-soldiers assumed a defensive posture with the older and younger female behind them. All four had their hands resting on their holstered pistols.

Ramirez made a show of holding her hands in the air, palms out. "I'm Commander Liana Ramirez and this is Lieutenant Commander Pell Ojana of the Federation Starfleet. We responded to a distress call from the *Rushaan*. Captain Dever claimed you were attacked by a Yelnar ship for reasons unknown to him, and then we discovered the six of you hiding aboard. We're simply trying to uncover what's really happening here."

"Have you come to arrest us?" the older woman asked pointedly from behind her makeshift military blockade.

"At the moment the only people in any trouble here are Dever and his crew," Ramirez answered. "May I ask your names?"

"I am La'Osh, formerly the High-Interlocutor of the Yeldan Conservancy. The officers before you have pledged their lives and names to the state, and are recognized now only by their service numbers."

She had intentionally omitted the name of the girl, Ramirez noted, sharing a meaningful glance with Pell.

"The Conservancy is your world's primary religious faith, isn't it?" Pell asked, having spent the past hour aboard *Gibraltar* gleaning everything she could from the Federation database on Yelnar history and culture.

"That is correct. I was the head of that faith for decades. Tragically, there was a schism after the war and the collapse of Dominion control, and I was forced from office and made to flee. Those responsible for my downfall followed us here and attacked. Fortunately, Captain Dever was able to defeat them."

Pell queried, "And that's why Dever fears more Yelnar ships may be coming?"

"Yes," La'Osh said gravely. "They will not be satisfied until I am either dead or in chains. My teachings, my life's work have been branded heresy, and I have been declared apostate."

"So, why then—" Pell began, only to be cut short by Ramirez's hand on her upper arm.

Ramirez inclined her head towards the Yelnar in a gesture of respect. "Thank you for answering our questions, La'Osh. Our people are helping to repair this ship, and we are in the process of deciding what, if anything is to be done with the crew. Until that has been decided, is there anything you need that we may provide to you?"

“No, thank you,” La’Osh demurred. “We prepared for a long journey and have all that we need.”

Ramirez withdrew with Pell in tow, the Bajoran officer waiting until they had emerged into the corridor outside before fixing a curious look on the XO. “Something I said?”

“I didn’t want to push too far too quickly,” Ramirez replied. “I want to go check the cultural database against what La’Osh has told us so far. The situation as she’s described it is an internal Yelnar dispute, potentially Prime Directive territory. Asking the wrong question too soon could tie our hands, depending on her response. Also, I don’t want to give her the chance to muddy the waters; I want her locked into a story that we can quickly prove or disprove.”

“You think she’s lying?”

“No,” Ramirez said after a moment’s consideration. “But she’s still holding something back. If we’re going to end up in the middle of a planet’s socio-spiritual upheaval, I want to make sure we have the full story before we either pick a side or stand aside.”

Pell frowned. “That’s an awfully big responsibility. Are you sure you’re comfortable making that call?”

Ramirez offered the hint of a relieved smile. “I don’t have to. That’s what the captain is for.”

* * *

Sandhurst entered the briefing room, bearing a cup of Rigellian spice coffee and an exasperated expression. “Well, that’s two hours of my life researching Federation diplomatic precedents and Prime Directive loopholes that I’ll never get back.” He slid into his seat and addressed the assembled officers: Ramirez, Pell, and Lar’ragos. “What do we know so far?”

“La’Osh was telling the truth, but it’s only the tip of a very large iceberg,” Ramirez summarized.

“Fire pit,” Pell corrected excitedly. “The upper regions of a very deep fire pit.”

Lar’ragos opened his mouth to offer his species’ variant of the expression but was silenced by a stern look and, “Don’t,” from Sandhurst. Then, to the others, “Explain.”

Pell opened with, “I couldn’t get much from our existing cultural database, but I inquired with Starfleet Intelligence, which has apparently been monitoring the planet as a Cardassian client state for some time now. They gave me a lot of excellent material.”

Sandhurst nodded expectantly for her to continue.

“La’Osh was what amounts to the head of the Yelnar national church until a little over a month ago. Now, while it’s true that the Yelnar were released from Cardassian occupation over a decade ago, they remained firmly within the Cardassian Union’s sphere of influence. That means during the war they fell under Dominion authority. The Dominion strongly influenced the Conservancy to peddle pro-Dominion orthodoxy to the Yelnar people in order to keep them compliant with the war effort. La’Osh was the mouthpiece of that effort. After the war ended, more fringe elements in the church coalesced into a power bloc and moved to seize control of the governing council, something akin to the Vedek Assembly on Bajor.”

Sandhurst cocked his head thoughtfully, taking a sip of his coffee. “So, this whole thing is an internal power struggle in their church?”

“Oh, don’t worry, it gets more complicated,” Pell said with a grim smile. “Much of the pro-Dominion epistles originated not from the Founders or the Vorta or even from La’Osh herself, but from a young girl that the Conservancy professed to be the latest incarnation of the Yelnar messiah.”

Ramirez winced and brought her hand up to rub at her temples with finger and thumb. “Oh, hell... the girl!”

“The girl,” Pell confirmed.

Sandhurst sighed, “The Yelnar are actually after the girl and not La’Osh?”

“Oh, they’re out to get them both, but the girl is their primary target. She was rumored to have the gift of prophecy, among other supernatural abilities. Our Intel people think that the new leadership of their church either wants to publicly decry the girl as a fraud, or they want access to her prescient abilities.”

Sandhurst held up a hand, “Wait, you’re saying that even after the Dominion and Cardassia were defeated, some of them still believe she can predict the future?”

“And this is where it gets weird,” Pell cautioned. “According to SI, the girl correctly predicted the combined Federation/Klingon attack on the Dominion advance into the Tyra system at the beginning of the war. They’re fairly certain that her proclamation is what spurred the Dominion to stage the ambush on the 7th Fleet when they exited the Archimedes Maelstrom.”

Ramirez's skepticism was voluble. "That's ridiculous! The Dominion had a massive sensor array in the Argolis Cluster, they saw the 7th Fleet coming."

Lar'ragos observed the exchange silently like a spectator at a tennis match.

"Subsequent analysis of Cardassian military records refutes that, Commander," Pell said, almost apologetically. "According to the Central Command, the Dominion leadership got the information about the 7th Fleet's approach from the Yelnar. They didn't specify that it came from the Yelnar messiah, but still..."

Ramirez sat back in her chair, arms crossed. "I don't buy it."

Pell shrugged. "I'm simply relaying what I received from SI, sir. I have her proclamation right here, and it describes the trinary Tyra system in pretty convincing detail, as well as the *'approach of enemies from the Occlusion of Deroth,'* which is the Yelnar name for the Archimedes Maelstrom. The edict was announced publicly at the time, and I verified that the reference was accurately time-stamped."

