

Treacherous Waters

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Treacherous Waters

by [Gibraltar](#)

Summary

Gibraltar is pulled from her duties in occupied Cardassian territory to escort a diplomatic mission to the Gamma Quadrant. When tragedy strikes, Captain Sandhurst finds he and his crew isolated on the far side of the galaxy and faced with the very real possibility of re-igniting hostilities with the Dominion.

However, unknown to Gibraltar, the starship Intrepid is also currently assigned to the Gamma Quadrant on a secretive mission of the utmost delicacy. Captain Aubrey and his crew must endeavor to discover the true nature of the threat that faces both ships, as well as avert a tragedy that could result in the deaths of billions.

This story is a crossover with Galen4's Star Trek: Intrepid.

Notes

This story begins in February 2377.

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

Chapter 1 by Gibraltar.

Captain's Personal Log, Stardate 54115.1

"Gibraltar is on route to Point Station Alpha, following our third uneventful convoy escort mission in as many weeks. The new year has been merciful to us so far. Insurgent attacks in occupied Cardassian space have dropped off significantly, and the neo-Maquis movement seems to have taken the opportunity to lay low and lick its collective wounds. I know it won't last, but I'm determined to enjoy the lull for as long as it continues.

On the down side, Starfleet Command's repealing of the Fleet wide stop-loss orders has led to a significant reduction in available personnel at nearly every level. Dozens of my crew have been reassigned in recent weeks, and we're back down to a compliment of one-hundred and eight from a high of one-hundred forty-three just two months ago. This means most departments are pulling double-shifts to compensate, but overall we're making do with less. Fortunately, I've been able to hold on to my bridge officers and senior-most NCO's. This, of course, is going to make finding a new first officer that much more difficult.

At 1600 hours, I'm meeting with Commander Ramirez to sort through executive officer applications in order to select both her replacement aboard Gibraltar as well as her own first officer when she assumes command of the Yassim next month. It's going to prove an interesting collaborative effort, and as the time for her departure gets closer, she's actually becoming more relaxed and significantly easier to work with. I have to admit that I'm going to miss having as capable and formidable an exec at my side. I can only hope to find someone as accomplished, but I've a feeling anyone I might end up with will only pale in comparison.

As one might guess, Ojana and I are the talk of the ship. Her quarters go practically unused, and she's already begun changing the arrangement of furniture in my... our cabin. I don't want to push things too quickly, but propriety is nudging me towards making an honest woman of her. Well... propriety, and the fact that I'm as madly in love with her as I've ever been. I'm still trying to figure how she might react to an actual marriage proposal; the memory of Soyam still haunts her deeply. On second thought, as we're quickly coming up on the anniversary of her husband's death, maybe marriage is a discussion to reserve for another time.

End log."

Captain Donald Sandhurst closed the personal log entry, turning back to his ready room desk from where he had sat gazing out the circular viewport situated immediately behind his chair. A half dozen ungainly civilian cargo ships polluted his usually unobstructed view of the stars. The freighters were his charges on this latest mission in what seemed like an endless string of escort assignments.

He caught sight of his reflection in the transparent aluminum. Sandhurst had been noticeably heavy as little as six months ago, but a traumatic episode from Sandhurst's recent past had resulted in substantial weight loss that he had since maintained. Now lean but still of average height, his once prodigious mane of hair was shaved close to his scalp, giving him a crest of white stubble. Sandhurst thought his hazel eyes still gave away too much, hinted too compellingly at some of the horrors he'd endured since taking command of his ship just eleven months earlier.

He rose and moved for the door. Sandhurst stepped out onto the bridge of the *Constitution*-class USS *Gibraltar*. The aging starship had been resurrected from the Starfleet boneyards in the waning days of the Dominion War. An eight month refurbishment had updated many of the ninety-year old ship's systems with 24th century technology, but she was still noticeably slower and less well defended than her more modern counterparts. Thus, the once heavy-cruiser was now classed as an escort, spending the majority of her days guarding humanitarian relief convoys to the beleaguered Cardassian colonies now under Federation and Klingon supervision.

Sandhurst moved for the command chair, prompting Lt. Commander Pell Ojana to stand and relinquish the seat to him. Sandhurst smiled and beckoned her to resume her place. "I'm just checking in, Commander." The auburn-haired Bajoran woman, the ship's second officer and diplomatic specialist, nodded in response and settled back into the chair.

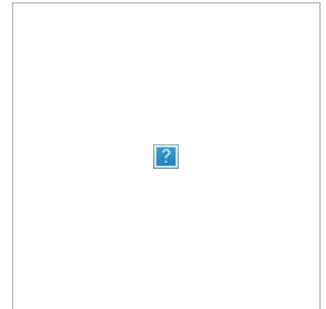
"ETA to Point Station Alpha is seven hours, five minutes, sir." She offered a padd to him, meeting his smile with one of her own. "I was just about to send this in to you, Captain. We've received new orders."

He gave the padd a brief glance and tucked it under one arm without reading it. "And where's the next convoy off to?"

She replied with a smirk, "The Gamma Quadrant, actually. It's less a convoy than it is a diplomatic honor guard."

Sandhurst raised an eyebrow at the unexpected news. He retrieved the padd and scrolled through its contents. "Well, I'll be damned. This'll be a welcome break from convoy duty." A wary frown suddenly found him. "But why us? I can think of a dozen ships in this theater better suited to an intra-galactic diplomatic mission."

"Continuity," Pell answered. "There will be a half dozen starships involved, and Command wants a vessel representative of the Federation's



23rd century exploratory campaigns. The idea is to display the Federation's longevity and commitment to exploration to our new friends, the Velk."

"Velk?" Sandhurst looked puzzled. "I've never heard of them."

"A Gamma Quadrant species that we'd only had fleeting contact with prior to the war. Their delegation is just completing preliminary talks on Earth, and we'll be rendezvousing with their diplomatic party at DS9 to escort them back to their homeworld on the other side of the wormhole."

Sandhurst looked wary and posited, "And how does the Dominion feel about this?"

"Apparently, they have no opinion one way or the other. They've been allowing Federation starships to operate in the GQ again, so long as we're careful to avoid their established territory."

Sandhurst held up the padd. "Sounds good. I'll look this over in a bit. I'm almost late for my meeting with Ramirez."

Pell nodded. "Dinner tonight?" she asked discretely.

The captain leaned in, his voice just above a whisper. "Of course. Any chance you could make your hasperat soufflé?"

She made a sour face and Pell remarked, "You know the replicator doesn't do my recipe justice."

He smiled shrewdly as he noted, "I guess it's a good thing I picked up the ingredients for the genuine article from that Bajoran trade ship last week at Sheva II."

She laughed lightly, drawing a few knowing smiles from the nearer officers manning their duty posts. Pell blushed fiercely in response as she said for public edification, "That's all I have to report, sir."

His eyes twinkled and Sandhurst moved for the turbolift. "Understood. Carry on, Commander."

The briefing room table was littered with padds and the large viewer set into the interior bulkhead displayed service file headshots of sixteen applicants who had made the final cut.

Commander Liana Ramirez sifted through the assortment of data tablets and picked one up, scanning it for a moment. "Okay, I've got Khilnani. She's neck and neck with Curbeam, with Robards coming in third." The diminutive woman had undone her customary utilitarian bun that usually confined her long black hair, and the onyx tresses now cascaded down over one shoulder. Though physically unimposing, she was undeniably beautiful. However, her physical attractiveness played a distant second to the aura of strength and calm she radiated and upon which her subordinates had come to rely. Because of her stature, more than one opponent had made the error of underestimating Ramirez, to their immediate regret. She had a reputation for being both tenacious and ferocious, and the captain could attest that it was well earned. She glanced up at him to ask, "And you?"

A former engineer, Sandhurst's padds were arrayed in front of him with linear precision. "I've narrowed it down to two. T'Shanir from the *Soval*, and Atoa of the *Sutherland*. T'Shanir's an engineer, and Atoa was chief of security for Captain Shelby."