Sandhurst held up a hand. "Regardless, it appears the girl's recovery is seen as vital by the Yelnar, and as their attack on the *Rushaan* proves, they're willing to fight to get her back."

"That much is certain, sir," Lar'ragos agreed, speaking up for the first time.

After mulling this information silently for a moment, Sandhurst inquired of Ramirez, "What's the ETA on *Rushaan's* engine repairs?"

Now it was Ramirez's turn to look apologetic. "Ashok says that between the battle damage inflicted by the Yelnar and the strain of powering their polaron cannon, most of the engine's major systems have to be rebuilt. Dever's people have some of the needed components, but not all. We're already replicating the required parts, but it'll be another four days before the ship's ready to move under her own power."

Sandhurst grunted sourly in response.

"*Bridge to Captain Sandhurst,*" came Lieutenant Juneau's voice from the comms.

As he tapped his combadge, Sandhurst glanced toward the ceiling by force of habit. "Go ahead."

"*The reconnaissance probe we sent out towards Cardassian space has picked up three ships on an intercept course with our position. They read as two Yelnar combat skiffs accompanied by a Cardassian Keldon-class cruiser.*"

"Hot damn," Lar'ragos said without enthusiasm, "now it's a party,"

"ETA?"

"*At present speed, they'll be here in seventeen hours, sir.*"

Sandhurst fixed his gaze on Ramirez. "Tell Ashok he's got fourteen hours to finalize those repairs, and no excuses. If I have to roll up my sleeves and go over there, I will."

"Aye, sir."

"When are you going to report this to Starfleet, sir?" Pell asked.

Sandhurst stood. "After it's over." In response to Ramirez and Pell's surprised expressions, he added, "The moment I call command with this they'll order us to back the hell off. At best we'll be left here as neutral observers, and at worst they'll order us to catch up with the convoy. Right now all options are on the table, and that's how I'd prefer to keep it."

Pell and Ramirez nodded in the affirmative before exchanging a brief look that spoke of further conversations yet to come.

After the two women departed the observation lounge, Lar'ragos turned his attention to Sandhurst from where he'd been wool-gathering out the viewports. "I'm coming with you when you go to talk to the girl," he said. It was less a question than a statement of fact.

"Are you now?"

"I'd strongly recommend it," Lar'ragos affirmed.

"How did you know that was my next move?" Sandhurst asked.

Lar'ragos didn't dignify that with a reply.

"Okay, fine. Your insight might prove helpful," he acknowledged.

"And please, for all our sakes, try to leave your skepticism here on the ship," Lar'ragos asked, a genuine entreaty void of sarcasm.

"What do you mean?"

“You’re a Starfleet engineer, Donald, and one of the most tactile people I’ve ever met. I don’t think faith is in your vocabulary.”

Sandhurst looked genuinely hurt at the inference. “I respect the beliefs of all peoples, Pava.”

“We both know that the Federation’s respect for religion is often that of benign tolerance, that same patronizing nonsense we fed the Bajorans before we discovered to our chagrin that their gods were real.”

After holding Lar’ragos’ piercing gaze for a moment Sandhurst nodded slowly. “I promise to try and keep an open mind.”

* * *

Chapter 4

Lar'ragos and Sandhurst made their way through the cramped, darkened corridors of *Rushaan*, navigating around cargo containers stacked in passageways and ducking below overhead storage netting slung just above them. Every square meter of the old ship had been used to store rations and spare parts for the six-month journey to the Nyberrite Alliance. There were no replicators on the ancient freighter.

Sandhurst felt a twinge of guilt at the thought that some months earlier he had found *Gibraltar's* corridors to be too narrow and claustrophobic after years serving aboard cruisers and explorers. They were spacious in comparison to this aged Bajoran hauler.

The two arrived at the entrance to the formerly hidden bay that had been transformed into a Conservancy shrine. Pell was standing by, conversing quietly with one of the two security officers flanking the doorway. She glanced up as Sandhurst stepped into view, bearing a pensive expression on her face.

"Something wrong?"

"Not wrong, exactly, just... unexpected," she replied.

Sandhurst merely stared at her, awaiting elaboration.

Pell appeared to be choosing her words with care. "*Rushaan's* crew are in there. Not all of them, obviously, but at least half. Maybe a little over half."

The captain cocked his head. "In the... temple?" Sandhurst wasn't sure of the exact terminology from the Yelnar faith.

"The sanctuary, yes," Pell offered.

"Is there some kind of friction between the Bajorans and the Yelnar, Commander?" Sandhurst looked questioningly towards the security officers. "And if so, why haven't we interceded?"

"No friction, Captain," she answered awkwardly. "The crew are, well, I guess you'd call them believers." She paused, then in answer to Sandhurst's next unspoken question she continued, "Several of them have apparently converted to the Yelnar religion."

Lar'ragos blinked, clearly amazed at this revelation. He pointed a finger towards the hatchway to the bay, remarking, "They do know their own gods are actually real, right?"

Sandhurst gave him a sharp look. "Pava."

"No, really," the El-Aurian pressed. "They're not exactly trading up. Why would you give up your real, scientifically verifiable, magic-tunnel-through-the-stars gods for someone else's mysticism?"

"And *you* were lecturing *me* on spiritual insensitivity?"

Lar'ragos withstood Sandhurst's withering stare for a moment before turning to Pell. "A little help here?"

The Bajoran cocked her head in a gesture of concession. "Donald, you know I'm loath to admit it on those rare occasions when Pava musters a valid point, but here we are nonetheless."

"Ouch," Lar'ragos protested.

Sandhurst looked between the two. "I'm lost. What's your point?"

"I can't explain the attraction of the Yelnar faith to these Bajorans either," Pell said. "Pava's correct, it's odd. Our belief in the Prophets isn't necessarily universal, and Bajor has had a handful of alternative belief systems, but very few of those survived the Occupation. Fewer still survived the discovery of the Celestial Temple." She offered the Bajoran variant of a shrug.

"Let's go ask," Sandhurst said as he stepped across the threshold.

The freighter's Bajoran crewmembers knelt beside the Yelnar soldiers, offering what appeared to be supplication to the young woman seated before them. "Now, go and shine your inner light upon others, always in peace, wisdom, and respect," she told them in a voice that sounded decades older than her thirteen-standard years. "In so doing, the peace of the few may become the bounty of the many."

The assembled parishioners rose as one, talking quietly among themselves as they filtered out of the compact storage bay. Lar'ragos spotted L'Osh among them, engaging with both Bajoran and Yelnar congregants.

The officers approached L'Osh, and Lar'ragos made introductions. Sandhurst inclined his head towards the young woman, around whom had gathered a handful of congregants. "We need to speak with her."

L'Osh bristled, "I cannot allow it. She must be allowed to remain above such matters."

Sandhurst pressed, "Forgive me, High-Interlocutor, but it is imperative we speak with her to determine her part in all this. As you might imagine, given that Cardassian territory, including the Yelnar home system, is presently occupied by the Alliance, this is delicate diplomatic matter for the Federation."

"I speak for the Anointed," L'Osh insisted. "Direct your questions to me."

Sandhurst sighed and rubbed the back of his neck absently. "I apologize for my lack of subtlety, L'Osh. Here is our situation. The Yelnar and their Cardassian allies are on their way. This ship can't run from them, and you will be unable to hide for long. I have to decide whether to intercede on your behalf, or leave you to your fate. That decision will be based on the answers that young woman there does or doesn't provide me in the next few minutes. Clear enough?"

Lar'ragos gave Sandhurst a side-eyed glance, mildly surprised at his friend's directness.

After a moment, L'Osh relented, though her eyes flamed defiance. She led Sandhurst and Lar'ragos over to the young woman. L'Osh asked those gathered around the adolescent to give them some privacy, and as the others departed L'Osh gestured to the girl. "This is Zadra," she said simply. No honorifics, no lofty titles, just the young woman's name.

"I'm Donald Sandhurst, captain of the *Gibraltar*, and this is my chief of security, Lieutenant Lar'ragos," he offered by way of introduction.

The young woman glanced between the two men. "Yes. The death-eater, and the death-bringer. I've been expecting you." She turned and started towards the makeshift living quarters situated behind the sanctuary, gesturing for them to follow.

They exchanged a quizzical look as they fell in behind the young woman.

She led them in to a small, improvised sleeping chamber situated immediately behind the shrine. Zadra extinguished the various votive candles in favor of a Bajoran camp-light. She unceremoniously shed her religious robes and pulled on what appeared to be a baggy sweatshirt bearing the Starfleet Academy logo.

Zadra smiled at their perplexed expressions. "A gift from your officer, Pell Ojana. It's unbelievably rare that a religious icon receives a gift of any practical value." She hugged her arms around her body and rocked back and forth, chirping, "So comfortable!"

"I apologize for being abrupt," Sandhurst said, "but time is short. The Cardassians are *en route*, accompanying a Yelnar contingent. We believe that they intend to take you into custody."

"Yes," Zadra replied, "that's a reasonable assumption."

"I need to know if you're requesting sanctuary for you and your followers."

Zadra paused to consider this, turning the camp-light in her hands as she watched the patterns of illumination play across the bulkheads. "Why do you offer sanctuary, Captain?"

"I'm concerned that you and your followers might become political prisoners of the new Yelnar religious hierarchy, or worse."

She eyed him skeptically. "No other reasons? No ulterior motives?"

Sandhurst returned her stare with an inquisitive look. "I'm not sure I understand."

"Prophecy," Lar'ragos provided. "She wants to know if the Federation wants her for her prescient abilities."

Zadra nodded in Lar'ragos' direction. "Just so."

"I really don't think anyone cares about that," Sandhurst replied, non-plussed.

"Captain, I offered material help to the Dominion during the war."

"And despite that, they lost," Sandhurst countered. "And even if true, the war is over. I'm aware of the political relationships between Yelna and Cardassia, and the pressure your government must have placed on you to conform to their narrative."

She shook her head. "You don't understand, Captain. I wasn't made to trumpet a Dominion victory by my government. They were *supposed* to win. I was correct in my prediction, or I would have been, except for the intervention of the Bajoran Prophets."

"There was the small matter of some three and a half million allied dead, not counting our millions of civilian casualties," Lar'ragos inserted tetchily. "All due credit to the Prophets, but our honored dead did the heavy lifting."

Sandhurst gazed intently at Zadra, allowing a moment for Lar'ragos' words to sink in. He opened his arms expansively. "Your claims are the purview of philosophers, strategists and historians, Zadra. I'm here trying to save lives. I'd like to help you, if you'll allow it."

"I will consider your offer," she said finally.

Sandhurst shot a grim glance at Lar'ragos before turning back to the girl. "I would ask you to do so quickly. The closer they get, the fewer options we have."

Chapter 5

Sandhurst and Lar'ragos stepped off the transporter pad with the captain offering a nod to the chief as they headed for the exit. Fresh off their encounter with Zadra, Lar'ragos commented, "If she doesn't want our help, I'm forced to agree with Juneau. No point in sticking our necks out if our assistance isn't needed."

The pair stepped through the parting doors into the corridor, coming face-to-face with Ramirez and Pell.

Sandhurst raised an appraising eyebrow. "This can't be good."

Ramirez glanced over her shoulder to assure their relative privacy before saying, "This scenario is becoming dangerously close to spinning out of control, Captain. As your two most senior officers, Commander Pell and I need to speak with you privately as soon as possible."

Sandhurst nodded and gestured to starboard, leading the group to a nearby conference room on that deck that was presently unoccupied. He gestured for the others to sit as he took his place at the head of the table. "Please, go ahead."

The XO shared a brief look with Pell before she offered, "Sir, while I understand your reluctance to yield situational command of this incident to headquarters, it's our opinion that there are too many factors at play here for us to go this alone. There are a number of high-order diplomatic considerations that both command and the diplomatic corps should be addressing behind the scenes, preferably *before* those ships get here."

Sandhurst settled back into his chair. "Exec, please, you've never been one to mince words. Enough protocol double-speak. Let me have it."

"Okay," Ramirez agreed. She held her hand horizontally just under her nose. "We're in the shit up to here, Captain. When Starfleet finds out we've been sitting on this situation without telling them, they'll roast your oysters on a spit. If the Bajorans on that ship are taken prisoner by the Yelnar with the Cardassians' help or complicit approval, this whole thing will blow up in our collective faces. The Bajoran militia will be obligated to mount a rescue mission, and we'll have a shooting war on our hands."

He nodded slowly, observing that not only Pell but Lar'ragos too seemed in accord with Ramirez's assessment.

"Okay. Anything else?"

She looked to the others. "Nothing for public consumption, sir."

Sandhurst jerked a thumb towards the doors. "Pava, Ojana, please give us the cabin."

Looking bemused, the two officers retreated wordlessly into the corridor.

"Shoot," Sandhurst ordered.

"With respect, sir, I'm due to assume my own command in less than two months. To be frank, I don't need any of this mess sticking to me."

Sandhurst rubbed the bridge of his nose tiredly. "So, to recap, I've overstepped my authority in this situation while potentially creating an interstellar incident and compromising my career and that of my senior officers in the process?"

"Accurate and succinctly stated, sir," Ramirez agreed.