Ramirez considered that. "I'm not sure having another engineer as XO is going to be particularly helpful, Captain. I think we've worked together well, with my strategic and tactical knowledge supplementing your technical expertise. With Atoa, you'd have a similar setup to what we presently enjoy." She leaned back in her chair, wincing at a knotted back muscle. "Now, I'm not accusing all Vulcans of being slavishly linear in their reasoning, but especially coming from a ship like the *Soval* with an all Vulcan crew I can foresee T'Shanir having some difficulties with as eclectic a crew as we've assembled here."

"That's a very diplomatic way of phrasing it, Exec," Sandhurst chuckled. As he read over Atoa's padd he noted, "Manuele's just completed his stint at Command Officers' Training, and it sounds like he's ready to sink his teeth into his first XO's billet." He shook his head in disbelief, "I'll admit to being a bit astonished that he's pursuing a posting with us."

Ramirez frowned as she asked, "Why is that, sir? Perhaps you haven't been paying attention, but *Gibraltar's* begun to develop a reputation for taking on difficult assignments and getting results. Not to mention that we've seen more than our fair share of action."

Sandhurst shrugged. "Fine, you've sold me. I suppose I'm just pleasantly surprised by the caliber of applicants seeking to sign on with an old escort."

She grinned broadly. "Well, you *are* replacing the best..."

As he raised his half empty cup of Rigellian spice coffee in a toast, Sandhurst beamed. "Of that I have no doubt."

The pre-mission briefing at DS9 had been refreshingly short. As Sandhurst and his crew were latecomers to the diplomatic escort mission, they had avoided the most tedious phases of convoy preparation. Four of the six ships participating in the diplomatic escort to the Velk home system had escorted alien delegates from DS9 to Earth and back again. The Velk ambassadorial party had traveled in the incomparable safety

that only a *Sovereign*-class starship like *Nagasaki* could provide.

Captain Braener, DS9's current strategic operations officer, had been tasked with briefing the captains and first officers from the task force in DS9's wardroom. With practiced efficiency, Braener recited the requisite navigational, tactical and logistical briefs on the region of the Gamma Quadrant the task force would be transiting.

He opened up the briefing to questions and nodded to Sandhurst as the *Gibraltar's* captain indicated he had a query. "I'd like some clarification as to the political situation on the other side of the wormhole at present," Sandhurst asked, arms crossed in an unconsciously defensive posture. "Do we have anything in writing from the Dominion that promises they won't be descending upon our group like a plague of locusts?"

This brought some muted chuckles from others with a similarly grim mindset. Braener smiled patiently. "Negotiations with the Dominion are on a hiatus right now, but the terms of the armistice allow us unhindered access to those areas in the Gamma Quadrant not presently claimed by the Founders. And as we've just covered, the nearest Dominion holdings are some twenty lightyears from the wormhole's exit point into the GQ. Though it's true the Dominion once controlled the Velk's home system, currently, the Dominion has relinquished its territorial claims to anything within twenty lightyears of the Velk homeworld."

"And if they change their minds without sending us a memo?" posited Captain Entenbe of the *Suleiman*.

Braener's tolerant smile faltered. "The Diplomatic Corps assured Starfleet Command that the Dominion won't present a problem on this mission. The Dominion and the Velk enjoy good relations."

"Good for the Diplomatic Corps. They won't be the ones getting shot at if they're wrong," Entenbe murmured *sotto voce* to her fellows within earshot.

Captain Zorek referenced the padd in his hand and spoke in a resonant yet precisely modulated tone. "I would request further information on this navigational hazard listed on the star charts as, 'the Bog.'" The senior Vulcan captain and accomplished negotiator would serve as task force commander from aboard the *Nagasaki*, leading his all Vulcan crew on a mission certain to earn another feather in his already substantial diplomatic cap.

Pleased at the sudden change of topic, Braener replied crisply, "The Bog is something of a dead zone in space, approximately five lightyears from the Velkamis system. It's comprised of sixteen separate star systems, most notable for their complete lack of Class-M planets. The Bog has been traditionally recognized as an important acquisition for a succession of conquering powers, as the numerous planetary bodies contain large amounts of heavy metals and dilithium deposits."

"And who is presently in control of the Bog?" Zorek asked, his bearded visage as stoic as that of a statue.

As he glanced down at a padd of his own, Braener looked momentarily uncertain. "We don't seem to have much information about that. The Velk made some veiled references to organized crime syndicates and piracy when the Diplomatic Corps asked them about the Bog, but we have no confirmed information regarding territorial claims over that region."

Zorek raised an eyebrow only slightly, the gesture analogous to a derisive eye roll from a human. "And this does not concern you?"

"Not overly much, no," Braener said with more conviction than he felt. "The ecological and infrastructure damage to the Velk homeworld is similar to what the Cardassians left behind on Bajor when they pulled out. The Federation's cooperation in helping them rebuild their economy will invariably lead to the re-establishing of rule of law over local sectors as the Velk begin policing neighboring systems."

"So, as the Velk stand up... we'll stand down, is that it?" Commander Ramirez asked incredulously.

"That's an over-simplification," Braener replied, looking ready for a verbal jousting match. "But the premise is accurate."

"Pulled any patrols in occupied Cardie space recently, Captain?" Ramirez asked, the hint of challenge in her tone unmistakable. Once upon a time, Sandhurst would have admonished her for such an outburst, but no longer. They had both seen too much to hold their tongues. "The Cardassians aren't doing such a good job of living up to our expectations in that regard. What makes us think the Velk will be any more reliable?"

Braener stiffened and his voice was tinged with indignation. "The Federation Council and Starfleet Command have deemed this an important diplomatic gesture to the peoples of the Gamma Quadrant, *Commander*. If you object to the assignment, I suggest you take it up with them." He looked to the assembled group and said, "Now, are there any further *pertinent* questions?"

None were voiced, and despite the other captains' subdued reservations, the meeting concluded and the various officers rose from their seats and moved for the exits.

Captain Fendro of the *Leeds*, a regal looking Andorian officer, approached Sandhurst with a wry smile. "You can thank Captain Aubrey of the *Intrepid* later, Sandhurst."

Sandhurst appeared confused. "How so?"

"*Intrepid* was originally supposed to represent the 23rd century in our little piece of historical pageantry. Unfortunately for you, Aubrey got caught up in some classified mission or other, and you and your crew were tapped to replace him."

“Remind me to send him a fruit basket,” muttered Ramirez from beside Sandhurst.

Fendro laughed. “After all the fun you had with Picard in the Briar Patch last year, this should be old hat to you.”

Sandhurst was in no mood to joke. “You’ve got a *Nebula*, Captain. You can fight if need be, and run if you’re forced to.” He took a sidelong glance at his exec as he fumed, “Our options are more limited.”

Suddenly serious, Fendro grasped Sandhurst’s upper arm lightly. “That may be so, Captain, but I can promise you one thing. So long as the *Leeds* is intact, you need not fear on that account. Like you, I don’t leave our people behind.”

Taken aback slightly by Fendro’s gesture, Sandhurst smiled gratefully. “And the same in return, Captain. Let’s pray we never have to put that to the test.”

15 hours later...

USS *Nagasaki*

Gamma Quadrant, Sector 7800913-G

Diplomatic Reception Lounge

Pell grabbed Sandhurst’s arm, smiling beatifically up at him as he sipped at a glass of champagne. “Care to dance, Captain?”

Sandhurst examined the glass closely as he demurred, “Maybe later.” He reached up to tug in annoyance at the stiff collar of his dress-whites jacket. “Sorry, Ojana, I’ve never been much fun at these diplomatic soirees.”

Forgoing her own dress uniform, Ojana was clad in a low cut, emerald green gown that the tailor Garak had assured her was all the rage in the Federation’s core systems. Sandhurst thought it flattered her slim figure, and amused himself for a moment by imagining removing it later that night.