His expression turned dour as he said, "You realize that we've both witnessed command turning their backs on innocents before in order to 'preserve the peace.' Are you prepared to walk away from this if we're told to turn a blind eye to the fate of the Yelnar refugees?"

"Those decisions are made far above our heads for a reason, sir," she countered. "Command isn't subject to the same emotional factors we are out here in the thick of it. Cooler heads can prevail, ones that have weighed the risks and benefits of acting or failing to act."

"You actually believe that?" he queried skeptically.

"I do," she answered. "I can walk away and sleep soundly. The chain-of-command exists for a reason."

A moment passed before Sandhurst allowed. "Thank you for your candor. I'll call command straight away and bring them up to speed. You have my word that if any of this washes back in our direction, I will convey explicitly to the powers-that-be that you advised me to report in first thing."

"Thank you, sir."

* * *

Chapter 6

“While I can empathize with your hesitation to bring this up the chain given recent events, Donald, I’m still disappointed. I thought I’d taught you better than that.”

Rear-Admiral Monica Covey’s rebuke stung, no matter how Sandhurst tried to rationalize it.

“You’ve denied us valuable time to try and head this off behind the scenes, and with that delay even the limited help I’m sending may arrive too late.”

“I understand, sir, and again, I apologize,” Sandhurst answered, voice tinged with resignation. “And if Zadra refuses to cooperate, Admiral?”

Covey pursed her lips thoughtfully for a moment. “Our concern is more with the Bajorans and their ship. If Zadra and her people voluntarily surrender to the Yelnar, the situation largely resolves itself. However, the Bajoran nationals and the freighter are off limits. If the Cardassians or their allies try and seize the ship or its crew, you are authorized to use whatever means you deem necessary to prevent it.”

“Understood, sir.”

“If she or any of her people ask for asylum, you will grant it and offer them the same protection as the Bajorans.”

Sandhurst nodded his compliance.

“You’ve put yourself behind the eight-ball here, but I have every confidence that you and your people will get the job done, regardless,” Covey added with just the barest hint of a grudging smile. “You’ve a proven knack for beating the odds.”

“Thank you, Admiral.”

“Good luck, Captain,” Covey offered in parting as she terminated the transmission.

Sandhurst sank back into his seat with an audible sigh, knowing that he was luckier than he deserved. Had it been any sector-commander other than his former captain, Sandhurst might have been raked over the coals.

He turned his chair to gaze out the large circular viewport behind him, at the deep blues and purples of the McAllister C5 Nebula that engulfed his ship and the freighter they were safeguarding. He reflected that since accepting this command, he had been thrust into turbulent situations time and again, but this was one occasion where his own hesitation and mistrust had only made matters worse. Now, he feared, his crew and that of *Rushaan* might end up paying the price for his own failings.

Sandhurst tapped his combadge and summoned Ramirez, Pell, and Lar’ragos to his ready room.

In response to their expectant looks, Sandhurst apprised, “I’ve spoken with Command, Admiral Covey to be specific. She’s issued orders that under no circumstances are we to allow the *Rushaan* or her crew to be taken into custody by either the Cardassians or the Yelnar. The Yelnar refugees we will protect if they can be convinced to request asylum. We are to attempt a negotiated settlement, but failing that, we have full authority to defend them and ourselves with force.”

Ramirez smiled grimly in response. “Good ol’ Monica. I’d hoped she’d be the one to make the call.”

Pell nodded approvingly, the tension in her posture ebbing noticeably at that revelation.

“Tell me they’re sending us backup, sir,” Lar’ragos prompted. “That Keldon-class out-guns us nearly two-to-one. Throw in those two Yelnar attack skiffs, and we’re at a significant disadvantage.”

“DS9 is dispatching *Defiant* and the border cutter *Onadaga*, but they won’t arrive here for another thirty-two hours,” Sandhurst provided with a fatalistic shrug.

Lar’ragos cocked his head in response. “Too little, too late.”

“How many quantum torpedoes do we have?” Sandhurst asked.

“Five,” Ramirez and Lar’ragos answered in unison before sharing a resigned look.

“We’ll have to employ them judiciously. For now, we and *Rushaan* are hidden in the nebula tendrils, and I’d like to maintain that advantage for as long as possible.” Sandhurst faced his senior officers, hands out in a gesture of receiving. “I’m open to ideas.”

“Gravitic mines,” Lar’ragos suggested. “Low yield, just enough to rattle their deck-plates and scorch their hulls. They’ve been used here before, and to good effect. Once they’ve stumbled across a few of those, they’ll reduce speed and will have to deploy a sensor picket with small-craft. That should slow down any search for us in the nebula considerably.”

Sandhurst nodded approvingly.

“We could modify some of our shuttles to mimic our power signature and that of *Rushaan*. Keep them chasing through the nebula after ghosts. That might give us the opportunity to lure them into some of Pava’s mine-fields.”

That actually brought a smile to Sandhurst’s lips. “Spoken like a former guerilla fighter.”

“This tendril is only fifty-thousand kilometers in diameter, sir,” Ramirez advised. “I recommend taking *Rushaan* in tow and moving deeper into the nebula. That’ll mean heavier concentrations of gasses and a lot more volume for them to cover.”

“Okay, all are excellent ideas. Please coordinate with engineering to make them happen.”

They collectively affirmed their orders and turned for the door, only to pause and turn back as Sandhurst amended, “One moment...”

He stood from behind his desk. “I know I’ve made this harder than it had to be, and put our backs against the wall in the process. For what it’s worth, I’m sorry. You all counseled me against doing this alone, and I didn’t listen.”

The three of them shared a look between themselves before Ramirez answered for the group. “Thank you for saying so, Captain.”

Lar’ragos hung back as Ramirez and Pell stepped out onto the bridge. “Yes?” He had a way of knowing when Sandhurst had something additional for him alone.

“This is going to get ugly,” Sandhurst observed.

“Almost certainly,” Lar’ragos agreed.

“Stay sharp,” Sandhurst said, more plea than order.

Lar’ragos vowed, “As tempered steel, captain-my-captain.”

* * *

Chapter 7

Bajoran Transport *Rushaan*

The parishioners filed out of the makeshift Yelnar temple as Zadra and L'Osh busied themselves boxing up a number of religious artifacts used in the ceremony that had just ended. One of the nameless military officers on guard duty stiffened noticeably and moved forward to block the arrival of an entrant.

Both women turned to see Donald Sandhurst, his hands raised at his sides in a gesture of benevolence. He was dressed in civilian garb, a simple short sleeved shirt with vest and pants. "I've only come to talk, if that's permissible?" he said.

Zadra turned to L'Osh. "I would speak with him alone, please."

After the older woman took her leave, Zadra sat down on a shipping container and bid Sandhurst to do the same. "What brings you back here, Captain?"

"I haven't come as a Starfleet captain," he replied, taking a seat across from her. "Just a man, seeking answers."

"My stock in trade," Zadra rejoined with a smirk. "Very well, then, what wisdom do you seek?"

"I wish to know how I might help someone who does not want my assistance?"

"You don't," she answered. "If your offer is rejected, you must accept that and move on. Our scripture teaches us that to force your viewpoint or beliefs on others is a transgression of the first order."

He nodded fractionally. "Our 'scripture' as well. In that case, please help me understand why someone would reject the help I and my people can offer. The danger is so real, and so close, I can't wrap my mind around what prevents you from accepting sanctuary."

"The greater good," Zadra said simply.

Sandhurst held his hands out, "I don't understand."

"If I were to accept your offer on behalf of my people, you would be honor-bound to defend us. The force coming for us outmatches your ship."

"That's true. However, we don't plan on giving them a fair fight."

"Always cheat, always win," she quoted, "'the only unfair fight is the one you lose.' Isn't that what Pava always says?"

It took Sandhurst a moment to realize that his mouth was open. He closed it before offering, "I'm surprised he told you that."

"You might be even more surprised to know that he didn't. You may choose not to believe in my gifts, but I do have them. I can see potentials, the near-infinite branches of possibility that spring from each moment and extend into the future."

Sandhurst frowned. "You're saying that accepting sanctuary with us would lead to a negative outcome?"

"That's a strong probability, yes." Zadra leaned forward and took Sandhurst's hands inside her own smaller ones. Her grip was firm, authoritative, and somehow strangely reassuring. "From my perspective, the path forward that results in the least loss of life, the least suffering, is for I and my people to yield to the Yelnar authorities."

"You will be at their mercy," he countered. "You could be exploited, tortured, or worse."

"Almost certainly. It is of no consequence. The greater good will be served."

"Your teachings, all that you and L'Osh and others of your church have suffered and sacrificed for, all that might be lost," Sandhurst pressed.

"My teachings have already spread beyond their ability to control or suppress them. If I and the others are martyred, our words and ideas will only grow in strength."

"We can help, we can *save* you," he insisted. "It's as if every fiber of my being is pushing me to try."

Her answering smile radiated compassion. "That's simply who you are, both as a person and as a trained protector. They are admirable qualities, Donald, but even the instinct to protect can be perverted if it overwhelms all other considerations."

He had no response to that.

"Allow me to explain," she continued. "Down one path, I see your ship fighting a desperate battle to stop the Cardassians and Yelnar, resulting in hundreds of deaths aboard their ships. You win, but in so doing you violate your own rules of engagement and stain yourselves with the weight of your deeds. Another path shows me you and your crew overwhelmed by a sneak attack from an unseen quarter, resulting in the

destruction of your ship and the *Rushaan*. The only avenue I can perceive that results in the fewest deaths and the least suffering is our voluntary surrender to the Yelnar.”

Sandhurst offered a reluctant nod, forcing himself to concede the point. “I think I understand, though it’s still difficult for me to accept.”

“That’s because you’re trying to dissect the decision rationally. You can’t. It’s simply a matter of faith.”

“I’ve never been much for faith,” he admitted. “Too much of a pragmatist, I suppose.” He withdrew his hands from hers. “Thank you for clarifying your position. May I ask what you intend to do with your Bajoran followers?”

“The Bajorans will remain with their ship. I have no desire to be the spark that ignites another conflict between Bajor and Cardassia. Besides, our Bajoran brethren will help spread the word about what happened here, to reveal the truth in contrast to the stories the state and its officially sanctioned church acolytes would have our people believe.”

Sandhurst stood. “I wish you well, Zadra. Your bravery is a credit to you and your people. I have a lot to do, and not much time in which to do it.”

She rose to her feet. “Thank you for hearing me out, Captain. If I may offer one bit of advice in parting?”

“Yes, please.”

“My support of the Dominion was based on the same reasoning as the present circumstances. Dominion occupation of the Alpha Quadrant would have led to peace, an imposed peace, but peace nonetheless. It was the path forward with the least suffering. The war’s aftermath, and the tribulations that are coming will bring destruction and death on a scale that Dominion control could have avoided.”

His eyes widened at the decidedly unwelcome prophetic revelations.

“Right, wrong, or indifferent, that was my belief, based on what I was shown. I say this because in time, you also may come to know the burden of this sight. If that comes to pass, I would ask you to reflect on what constitutes the greater good, and for whom.”

Sandhurst looked befuddled. “And... I’m lost again.”

“Farewell, Captain,” Zadra said in parting. “I wish you good fortune on your journeys.” With that, she stepped back behind the altar into the living quarters beyond.

He stood alone there for many minutes, contemplating her words before he turned to resume his duties.

* * *

Chapter 8

A string of tiny communications satellites had been strung from just outside the nebula to *Gibraltar's* hiding place some fifty-thousand kilometers within the cloud. This would enable Sandhurst to speak with the approaching Cardassian ship without giving away *Gibraltar* or *Rushaan's* positions.

Sandhurst initiated the transmission from his ready room, toggling the channel open as soon as Juneau had confirmed the link was stable and secured. He used an allied frequency, one of the ones used by Starfleet to communicate with the Cardassian military on joint operations throughout occupied Cardassian territory.

He had coded the message 'personal', an indication that he wished to speak privately with the Cardassian commander, rather than parlay in front of the gul's entire bridge crew.

After a few moments, the image of a Cardassian officer wearing the traditional carapace-armor appeared on his screen. The man was clearly older than most Cardassian officers Sandhurst had interacted with, as he had streaks of grey in his hair, an unusual indulgence for someone of that species. Cardassian vanity typically demanded that older men in their society, soldiers especially, color their hair to maintain the jet-black hue of their youth.

"This is Gul Voret of the warship *Dokel*. To whom am I speaking?"

"Donald Sandhurst, starship *Gibraltar*."

Voret inclined his head. "And how may I help you, Captain?"

"We've monitored your approach alongside your Yelnar allies, Gul. I understand that it's their intention to take custody of their citizens from the Bajoran freighter."

"It is," Voret confirmed. "May I presume you are shepherding them within the nebula?"

Sandhurst nodded.

"Is my assigned mission going to present a problem for you, Captain?"

"Not as much for me as it will be for the Yelnar priestess and her retinue," Sandhurst replied dryly. "Would there be any point in my asking you to try and intercede on their behalf with the Yelnar captains?"

It was almost difficult for Sandhurst to believe, but Voret actually appeared somewhat discomfited. "Unfortunately, it seems that the Yelnar soldiers accompanying me are religious zealots, and they've rejected all of our attempts at moderating their more vengeful impulses."