“I have been apprised of your engineering difficulties, Captain.” Captain Zorek’s confident timbre jarred Sandhurst from his illicit reverie. Sandhurst blinked and turned to address the task force commander as the esteemed Vulcan added, “Is there anything my engineering staff can do to assist?”

Sandhurst cleared his throat, “Ah... no, thank you, Captain. It appears that transiting the wormhole induced a minor fluctuation in *Gibraltar’s* intermix ratio. It’s a problem that crops up from time to time with the older classes of starships passing through the phenomenon. We’re attenuating the injectors to compensate and trying to correct the issue without having to drop out of warp.” He finished his champagne in a single quaff and smiled weakly. “We wouldn’t want to interrupt the mission, after all.”

Zorek examined him with a dispassionate élan. “There is sufficient leeway in our current timetable for the task force to drop to impulse and allow you to effect repairs.”

Sandhurst waved away the suggestion dismissively as he replied, “Thank you, Captain, but that won’t be necessary. My chief engineer has the situation well in hand.”

“Very well,” Zorek intoned, inclining his head in acceptance. The Vulcan turned, his sensitive ears alerting him to the approach of the Velk ambassador, Envoy Jivin Sharm. “Envoy, may I introduce you Captain Donald Sandhurst, commanding the starship *Gibraltar*, and his diplomatic officer, Lieutenant Commander Pell Ojana.”

Sandhurst had paid sufficient attention at the briefing to know the Velk eschewed physical contact with outworlders who had not yet undergone a religious cleansing ritual. Instead, the captain bowed at the waist. “A pleasure, Envoy.”

The squat reptilian, his face mottled with thorny protrusions, generated his people’s approximation of a smile, which looked more like a painful rictus to the other humanoids present. “The honor is mine, Captain. Your people’s assistance in stabilizing our ecosphere and restoring our economy engenders a gratitude that defies your universal translator’s ability to express.”

Pell turned on the diplomatic charm as she acknowledged the ambassador with a bow of her own. “Your world and mine have much in common, Envoy. Only a decade ago, the Cardassians left Bajor a devastated planet after a half-century of occupation. The Federation has helped us to restore our world, heal our sick and injured, and rebuild our society. Your people are in good hands.”

Sharm’s toothy smile widened, the gesture somewhat unsettling due to his species’ similarity to the ferocious Jem’Hadar. It had been obvious from the Federation’s first contact with them that it had been Velk stock the Founders had genetically altered to create their cloned army. “I’m pleased to hear the Federation’s generosity has born such welcome fruits among your people, Commander, as I hope it does among my own.”

As Pell and Sharm continued talking, Sandhurst took the opportunity to excuse himself and wandered in the direction of the beverage tables. He claimed another flute of champagne and turned to find himself face to face with Captain Altwell of the *Hornet*. Altwell wore a mischievous grin and cleared his throat before directing a smarmy jibe at his fellow captain. “Having trouble keeping up, Sandhurst?”

Sandhurst sipped at the bubbling liquid. “Beg pardon?”

“Keeping up...” Altwell seemed to be enjoying the moment a bit too much. “Rumor has it your engines are having trouble and here we’re only limping along at Warp 6.”

Sandhurst forced a weak, humorless smile onto his features as he replied dryly, “Verteron particles within the wormhole have been known to play havoc with the nacelle field balance of older classes of starships.”

“Really?” Altwell feigned surprise. “*Hornet* is nearly fifty years old herself, and we seemed to have weathered the wormhole just fine.”

“How nice for you,” Sandhurst turned to leave.

“If you like...” Altwell offered quickly, “I’d be more than happy to take *Gibraltar* under tow and see you safely back to DS9.”

Sandhurst turned back towards the unctuous captain, keeping his tone carefully neutral. “That won’t be necessary, thank you.”

Altwell stepped forward, speaking in low tones. “Oh, it would be no problem at all, Captain. After all, we wouldn’t want anything untoward happening to such an important diplomatic conference.”

Sandhurst leaned in, feeling a tightness in his temples as his blood pressure began to rise. “Meaning?”

“Meaning that you and your ship have gained... how shall I put this... a reputation for being present when unpleasantness erupts. More than a few people are convinced you’re something of a bad luck charm.” The self-satisfied smirk on Altwell’s face might have set Sandhurst off some months before, but he had been learning the value of reining in his more impulsive responses.

As he took a long sip from his glass, Sandhurst appeared to give Altwell’s statement some thought. “You’re mistaken, Captain. You see, unlike you, I’m confident enough in my ship and crew to take them into harm’s way when it proves necessary. In the past year we’ve fought Cardassian insurgents, Orion raiders, the Alshain Starforce, the Son’a, the Maquis, and even a band of Bajoran religious extremists. It’s very apparent that you, on the other hand, have gone out of your way to keep the *Hornet* deep within the Federation’s core sectors while other captains and crews are manning the ramparts and helping to ensure the survival of our civilization and way of life.”

Altwell’s face colored, and Sandhurst cut him off as the man began to reply. “So, if I must decide between cantankerous engines or a sturdy backbone, I’ll take the backbone.” Sandhurst thrust his now empty glass into Altwell’s hand as the man’s mouth hung open in lieu of forming a cogent comeback. “Take care of this for me, won’t you?” Sandhurst patted him on the shoulder, “There’s a good man,” before abruptly turning and walking back towards Pell.

She had just finished her conversation with Envoy Sharm, and glanced up as Sandhurst approached. Pell gave him an appraising look as she asked, “Something wrong, Donald? You look a bit irritated.”

“No, nothing,” he said as he jerked a thumb back over his shoulder towards where Altwell stood glaring at Sandhurst’s back. “Just having a lovely little chat with the welcoming committee.”

“There’s a committee?”

Sandhurst grinned. “Always is.”

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Chapter 2 by Galen4

Captain's log, USS *Intrepid* Stardate 54114.0

Our classified diplomatic visit to the Gambis home world has taken a turn for the worse. My chief engineer, Lieutenant Cal Benjamin, is being held hostage in retaliation for his inadvertent damage to their nursery. I've documented the circumstances and exact details of this incident in a separate report

From my prior contact with them I know that the Gambis take offense easily. I'd therefore like to note that every precaution was taken during our mission to avoid creating a diplomatic SNAFU. I made sure that my away team was thoroughly briefed on all data from our first contact. They took pains to observe proper cultural etiquette and adhere to all social norms specific to Gambis society.

I must reluctantly say for the record that the accident at the nursery was due to Lieutenant Benjamin overtly disregarding my orders from the mission briefing and acting of his own accord.

His good intentions notwithstanding, this incident has damaged relations with the Gambis to the extent that our progress here is on the verge of unraveling. To say nothing of Benjamin's safety.

If our mission here fails and this species becomes distrustful of the Federation, it could create friction with their nearest neighbors, the Velk, who are deeply invested in Federation aid to rebuild their own world. If these two powers become adversaries, the hoped for stability in this sector would be jeopardized. This is a real threat if the Velk support us and the Gambis do not.

Since it was I who first made contact here in the Gamma Quadrant a year ago, I'm the defacto 'expert' on their culture. This means there are no social models on this society for me to access for guidance-----no protocols to look up other than the precious few already known to me. And Starfleet is several days away by subspace radio.

After making repeated attempts to resolve the issue through negotiation, the Gambis Elder has finally extended an offer to talk. He has made it clear that as the 'head of my family'; I'm to undergo a trial of some sort to win back his confidence. The details were purposely left vague.

Within the hour, I'll transport to the surface alone to complete talks with the Elder and verify that Lieutenant Benjamin is unharmed. Afterward, I'll be allowed two officers to join me.