That, in contrast, was not hard for Sandhurst to believe at all. "I was afraid that might be the case," he responded. "As it happens, Zadra has decided to surrender herself and her followers upon your arrival, so it appears we may avoid any unfortunate interstellar incidents."

"And the Bajorans?" Voret inquired.

"What about them?"

"The Yelnar are demanding that they be taken into custody as well, along with their ship. The Yelnar are charging them with the destruction of their gunship and the murder of its crew."

Sandhurst frowned at that, considering his words carefully before replying. "You realize that the Yelnar attacked first, and the Bajorans were merely defending themselves?"

"I understand that, yes, but the Yelnar fail to appreciate that distinction."

"Now, that *does* present a problem for me," Sandhurst rejoined. "Bajor is not only our ally, it's on the cusp of Federation membership. I won't allow any Bajoran nationals to be seized by the Yelnar. I have orders to use any means necessary to prevent that from happening."

Voret absorbed that silently for a moment, as if giving the words the consideration they were due. Finally, he replied, "I have no interest in sparking a new conflict with either Bajor or the Federation, Captain. However, my influence with the Yelnar is limited. I have decided that if they enter the nebula to seize the Bajoran ship, they will do so alone. I will hold position outside the nebula with *Dokel*. If the Yelnar wish to risk their lives to capture the Bajorans, they are free to do so."

"I appreciate your restraint, Gul. I hope it won't come to our trading fire with the Yelnar."

"I hope for that as well, Captain, but I fear that hope is a forlorn one. They seem intent on provoking a battle."

"There's an old human aphorism, 'be careful what you wish for, you just may get it.'"

Voret allowed the smallest hint of a smile to tug at the corner of his mouth. "My people have a similar saying. May fortune favor you and your

crew, Captain.”

* * *

Chapter 9

“Energy spike at two-two-three, mark zero-seven-nine,” Shanthi observed, fixed to the sensor returns displayed on his console. “Reads as an anti-matter detonation.”

“Confirmed,” Lar’ragos agreed from behind Sandhurst. “Somebody tripped one of our mines.”

“The game’s afoot,” Lightner muttered from the Helm station.

Juneau cast a glance over at him from her Ops station. “They’ll never make it past our mines. Besides, it’s just two combat skiffs. This won’t take long.”

“Lieutenant,” Sandhurst called to Juneau in mild reproach, “how many people have made the mistake of underestimating *us* in the past? We’re dealing with fanatics who aren’t afraid to die for their cause. If we let our guard down, they’ll make us pay for it.”

“Yes, sir,” she replied in grudging apology.

On the main viewer, all that was visible were the dark blue and black swirls and striations of the McAllister Nebula. It was the perfect place for an ambush. Whose ambush remained to be seen.

“Helm, set a course for that explosion, ahead at five-hundred kph. I want to skirt the z-axis of minefield L-Four to protect our port flank as we approach. Ops, send one of our probes to that location to scout ahead. They may be trying to bait us with our own hook.”

Tense moments passed as *Gibraltar* maneuvered towards where their enemy was believed to be lurking.

Four bluish lights appeared ahead, emerging from the nebular gloom one after the other in one-second intervals. Before Sandhurst could muster a warning, Lightner blurted, “Inbound torpedoes ahead!”

Sandhurst did not have to order evasive action as Lightner had already thrown *Gibraltar* hard over into a wide, corkscrewing arc in an attempt to throw off the incoming missiles.

“Warhead yield is tri-cobalt infused thermonuclear in the five-isoton range,” Shanthi offered from the Science station.

“Tactical,” Sandhurst called out. “Defensive phaser spread.”

Lar’ragos unleashed a barrage of phaser beams that lanced out towards the targeted ordinance, annihilating two of the four missiles in flight.

One of the torpedoes struck home, slamming into *Gibraltar*’s forward shields as the other flashed past harmlessly. The ship lurched but power systems remained stable. The crew, old hat at this by now, evidenced negligible reaction to the assault.

“Forward shields at ninety-four percent and holding,” Lar’ragos noted.

Ever the tactician, Ramirez followed a hunch and trained sensors aft, detecting a subtle signature prowling through the nearer layers of gasses behind them. “I’ve got the other one,” she announced. “Bearing one-nine-zero, mark one-eight-three.”

Sandhurst cast an appreciative glance towards her at her station in the well. “A pincer maneuver?”

“In this configuration it’s more anvil and hammer, sir, but yes.”

“Pava,” Sandhurst jerked a thumb aft-ward. “They’ve been naughty. Spank them.”

“Aye, sir. Aft torpedoes away.”

Three photons rifled towards the lurking skiff, which didn’t detect them until it was almost too late. A wild evasive maneuver saved the craft from total destruction, but the impact of one torpedo and the nearby detonation of another left the corsair spinning off into the murky cloud, atmosphere boiling away into vacuum from multiple hull breaches.

“One threat vessel neutralized,” Lar’ragos noted dispassionately.

“Now where’s the other one?” Sandhurst inquired as he shifted his weight in his seat, his agitation beginning to show with being restricted to the command chair.

Shanthi reported, “No firm sensor returns. I see some slight disruption to the gasses at two-one-seven, mark two-eight-two; might be an impulse turn.”

“Pava, fire a spread of torpedoes that way, maximum dispersal.”

“Rattling their cage, aye,” Lar’ragos acknowledged.

The missiles detonated, leaving the target area awash in explosive energy.

Unwilling to wait for Shanthi's report, Sandhurst studied the abbreviated display on his chair arm. He found nothing.

"Helm, bring us around to course one-five-zero, mark zero-four-five. Twenty degrees down-bow and port roll thirty degrees. Five-hundred kph."

Ramirez gave Sandhurst a curious look from the well. "Something up your sleeve, sir?"

"Maybe," he allowed. "Playing a guess."

An insistent chime at Shanthi's post prompted him to announce, "Captain, we've lost telemetry from the surveillance probe at *Rushaan's* position."

"Damn it," Sandhurst muttered under his breath, standing. "The other Yelnar skiff?"

Shanthi stared disbelievingly at his telemetry returns. "No... no, sir. *Rushaan* fired on the probe themselves."

"Zadra!" Sandhurst barked the name like a curse. He forced himself back into the command chair, eyes set intently on the viewscreen ahead. "Science and Tactical, find me that other skiff. Ops, activate the transponder we affixed to *Rushaan's* hull. I want to know where she's headed."

Ramirez cast the captain a surprised look. "We tagged their ship, sir?"

He pursed his lips in response and fumed, "Insurance, Exec. I had it placed while you were over there. Zadra's playing us."

"Here and I thought we were getting along so well," she replied with a fatalistic shrug.

The Yelnar ship emerged suddenly from a nearby eddy of gas as *Gibraltar* came about, the smaller ship's weapons ports blazing. Disruptor bolts and missiles savaged *Gibraltar's* starboard shields from near point-blank range as the starship heeled over in response to the unexpected assault.

The bridge tilted wildly to port and many of those not secured to their chairs were sent sprawling with a chorus of surprised yelps.

The Ops board avulsed a gout of sparks, and Juneau was just able to jerk her hands back before a streamer of electrical current surged across the surface of the dying panel.

"Pava," Sandhurst croaked as he struggled to pull himself back into his chair, "shoot back."

As he worked the weapons station, Lar'ragos acknowledged the order and noted laconically, "There's a reason your chair has safety restraints, sir."

A single phaser blast from the ship's ventral phaser array was *Gibraltar's* sole reply as the skiff shot past them and ducked into another concealing nebular tendril.

Juneau unstrapped herself and squeezed past Lightner at the Helm as she made for an auxiliary console on the upper level of the bridge. As she did so, Lightner mocked her quietly, "*This'll be easy.*"

Her response, though non-verbal, was unmistakable.

Sandhurst activated the command chair's shoulder restraints and looked to the specialist at the Engineering station. "How are we looking?"

"Moderate power systems disruptions, sir, and we've overloaded one shield generator on the starboard quarter. Shields are holding and structural integrity is nominal."

Lightner called back over his shoulder. "Captain, they looked like they were egressing towards one of our minefields."

In response, Sandhurst looked to Shanthi who nodded in consensus. "If they stay on the same course, they'll run right into field L-Seven."

Sandhurst crossed the fingers of both hands. "Here's hoping. Lay in a pursuit course and engage, but not too quickly. We've one too many black eyes as is." He threw a glance to where Juneau had ensconced herself at an auxiliary station, reconfiguring it for Operations. "Tell me we have a signal from *Rushaan.*"

"We do, sir. Strong and clear. They appear to be heading back towards the last known position of the Cardassian cruiser." Juneau was flabbergasted. "They have to know the Cardies are there, right?"

"Zadra's trying to martyr herself and her followers, and we keep getting in her way," he answered grimly.

"What the hell for?" Ramirez asked, exasperated.

"That's the question, Commander. If she survives this, I intend to ask her."

“No, Captain,” Ramirez parried. “I mean why do we keep trying to stop her?”

Sandhurst’s answering glance was tinged with judgement. “Some of the ship’s Bajoran crew aren’t her followers and don’t deserve to be offered up in sacrifice.”

“Fair point, sir,” she conceded, suddenly embarrassed to have voiced her unflattering question.

Shanthi’s clenched fist shook above his head as he crowed, “Got him!” In response to the bridge crew’s attention, he elaborated, “Two of L-Seven’s mines just detonated in succession.”

“Take us there,” Sandhurst directed to Lightner.

A tense minute passed as *Gibraltar* eased through the miasma, wary of another ambush. There they found the drifting remains of the Yelnar skiff, surrounded by a cloud of shattered hull plating and leaking radiation into the void.

“Helm, get after *Rushaan*. Set an intercept course that will reach them before they stumble into Gul Voret. I don’t want to test the man’s resolve.”

“The survivors on the skiffs, Captain?” Ramirez inquired.

“As ye sow, so shall ye reap, Exec. We’ll come back for them after we’ve settled up with Zadra and her merry band.”

* * *

Chapter 10

“You lied to me.” Sandhurst uttered the words from behind his ready room desk, his expression set in a mask of parental disapproval.

If Zadra was at all impressed with his façade, she didn’t show it. “You had no right to abduct me from my ship, Captain.”

“Considering that we intercepted you on your way to surrender to the Cardassians, I’d say neither your rights or your own personal safety are a high priority for you at the moment.”

“Release me, my ship, and my people. Allow us to go about our business.” It was a demand, but she voiced it as if by rote, utterly without conviction.

Sandhurst sat back in his chair, folding his arms across his chest. “No.”

She stared at him for a moment, seemingly at a loss for what to do next. “Why?”

“You’re asking me why I should release an apparently suicidal religious leader and her followers to surrender themselves to the Yelnar so that they can be imprisoned, tortured and very probably killed? How the hell is that even a question?”

“You don’t understand,” she pressed. “You couldn’t.”

“Even if I were willing to release you and your fellow Yelnar citizens, which I’m not, I wouldn’t release your Bajoran followers. Their imprisonment would create an interstellar incident between the Yelnar and Bajoran governments. As you might imagine, the Bajorans are rather sensitive to their people being mistreated. If that abuse were to come at the hands of a Cardassian ally, that would be a guaranteed recipe for war.”

Zadra opened her mouth to reply, but Sandhurst continued over her.

“And what do you think the odds are that a Bajoran/Yelnar conflict wouldn’t draw in Cardassia and the Federation?”

Again, she moved to speak, and again he cut her off.

“Zero. Nil. Zilch. Whatever the Yelnar word for ‘zero’ is. That’s the likelihood. So, to recap, I’m not inclined to allow a selfish child, no matter how revered, to spark a war while committing ritual suicide. If that makes me a villain in your eyes, so be it.”

“I’m *not* a child,” she snapped back, showing the first real emotion since she’d been summarily beamed away from the freighter and marched to the ready room by a phalanx of security personnel.

“Yes, you are. Absolutely you are. Regardless of your high station, you are biologically an adolescent. You have the hormones and the incomplete neurological development of a teen.”

“*You don’t understand!*” she shouted, lunging forward to slam her hands down atop his desk.

Sandhurst didn’t react, and instead he held her gaze passively. “Explain it to me.”

“I see the future, Captain.”

“So you’ve said,” he replied neutrally.

“No, not just days or months ahead, but centuries. I’ve seen what will happen if I and my followers successfully escape this nebula. We never make it to the Nybarrite Alliance. *Rushaan* experiences engine failure that forces us to shelter on a barely viable planet in a distant system. There we establish a colony that attracts other Yelnar expatriates over the coming decades.”

He cocked his head, battling his skepticism as her story unfolded.

“Three hundred years from now, the descendants of those colonists stage a return to Yelnar. My teachings will have been perverted by a series of self-serving acolytes into a monstrous parody of everything I believe. My so-called ‘followers’ find a Yelnar at peace, enjoying prosperity and good relations with their neighbors, and they fall on them like a swarm of *keth’ta*. Our world is wracked by conflict, a bloody religious war lasting decades that kills tens of millions.”

She touched a hand to the symbol sewn upon the breast of her robe. “Genocide. All in my name, flying flags emblazoned with my sigil.”

He sat back in his chair, exhaling a breath that he hadn’t realized he’d been holding in. “That’s a lot,” he said finally.

Zadra didn’t reply. She merely gazed into the distance, paralyzed by horrors that would not occur for centuries.