Captain Jason Aubrey stared into the abyss. He shifted his feet on the gravely precipice, sending a loose rain of pebbles over the edge. Below him, two hundred and forty three meters straight down, lay a ruined and broken landscape. It was a sea of rocks, rendered harshly by the light of a bloated red sun.

For an instant, as Aubrey looked out over the empty space beneath him, he felt the sickly embrace of vertigo. He concentrated on holding the disorientation at bay, before his faltering balance could send him tumbling into a lethal fall.

It was a childhood memory that tethered him to the ground once more. It had surfaced from nowhere, as most of his newly restored memories so often did these days. He recalled one of the countless incidents in which his best friend had talked him into mischief. His father had admonished him for his bad judgment with that time-honored analogy: *Well, if your friend Jeff jumped off a cliff, would you jump off a cliff too?*

A smile tugged at the corners of his mouth.

The two Starfleet officers, who stood a dozen or so meters behind him, didn't share his amusement.

Lieutenant Commander Adol, an Andorian man, valued his commanding officer's safety more than his own. He kept leaning in the captain's direction, his mouth set in a tight grimace. He looked very much like a boxer who was eager to leave his corner and begin pummeling someone.

The other, Commander Shantok, was an attractive Vulcan woman who was having a devil of a time containing her emotional Betazoid half----although this was a struggle she advertised to no one.

"Commander," Adol groused under his breath, "we can't permit this. It's too much. *It's too much.*" He took a hesitant step forward, then backed into place again. "Do they really expect him to *die* over this?"

Shantok considered the stony ground at her feet and weighed the options before her. The captain had already agreed to the trial, so she could

easily make things worse by trying a last ditch effort to talk the Gambis out of this. Her attempt may not sit well with Aubrey either. But finally, she decided that the endeavor would be worth the risk. It could very well save the captain's life.

She looked out over the assembly of beings that surrounded them. All five creatures sat atop stone pedestals set in a half circle. The Gambis were bipeds, but a meter taller, and a several kilograms heavier than the average humanoid. Their large reptilian wings were crossed behind their backs in a gesture that equated to a human folding his arms over his chest. Horns and claws adorned much of their rough, dark hide. Cat-like eyes peered from beneath heavy brows. Had these beings arrived on Earth a thousand years ago, they would have easily been taken for mythical gargoyles.

She moved slowly away from Adol, taking carefully measured strides towards the gathering. She stopped just close enough to suggest assertiveness, but just far enough away to impart a veneer of respect.

"Honored Father, we have concerns." She was careful to address her remarks to the elder Gambis, who occupied the pedestal directly in front of her. As head of the family, he was always first to be addressed and his decisions, once made, were uncontestable.

His dispassionate stare wasn't inviting, but neither did it forbid her from speaking.

"You have said that this action will restore your trust, if carried out honestly and in good faith. You have also given your word that our captain will not be harmed." For emphasis, she inclined her head over her shoulder in Aubrey's direction. "Yet, there is no logical way that we can see for him to avoid death once he steps from the ledge. Can you tell us how you will ensure his survival?"

The elder Gambis said nothing in response at first. Then, he slowly raised a clawed hand in the air and drew it horizontally in front of his chest. He responded in a rumbling baritone. "There will be *trust* in what I have imparted, or there will be *no trust* in what I have imparted."

Shantok tilted her head respectfully, as if in full agreement with the ambiguous remark. "I understand the meaning of this trial. It will re-affirm the captain's integrity, and therefore the Federation's integrity, in your eyes. However, revealing the means of his rescue won't diminish the significance of his actions. In fact, it will only strengthen our *own trust* in you. Trust is something that *both parties* must earn."

From his vantage point, Aubrey turned in time to see Shantok speaking to the Elder. He couldn't make out what she was saying, but she was no doubt either trying to talk them out of this ritual, or demanding proof that he wouldn't be harmed. Or both.

Pointless and risky, no matter how you saw it. He had himself tried every argument in the book and all of it had fallen on deaf ears.

But moments later, he became alarmed at the sudden change in the assembly's body language. Even from a distance it was becoming apparent that Shantok had already progressed into shallow water. The elder had spread his pterodactyl-like wings to a half open position; a gesture that Aubrey knew signified offense.

He slapped his combadge. "Commander," he whispered urgently. "Back off, that's an order. I already-----"

But the Elder's bellow reverberated like a thunderclap.

"*You* must give your trust again to *us*?" He stormed at her. "It was *your* family that committed the betrayal! *Your* family that caused harm to my clan!" To the Gambis, the family structure was paramount. It defined their entire social-political make up. Therefore, they interpreted all hierarchies they encountered in the same manner.

"It is not your place to demand from *us*!" The elder Gambis was now standing fully erect, his wings stretching outward like an immense bat. "You can ask for *nothing*!"

Adol sprinted towards her, cursing the absence of his phaser. All of the imposing aliens were now rising to full height, their heavy wings rustling open.

The Andorian stooped low and snatched a large rock from the ground without breaking his stride. Almost in the same movement, he hit his combadge. "Adol to *Intrepid*! Stand by for emergency beam-out!"

"*Intrepid*, belay that order." Aubrey interjected over the communicator. "Mr. Adol, Commander, stand down and return to your positions."

The security chief came to a skidding halt at the sound of his captain's confident voice. He reluctantly dropped his makeshift weapon, but only after satisfying himself that the first officer was not in immediate harm.

Shantok uttered some amiable words of apology to sooth the Gambis' frayed tempers before walking back to join Adol.

Her effort was moderately successful. The creatures huffed and growled and continued to unfurl and close their wings in agitation-----but the situation was now simmering rather than boiling.

Walking beside her, Adol heeded the call to sarcasm.

"Well, I can see why the Federation council wants a relationship with the Gambis. They're so peaceful and open-minded."

Her comeback was so immediate it caught him unprepared. "I seem to recall that the Vulcan High Command once made the same observation about the Andorians."

They walked near the edge of the cliff upon which Aubrey stood.

She began making her case at once. "Captain, with more time I'm certain we can-----"

He raised his hand gently. "Commander, I appreciate your efforts on my behalf. But I've already explored all the options. This is the only way to regain their faith and free Lieutenant Benjamin." He took in a deliberate breath, and looked out over the great vista. "Unfortunately, this is all we have. So I'm ordering both of you not to pursue it any further."

Stepping back to the ledge, he removed his combadge and tossed it to Adol. Once he jumped, there would be no rescue from the ship without his communicator. Nor had their scans revealed any power sources between him and the ground. There were no tractor beams, anti-grav fields, transporters, or force fields-----nothing at all to slow his decent once he left his perch. He would live or die entirely upon the word of the Gambis.

It was, quite literally, a leap of faith.

Adol considered tackling him before he could jump. Instead he decided on reason as a blunt instrument. (Even if he had to stretch the facts to suite his objective.) "Captain, the universal translator has trouble with the Gambis language. And they use a lot of metaphors in their speech. How do you know you're not interpreting what they're saying too literally? You could die over nothing more than a miscommunication!"

Commander Shantok raised an eyebrow just slightly, favoring the security officer with a look of approval. She seemed to be saying, *nicely done*.

"They were pretty direct on this point. So I sincerely doubt it." Aubrey replied, almost sounding apologetic.

He turned and took a telling step forward.

At this point, Shantok decided to dispense with subtlety and debate. She simply would not stand by and watch her commanding officer commit suicide.

"Captain, I can't allow this. It's an unacceptable risk and indicates to me that your reasoning may be in question." She tensed, ready to spring forward like a cat. "If you don't abandon this course, I'll be forced to relieve you on those grounds."

"Sorry." He stated with finality.

And with that, he pivoted and leaped out into the void before him.

The Vulcan woman was strong and fast-----but not fast enough. Even as she dove forward, Aubrey had already escaped her outstretched hand. She felt her fingertips brush the fabric of his pant leg just before she hit the gravel in a skid.

And then he was gone.

The fall itself wasn't so bad. Aubrey used to enjoy high altitude air diving, where a person falls from a strato-car or hovercraft only to halt their decent with an anti-grav harness, just a few hundred meters short of the ground.

This was different of course. He was just high enough to see the ground rushing to meet him and the fall was just long enough that one could contemplate the unhappy conclusion to the journey.

At the halfway point, he realized that Adol's hasty excuse to keep him from leaping might have been correct after all. Perhaps he really had just extinguished himself by misunderstanding a metaphor.

His mind shut down in anticipation, seeking the comfort of shock.

And because of shock, Aubrey never saw the blur from overhead. He failed to hear the leathery beating of large wings. He didn't feel the talons clamp around his forearms. He was oblivious to his body being pulled taught, like a piece of rubber, before bouncing high into the air.

At some point he came to and thought he was still falling.

Wow, this is taking forever, he mused drunkenly.

As his senses returned, he became aware of painful pressure in his shoulders, and realized that he was now hanging from something that had him in a vice-like grip. It soon became apparent that a Gambis was holding him aloft, speeding him through the air and back up to the towering spire he had descended from. It occurred to him that this was what a squirrel must feel like when captured by a hawk.

Aubrey was lowered to the rocky plateau with a controlled gentleness, before the creature touched down next to him.

Adol and Shantok were at his side immediately. The security chief stole a moment to spread his withering glare over the assembled aliens, before tending to his captain.

"Sir, are you all right?" He queried.

The captain nodded stiffly, and then sat up. "I think so. Just a little shaky."

"You should return to the ship at once." Shantok said stiffly.

The Gambis who had affected the rescue spoke. Shantok noticed its voice was attuned to a higher pitch than the others. Also, it had a smaller build. She concluded it was female, perhaps the Mother of the family. She must have remained hidden in one of the many caves that honeycombed the tower, only to emerge at the last moment.

"Captain Aubrey, we return our *trust* to you." Standing beside him, she stretched her wings vertically over her head then folded them behind her back once more. The rest of her family followed suit, repeating her gesture exactly.

Aubrey got to his feet, testing each trembling leg before putting his full weight on it. He dusted himself off while speaking to the Elder. "Then I respectfully ask that my officer be returned."

"And so he shall." The elder replied.

Before them, one of the many rocky outcroppings that littered the plateau began to shimmer and become indistinct. When the holographic image disappeared, Lieutenant Cal Benjamin was revealed in its place.

The young man was smudgy and disheveled, but otherwise looked no worse for the wear. He shuffled towards them like a criminal who had just been extradited to his home world.

Adol did a superficial evaluation of his health after Benjamin stood among them.

"No damage that I can see with the tricorder." He reported.

Aubrey dipped his chin in acknowledgement. "Thank you." He said. Stepping in front of the young engineer, he placed a hand on his arm. "Are you sure you're not hurt?"

Benjamin's sorrowful eyes roamed everywhere, evading his commanding officer's face. "Yeah, I'm ok." He replied in a low tremor. "I got a little scratched, but mostly..." his voice trailed off when he became aware that Aubrey's hand was not upon his arm to offer solace. He winced at the tight grip.

"Good," the captain said. "then listen closely."

Knowing that he was expected to look up, Benjamin willed his face to rise.

With a frigid smile, the captain continued. "Once you've checked in at sickbay and been debriefed, you're confined to quarters for the remainder of this assignment. And I'm placing a level three reprimand in your file."

"Aye, sir." Benjamin whispered.

"You came very close to derailing the Federation's efforts in this sector. Rest assured, you and I will be discussing that subject at great length."

"Captain."

Aubrey realized Shantok had been trying to get his attention. The elder Gambis had glided from his platform and was now walking towards them, moving in that oddly comical shuffle-hop that was reminiscent of a bird.

"We are pleased that you have mended the rift between our families." The Elder rumbled. "We look forward to the day long Festival of Reconciliation aboard your star-craft."

Four sets of eyebrows went up.

"Festival?" The captain ventured cautiously. "On our ship?"

"Yes." Our two families will now celebrate our new kinship." He spread his wings vertically in the air. "We are now *one* family."

"It would be a great honor for us to celebrate here," He countered, making a wide gesture that encompassed the rocky plateau. "On the surface of your beautiful world."

The Gambis brought his wings to a half folded position. He cocked his head to one side. "You have seen our world. We have not seen yours."

Aubrey kept his eyes on the creature's half folded wings----body language that foreshadowed more trouble. He decided to concede, hoping it wouldn't be perceived as weakness. "Then we are honored to have you aboard. Of course."

"Stay with us for a short time, Father, while your family attends to the details aboard your star-craft."

Was there a just hint of mischief in the Elder's eyes, or had the captain only imagined it?

A few minutes later, the officers stood alone, as the Elder had returned to the assembly to give the captain time to confer with his crew.

"We have a problem." He said at once.

"I concur." Shantok added. "We're due to rendezvous with the diplomatic convoy in three days. This function will put us too far behind schedule to participate."

Adol rubbed his chin. "I don't understand. This festival we're supposed to host is only for a day, right? We're only a few light years from the Velk home world. I don't see a problem with the time table."

Aubrey was bemused. "A *Gambis* day, Mr. Adol. Not a Federation standard day."

"And a *Gambis* day lasts 78.4 hours." Shantok supplied.

The Andorian grinned as a new thought surfaced. "Well, it at least we have a great excuse to not participate in that diplomatic procession. It would have been a waste of our time anyway." He stopped and shrugged at Aubrey. "In my opinion, sir."

"Considering how particular Admiral Jellico is, it's likely that he'll pick another ship to replace us."

"Six ships to do the work of one. It's a waste of personnel and resources." Adol scoffed.

"The Federation Council considers the gesture an important one-----to demonstrate our commitment to the hostile governments in this sector." Shantok lectured.

Aubrey looked back at the *Gambis* assembly, who were now gathering on the ground, making excited snorts and growls. "As much as I'm enjoying this compelling dialogue, I need both of you to return to the ship and begin making arrangements for our guests."

Shantok gave Adol a visual cue that she wished a moment alone with the captain. In silent understanding, he collected the sullen engineer and made a smooth exit. After they had left, she stood without speaking, observing Aubrey as though she were no longer sure of his identity.

"I take it, Commander, that you're about to express your dissatisfaction."

One look at her face told him that he had misjudged her mood. Shantok was not merely exasperated with him; she was in a state that for a Vulcan was close to fury.

"I have served with you for some time. She began coldly. "I have great respect for what you have accomplished as a starship commander. I know that on occasion, you've made decisions that could have ended your career or caused great harm to others. However, I've always supported you because invariably, your decisions turn out to be correct."

"I appreciate that. I know that-----"

"Lately, your actions have forced me to re-evaluate that opinion."

He blinked in surprise. "Oh?"

"I will be recording a formal protest in my log regarding your decision to follow the demands of the *Gambis*. It was a needless, unconscionable risk."

His blue eyes cooled. "I believed otherwise. Every risk I take is a calculated one, Commander."

"I know that is what you believe."

"No," he corrected. "That's what I know. I explored other options first. I told you that already."

Shantok was certain that Aubrey *had* tried other options. There was no doubt that he had tried to talk the *Gambis* out of their bizarre test.

But just how *hard* had he tried?

Since the end of the Dominion War, she had noticed a deviation in his behavior. Lately, too many situations like this had arisen-----scenarios where Aubrey was mysteriously required to place his life in grave danger to either complete a mission or save the ship. Officially, there were always good reasons to support his actions-----at least, they were good reasons to anyone who didn't know the captain as she did.

She didn't think it was a martyr complex or self-loathing. This was something more complex, a concept whose identity lay just out of her reach.

She had mind melded with him twice in the last few years. Each time, she had tread carefully to avoid violating his privacy. But during those experiences, she sensed that he was guarding a secret that was weighing heavily on him. It was a dark knowledge that he believed he had long ago come to terms with. Like most humans, he had obviously made the mistake of too hastily dismissing something without properly reconciling it. Because of this, the pain was all but invisible to him now-----lurking in plain sight, driving him to seek out personal hazards.