“You believe that if you surrender to the Yelnar now, are tried as apostates and executed, that all those horrors will never happen?”

She drew herself out of her reverie and focused on Sandhurst. “That is my desperate hope.”

He shook his head slowly, looking down as he searched for the right words. He raised his eyes to hers. "I understand your dilemma. As a starship captain I'm entrusted with the lives of my crew and with an enormous arsenal at my command. I make life and death decisions far more often than I'd like. You bear the same responsibility for the welfare of your people. Your followers have dedicated their lives to serving the faith you profess, the ideology you teach. You can't condemn them to death, or worse, because of something that might happen hundreds of years from now."

"It's for the greater good!" she pleaded. "The lives of a few dozen people now to save untold millions later."

"You can't quantify morality with mathematics, and you can't justify an immoral act with sophistry."

"It happens, I've *seen* it."

"Young lady, the future isn't written in stone. There are countless individual thoughts, actions, and decisions between now and this jihad you say you've witnessed. I know you perceive a bright line linking the two, but there are far too many variables to account for. Everything we know about temporal mechanics conflicts with what you're saying."

She closed her eyes and her face twisted with frustration. "Say what you will, I know this will happen."

"Change it."

Zadra blinked uncomprehendingly.

"Take whatever steps are necessary to prevent that future from coming to pass. Write and preach your vision of peace so prolifically that no one centuries from now could ever hope to distort your message for their own ends."

"Impossible..." she muttered, turning away. "I've tried that already. Nothing in my visions of the future changed."

"You're young," Sandhurst offered. "You've tried to alter that future for what... months, a year or two at most? You have the rest of your life to build your legacy, to steer your faith towards peace and compassion."

"I've seen myself try," she pleaded. "It didn't work. No matter how many times I preached peace and the sacred status of our homeworld, in the end the message is always twisted and Yelnar's fate remains the same."

"So, you're certain your only alternative is to betray your followers' belief and trust in you? You can't see any other path?"

"Only one," Zadra said finally. "I will surrender to them alone."

"And will that alter the future you're trying to avoid?"

"We will see."

* * *

Chapter 11

Zadra had surrendered her religious vestments and was now garbed in a simple shift and pants. She walked down the corridor at a deliberate pace, clearly in no hurry to reach her destination.

Sandhurst escorted her towards the transporter room, keeping step with her. He had exhausted every argument he could think of to dissuade her from her goal, to no avail. Pressing her further, he felt, would dishonor the sacrifice she sought to make, however much he disagreed with it.

So he kept companionable silence, trying to offer support merely by his presence.

They reached the transporter room, stepping through the parting doors to reveal Pell and Lar'ragos standing by with the transporter specialist.

"So, you're just going to let her do this?" was Pell's biting welcome.

Sandhurst closed his eyes briefly, dreading the impending confrontation with the stubborn Bajoran officer, with whom he was romantically involved. He turned to the console operator. "Chief, could you give us the compartment? I'll handle the transport."

The man appeared to accept the dismissal gratefully, ducking into the corridor as Sandhurst turned to engage Pell.

"I'm not allowing anything, Commander, and please don't talk about Zadra as if she's not in the room."

For her part, Zadra seemed unfazed by the exchange, her focus instead directed towards the transporter pad and all the significance it augured.

Pell glanced to Lar'ragos. "Can I expect any help from you on this?"

The El-Aurian looked askance at her. "She's made her choice, sir. Our interfering with her decision would constitute a violation of any number of Starfleet regulations and Federation laws. I would have assumed a diplomatic officer would be aware of that."

Her answering glare could have melted neutronium. She turned back to the captain. "At least have Taiee look at her to render a medical opinion of her ability to make such a decision?"

"Taiee's a nurse-practitioner, Pell, not a psychiatrist, and you know it."

Pell began to object anew but fell silent as Sandhurst raised a belying hand. "This isn't up for debate. I understand you have strong feelings about this, but it's not your decision to make, nor mine." He pointed to Zadra. "It's hers."

Zadra seemed to find herself again and addressed Pell. "I appreciate your concern, Commander, I really do. I know of your mistrust of the Cardassians and their allies; it's a fear I share. Believe me, if there were any other way I could see to prevent the future I've witnessed, I'd take that option."

Pell held the younger woman's gaze. "I won't pretend to understand, and I certainly won't stand here and watch while you do it." She stormed out of the compartment, flashing a parting glower at Lar'ragos.

Sandhurst stifled a sigh and moved to the transporter console. "You know, Pava, I think she's really starting to warm up to you."

This brought a mordant grin to his friend's lips.

"Zadra, I'm ready when you are." Sandhurst double-checked the re-materialization coordinates and confirmed the Cardassian warship was awaiting transport.

The young woman hesitated a moment before stepping up onto the transport pad. She turned to face the two as Lar'ragos moved to stand next to Sandhurst.

"Thank you for all you've done, Captain, both for me and for my followers. I know L'Osh has fiercely opposed my doing this and caused you many headaches as a result."

"L'Osh cares deeply for you," he replied. "You are her prophet, her teacher, and in many ways, her disciple. She *should* be distressed by your decision."

"We'll make sure that she and your other followers make it to the Nyberrite Alliance," Lar'ragos added hopefully.

A single tear leaked from one of Zadra's large eyes. "No sanctuary that, but the effort is appreciated nonetheless."

Sandhurst and Lar'ragos exchanged a puzzled glance.

"I wish you well. I hope that our mutual fears don't come to pass and that you are treated mercifully by your people."

She dipped her head. "Thank you, Captain." Zadra took a deep breath and seemed to steel herself. "Please proceed."

“Energizing,” Sandhurst advised. A moment later, the woman vanished from the pad.

“That is a brave young lady,” Lar’ragos assessed.

“Agreed,” Sandhurst said after a long moment of wrestling with his emotions. “I hope to hell I’ve just done the right thing,” he divulged.

“That makes two of us,” Lar’ragos answered. He tapped a series of commands into the console. “Transporter room two, our beam-over is successful. Please coordinate transport of the Yelnar prisoners from the skiffs over to the Cardassians.”

Sandhurst made for the door. “I’ll be on the bridge. Alert me when the prisoner transfer is complete, and we’ll set course back to *Rushaan*. I want Ashok to give that old scow a complete stem-to-stern workover before we send them on their way.”

“Aye, sir.”

Eight meters further down the curving corridor, Sandhurst found Pell in a maintenance alcove, leaning against a bulkhead as sobs wracked her frame.

He stepped in, gently wrapping his arms around her shoulders. He spoke no words as none would suffice. Pell had suffered greatly at the hands of the Cardassians, and knew full well what horrors were in store for Zadra.

The universe was not fair, nor just and it would simply never be so.

* * *

END

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