These thoughts cycled through her mind in the span of two seconds.

"My intention was to express my concerns to you. If I may be dismissed, I'll return to the ship and communicate our delay to Admiral Jellico."

She was cool and aloof.

Aubrey wanted to pursue the subject. He was uneasy at Shantok's displeasure. They had had disagreements before, but their working relationship had always benefited in the end.

Not this time. Damage had been done here today. How much, and how permanent, he would soon find out. But as always, he was forced to put off the discussion because of time constraints.

"Very well, Commander. We'll table this for now. But I'd like the opportunity to follow up on your concerns."

She nodded, offering no commitments.

He watched her back recede away, as she walked off to join Adol and Benjamin at the beam down sight.

He considered her waning trust in him. He thought about his impulsive engineer who had just tarnished a brilliant career. Then there was his security chief who, it seemed, was becoming more bitter and cynical every day.

The Gambis think of us as a family, he thought wryly. If so, we're quickly becoming a dysfunctional one.

The attempt at gallows humor fell flat. He straightened his uniform and moved away from his crew, once again embracing the unknown by himself.

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Chapter 3 by Gibraltar

USS Gibraltar

Gamma Quadrant, Sector 7800913-G

Sandhurst tread purposefully into Engineering, his displeasure as evident in his stride as it was upon his face. "Let's have it, Lieutenant."

The enormous Bolian engineer turned from the master systems display, his response as succinct and taciturn as the captain had come to expect. "We've tried everything, sir. There's no way to correct the imbalance without dropping out of warp."

As he moved to the warp field monitors, Sandhurst quickly assessed the situation. "No success with attenuating the injector sequencing, Mister Ashok?"

Ashok demonstrated the patience of a Vulcan *Kolinahr* master as he answered stolidly, "No, sir. The problem has remained determinedly vexing."

The next ten minutes turned into a fruitless series of questions and answers, with Sandhurst postulating various avenues of corrective action, only to have Ashok inform him they had already been attempted. It became readily apparent that there could only be one solution to this impasse.

He stepped into a secluded alcove and tapped his combadge as he wrestled with his anger and frustration. "Sandhurst to Ramirez, contact the *Nagasaki* and inform Captain Zorek that we're going to have to drop to impulse in order to affect repairs to our warp drive."

"Captain," Ramirez replied, sounding particularly reticent, "*Zorek just notified us that Nagasaki has received word from the Velk homeworld that some kind of civil unrest has broken out there. It may be related to the task force's impending arrival. The envoy has been ordered home immediately, and all ships have been instructed to increase speed to Warp 8.*"

Sandhurst rubbed his temples and fought to control his breathing as he exclaimed, "Great. Just great." He took a moment to center himself and then ordered, "Understood, Exec. Send our message to Zorek, and inform him that we'll catch up as soon as possible."

"Yes, sir."

Sandhurst stepped back out onto the main floor of Engineering. He removed his dress uniform jacket, draping it over an auxiliary console as he pushed up the sleeves of his undershirt. "Okay, Lieutenant, engines all stop while we get to the bottom of this."

Ramirez sat patiently in the command chair, awaiting news from the engine room on the status of the ongoing repairs. She knew Sandhurst was embarrassed and angry at having to fall behind as the convoy proceeded to the Velkamis system, but some things were simply unavoidable. Ramirez prided herself on taking a more pragmatic view. If nothing else, at least she'd be able to say she had been to the other side of the galaxy.

Despite the fact that the wormhole's existence had been common knowledge for nearly a decade, it still seemed surreal to Ramirez that she was now some seventy-thousand lightyears from home. She tried to imagine what it must be like to be lost at such a distance, like the crew of the starship *Voyager* who even now struggled to find a way back to Federation space from their imposed exile deep in the Delta Quadrant.

She banished the thought after a moment, finding it too harrowing to contemplate. Ramirez brought herself back to the task at hand, glancing at the bridge's chronometer with growing irritation. Lieutenant(j.g.) Olivia Juneau, the ship's chief operations officer was late. Again. It would be the second time this week.

With Ramirez's time aboard *Gibraltar* winding down, she was determined to settle the matter of Juneau's lackluster performance prior to her departure. For nearly a year Ramirez had coached, encouraged, and cajoled the younger woman, trying to prompt Juneau into turning the proverbial corner and taking her career more seriously.

Indeed, Juneau had demonstrated moments of brilliant service, once taking command of any away team under attack by nightmarish monsters created by a delusional member of the Q Continuum and proving so effective she had merited a citation for bravery. Regardless, Juneau's sporadic examples of heroism could not compensate for her sub-par performance on a day-to-day basis. Her written reports and personnel evaluations were sloppy, and her department was the least organized aboard ship despite Ops being the primary administrative and logistics post. Morale in the operations department was at an all-time low, as Juneau's subordinates felt adrift and without guidance or leadership.

One way or the other, Ramirez vowed silently, I'll fix this before I leave. I'm not leaving this mess for the captain's next XO to fix.

The sound of the turbolift opening prompted Ramirez to glance over her shoulder, where she spotted a disheveled looking Juneau stepping onto the bridge and looking very self-conscious. She was of medium height with strawberry blonde hair that was presently an unkempt mess, as if she'd just awakened. Juneau was known to be self-conscious about her weight, being as she was fuller figured than she would have liked. Her freckled complexion made her appear much younger than her twenty-six years, and they stood out more prominently at times like these when she was blushing fiercely.

"Mister Juneau," Ramirez said, her tone ominous. The XO stood and motioned towards the captain's ready room. "Let's talk, Lieutenant."

USS *Nagasaki*

Gamma Quadrant, Sector 7800913-G

Lieutenant S'Vel at Operations was the first to notice the irregularity, which he dutifully brought to the captain's attention. "Sir, sensors indicate the presence of a small spacecraft that has just appeared five hundred meters off our ventral axis. I am now reading a transporter signature as well."

Zorek sat forward ever so slightly in the command chair. "Red alert, raise shields." He addressed the officer at the science station and prompted, "Location of the transporter beam?" To S'Vel he inquired, "Did the vessel decloak?"

"Negative, sir. We have detected none of the customary energy signatures associated with cloaking technology." S'Vel looked momentarily perplexed as his board warbled another warning. "The vessel has vanished, Captain."

The deceptively elfin looking female tactical officer announced from the back of the bridge, "Sir, security personnel outside the Velk accommodations sa—"

Without warning, the multi-layered fabric of subspace intruded into the plane of the physical universe in a spherical shape measuring five AU in diameter. The phenomenon was centered on the Starfleet task force and engulfed the five starships instantaneously. The shearing stresses caused by the sudden warp velocity penetration of the ships into the chaotic subspace geometry was far in excess of anything they had been designed to withstand.

Alarms howled on *Nagasaki's* bridge, sounding the proud ship's death knell. Zorek stood to witness the approaching core of the maelstrom on the viewer, determined to meet his end on his feet. His impressive intellect quickly assessed the odds of survival upon impact with such a tempest at hyper-relativistic speeds and concluded that there was no hope of escape. As the starship's rending superstructure shrieked around him, Zorek of Vulcan announced in a voice free from fear or regret, "It has been an honor."

Nagasaki and her fellows slammed into an eddy of twisted subspace, its density many times that of a neutron star. Within milliseconds all five starships and the two-thousand, three-hundred and seventeen crew contained within them were reduced to subatomic components racing away on random trajectories.

Ramirez was about to step across the threshold into the ready room when the voice of Kuenre Shanthi caught her attention. The newly promoted junior lieutenant served as *Gibraltar's* science officer, and at present he was staring into his sensor display with evident disbelief. "Commander... the task force."

A sheepish looking Juneau slid past Ramirez through the narrow doorway and entered the ready room as the exec glanced back at the young science officer. "What about it?"

It took Shanthi a moment to find his voice. "It-- it's *gone*, sir."

Ramirez rolled her eyes, misunderstanding. "Now we've lost sensors? What the hell is the matter with this ship?" Her anger with Juneau in abeyance, Ramirez approached the science station. "Have you run a diagnostic?"

Shanthi pried his eyes away from his display and looked up at Ramirez, his face a mixture of incredulity and horror. "The sensors are fine, sir. There's been some sort of massive subspace rupture at the task force's coordinates. The ships are gone. Destroyed."

The set of her jaw and the dark expression were the only outward signs of Ramirez's distress. She looked to the petty officer manning the Ops board and ordered, "Confirm that."

Less than ten seconds had passed when the man's reply came. "Confirmed, sir. Sensors indicate a large-scale subspace disruption measuring some five AU in diameter. It appears to be subsiding, but there's no sign of any of the other vessels."

Ramirez glanced back at Lieutenant Lar'ragos manning the stand-alone Tactical station just behind the captain's chair. She instructed, "Hail the task force, Pava."

The El-Aurian nodded in response, his hands moving across his console. A look of consternation flickered across his features briefly before he looked up at Ramirez. "Whatever just happened out there has caused massive subspace communications interference, sir. We can't get a signal out."

"Red alert," Ramirez ordered in a subdued voice as her mind reeled with the sudden and senseless loss of so many lives. "Captain Sandhurst to

the bridge."

The somber silence that filled *Gibraltar's* briefing room was finally broken by Sandhurst's query. "So, now I have to decide whether to turn around and head back to DS9 or carry on and continue the mission as best we can." He scanned the solemn expressions of his senior staff. "I'm open to suggestions."

Just as Ramirez appeared about to speak, Juneau blurted out, "Continue the mission? *What* mission? *Nagasaki* is destroyed, the Velk envoy is dead, the Federation's diplomatic team is dead, Captain Zorek is dead. There's no mission left to complete!"

Ramirez looked prepared to jump down Juneau's throat, but Sandhurst held her in check with a raised hand. "I did ask for opinions, Commander. She has a valid viewpoint."

"Fine," Ramirez countered, giving Juneau a scathing look. "I vote we proceed with our mission. Our holds are full of medical and relief supplies for the Velk homeworld. Granted, we're only carrying a fraction of what the rest of the task force had, but under the circumstances every bit helps."

Pava Lar'ragos raised two fingers from where his hand rested atop the table to indicate his desire to speak. The youthful looking lieutenant was more than four hundred years old. Despite being relatively small in stature, Lar'ragos was agile and deceptively strong, advantageous attributes in a security officer. His jet-black hair was tightly curled and cut short. The hard cast of the man's dark brown eyes hinted at the struggles endured during his centuries long journey from the Delta Quadrant to Federation space.

Sandhurst acknowledged his old academy classmate with a nod, prompting Lar'ragos to speak. "Respectfully, sir, if we've just witnessed the deployment of a new Dominion weapon, it's our responsibility to return to report this incident to Starfleet Command."

"If this *was* the Dominion," interjected Issara Taiee, the ship's chief medical officer, "then why are we still here?"

"We're the witnesses to the effectiveness of their weapon," Lar'ragos answered. "No sense in putting on a successful demonstration like this if there's no one left to report it to your enemies."

Science officer Shanthi cleared his throat and drew the gathering's eyes to him. The tall African seemed disconcerted with the attention but pressed on. "Once we've restored warp capability, we could send a message buoy at warp back to the wormhole to report the loss of the task force. That would allow us to notify Starfleet while moving forward with our assignment."

Ramirez nodded in silent agreement and Sandhurst appeared thoughtful. Juneau spoke up once again, her expression incredulous. "You're actually considering this?" She gestured to the viewports, "They just wiped out five starships without breaking a sweat! They're not going to hesitate to destroy us, too, if we don't turn around and run back to Federation space."

Sandhurst's hazel eyes met Lar'ragos' brown counterparts. "Is this your assessment too, Pava?"

Lar'ragos appeared bemused. "I can't believe I'm actually agreeing with Juneau, but speaking from a tactical standpoint, I think her appraisal is correct. Odds are the Dominion is counting on us to turn tail and head home. If we forge ahead, they wouldn't even need to employ this new weapon of theirs again. A handful of their heavy fighters would be sufficient to finish us off."

"Are there any other Starfleet vessels assigned to the Gamma Quadrant at present?" Sandhurst asked.

Ramirez shook her head fractionally. "No, sir. Our convoy was the sole Starfleet presence on this side of the wormhole."

Sandhurst nodded, then placed his hands palms down atop the table. "So, once again, we're up the proverbial creek without a paddle." An ironic smile graced his lips, "And here I was afraid we'd get out of practice." He took a long look around the table, surveying the tension evident in his officer's faces. Sandhurst's gaze finally settled on Pell Ojana, seated at the opposite end of the table. "Commander, are you sufficiently up to date on the players to take the lead on the diplomatic front?"

Pell met his stare evenly. "I always prepare for just such an eventuality, sir. Although I lack the background experience and established relationships of Captain Zorek and his team, I'm confident I can convey the Federation's position and goals."

"Very well." Sandhurst put on his most confident face, knowing that in all likelihood he wasn't fooling anyone. "We're going to notify Starfleet of our circumstances by warp probe while *Gibraltar* proceeds to the Velkamis system. Thank you all for your input. Dismissed." As the senior staff began to file out, Sandhurst motioned for Ramirez to remain behind.

"Sir?"

He stood and moved to the viewport. Sandhurst gazed out at the stationary stars, recognizing not a single constellation in this far-flung corner of the galaxy. He reached out with a hand to brace himself against the transparent partition. "Tell me this isn't hubris, Liana."

She looked perplexed as she remained standing a few paces behind him. "I'm afraid I don't understand, Captain."

"My wanting to stay and complete the mission. We've just seen one of the Federation's most accomplished explorers and diplomats snuffed out in an instant along with his crew and those of four other vessels. What the hell am I thinking?"

"That's easy," she replied, the timber of her voice resonating confidence. "You're doing your duty and fulfilling the mission we've been assigned. We don't back down from challenges. That's the bar you've set for this crew."

"And the Dominion?"

She smiled fiercely. "If they're behind this, let them come."

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Chapter 4 by Galen4

USS *Intrepid*

Gamma Quadrant, Orbiting Gambis home world

Stardate: 54114.3

Artificial wind rustled the trees and bushes around him, and Jason Aubrey inhaled deeply, thriving off the scent of honeysuckle and pine. It was the first time in three days that he had a moment to himself, and he couldn't have picked a better place to spend it than amongst greenery.

Real greenery, no less. This was no holodeck he was sitting in. 'Sherwood Forest' covered most of deck 18 on the *Excelsior*-class vessel. It was one of the few hydroponics parks left on any starship, a landmark whose revered status had been stubbornly preserved by each of the ship's commanding officers, stretching back 40 years. Her current master was no exception. (Although how it came by the moniker of 'Sherwood Forest' was an historical enigma.)

It had all been worth it. The Festival of Reconciliation had finally ended and the Gambis had departed the ship two hours ago. It had been three exhausting days spent mostly in the ship's main hangar bay, located beneath the secondary hull. The sizable chamber had been the most practical choice to entertain the large and awkward creatures, with their long wings and sharp claws.

Ultimately, the occasion had been a success; the Elders had left the ship happy, stuffed with all the raw meat and fruit juice the replicators could produce in a 78-hour period.

When it comes to gratuitous consumption, He reflected; the Klingons have nothing on these people.

He shook his head ruefully at the memory of being coerced into singing in front of his senior officers. He had learned too late that the Gambis liked to sing. A lot. In fact, it was one of their main pastimes. They accented all parties and social gatherings with a chorus of howls and woops whose beauty was directly proportionate to one's level of inebriation. And it was an activity that they insisted Aubrey participates in-----even to the point of him doing a solo.

Thus, bottles of Saurian Brandy had been passed around to make his audience more receptive-----and then he had sung. Or bellowed, to be more accurate. His ruthless repertoire had possessed all the charm of grinding metal. It was likely that his crew would be recounting the harrowing details to their grandchildren.

But any personal embarrassment had been worth the sacrifice. Because as of today, a formal relationship now existed between the Gambis and the United Federation of Planets.

Despite being flushed with this success, his musings turned to Shantok once more. As he sat upon the marble bench in the park, he thought of the rift that was now between them, a gulf that he had carelessly allowed to widen over the last year. He decided that he would find a way to resurrect her faltering respect in him. No matter how thorny the effort.

But for the time being, he knew of one way to cheer her up. Tapping his combadge, he said, "Aubrey to Shantok."

"Go ahead." Came the neutral response.

"Commander, now that our responsibilities here have been discharged, I think it's time we got underway."

"Understood. Shall I set course for the wormhole, Captain? Or do you have new orders in hand?"

"Actually," He said with relish, "we'll be stopping next door to the Velkamis system on our way back. Captain Zorek and his team will be there by now. He might like to see you again."

There was a minute trace of hesitation in her voice. *"I wouldn't presume to know what Captain Zorek might wish,"* She commented. *"Nor would I want to distract him from his vital assignment."*

"I think your revered mentor will make the time for you." He quipped.

Only Aubrey knew what the elderly captain meant to his first officer. Shantok's mother, a well-respected Priestess on Vulcan once had a torrid affair with a fugitive Betazoid criminal. Shantok had been produced by this act of infidelity. As a young woman, her community had quietly and subtly ostracized her for it.

Her family was regarded with shame, despite outward gestures of civility and acceptance. In a way, this silent disapproval was harder for her to bear, for her dual heritage gave her formidable telepathic abilities...and before she mastered those abilities, they had ruled her. The disdain and intolerance of her peers had been both seen and felt by the young Shantok. The merciless onslaught of other people's thoughts and

emotions had nearly broken her. More than once, she had discarded Surak's philosophy of non-feeling.

It wasn't long before her mother found a barely plausible excuse to live off world, leaving Shantok the burden of her shame.

Then Zorek had begun tutoring her. He was both wise and tolerant. He schooled her in the mental disciplines she would need to master her own mind. But more importantly, he held no disapproval of her. He was adamant that she should demand the best from herself, forcing her to earn every bit of respect he gave her. And demanding that she make others treat her in the same regard.

He was the only father figure, the only real parent she had ever known. She had wanted desperately to emulate his dignity and self-assuredness. So it was that, although Zorek never voiced his expectation, she acted on it, following his footsteps into Starfleet.

"He will have the opportunity of my presence, should circumstances permit it----and should he desire it." The response was too stereotypically Vulcan, which Aubrey knew was an overcompensation to mask her excitement.

"Very good. Lay in a course for the Velk home world. And relay a message to the *Nagasaki* that we're on the way."

"Acknowledged."

He stood from the bench and stretched. Fatigue was fast approaching. He thought about stretching out in the grass, but he didn't fancy the image of snoring under an elm tree in front of off duty crewmembers.

"Uh, Captain?"

A young man of pale complexion had just stepped through two large bushes. His jet-black hair was immaculately groomed.

Aubrey barely contained his surprise. Lieutenant Cal Benjamin had only just been allowed back to duty today. And yet, here he was, seeking out his captain.

The kid's got guts. He observed silently. "What can I do for you, Lieutenant?"

Benjamin's jaw muscles worked furiously, the only outward sign of his distress. "Sir, may I have permission to speak freely?"

"By all means." Aubrey agreed. He waited patiently for the young man to begin.

"I just wanted to say thank you." He announced solemnly. "For what you did. For what you did down there for me. Despite my stupidity."

The captain sat down again. "Mr. Benjamin, as long as we're speaking freely you're welcome."

The engineer nodded and immediately started eyeing the far side of the park, anxious to make a dignified exit while he still could.

He never had a chance.

"But let's clarify a few things." Aubrey continued. "First of all, you're not 'stupid'. You just made an impulsive decision down there. You wanted to show our goodwill by trying to repair the Gambis' hatchery. Unfortunately, you didn't bother to ask if they wanted your help first. Your intention was a good one, but your incorrect assumption about how their technology worked nearly destroyed two of their eggs."

Benjamin paled further, as he braced for an unprecedented ass chewing.

"You're one of the best engineers in Starfleet. You just need to understand that running a department on a starship takes more than technical skills. It takes leadership skills. And part of leadership is knowing how to set a good example. Understand?"

"I do sir." He said rigidly.

"It occurs to me that I might have pushed you into the chief engineer role before you were ready. So, I'm at fault as well."

Benjamin's throat clicked with a loud swallow. "Sir, I-I just wanted to know if this was it for me. Sir."

Aubrey drew his eyebrows together. "'It' for you in what regard?"

"Will you be appointing a new chief of engineering?" It was a Herculean effort to for him to ask and the expenditure cost him most of his composure. He spat out the rest in a flurried rush. "I just wanted to know in advance, I hate waiting for bad news. You know. With all respect. You know. Sir."

Aubrey climbed to his feet and took a long, absorbing look at the younger man. "If I was going to demote you, I wouldn't make you wait three days to find out." A faint grin came to life. His eyes softened. "And just where the hell would I find someone who can clean up the mess you made over the last year?"

His combadge chirped to life at that moment.

"Shantok to Aubrey."

Keeping his weighted gaze upon Benjamin, Aubrey tapped his badge absently.

"Go ahead."

"Captain, I have an...oddity to report."

"I'm listening, Commander."

"Sir, I ordered a message be sent to Captain Zorek, as you requested, to inform him of our pending arrival at the Velk home world. However, the Nagasaki has not responded to our transmission."

Pulling his focus back from the conversation with Benjamin, he digested the news. "Interference? Or a problem with our transmitter?"

"Neither," Shantok said. *"Our subspace transmitters are fully functional. And no interference signatures have appeared on the chambers coil spectrum."*

"It's possible that *they're* the ones having communication problems. Try one of the other ships from the procession. Maybe the *Leeds* or the *Hornet*."

"We have. We attempted individual contact with all five ships assigned to the detachment. None have responded to our encoded hails." Here she paused for added urgency. *"It would appear that the Nagasaki and her escorts are not in the Gamma Quadrant."*

"Could be the mission got postponed." Benjamin volunteered, eager to become useful again.

"Doubtful." The first officer said through the communicator. *"Starfleet would have notified us."*

"Maybe they were recalled at the last minute." He persisted.

Appearing lost in thought, Aubrey countered his explanation. "Knowing the timetable they were on, a 'last minute' change would have occurred hours ago, or they wouldn't have had time to leave the quadrant already." He chewed his lip for a moment. "Which means we'd have received an update by now in either scenario."

"I suggest a general hail, to ensure we've pursued all avenues of communication." Shantok ventured.

As he walked out of Sherwood Forest with Benjamin in tow, the captain furrowed his brow. "Let's hold off on that for right now. Our mission was classified. A general hail would advertise our presence in the area and I'd like to keep a low profile for the time being."

"You suspect trouble." Shantok made this into a statement rather than a question.

Benjamin was aghast. "Sir, are you saying the Dominion broke the treaty and went after our ships?"

The pair emerged into a short access hallway that led to a turbolift. "At ease, Mr. Benjamin. More than likely this will turn out to be nothing more sinister than a communication faux pass. I'm just taking precautions until we get some facts."

"But sir, how do we get facts in a situation like this? It would take hours to hear back from Starfleet."

In answer, Aubrey directed his next order through his combadge to Shantok. "Commander, please contact the Velk Senate on a secure channel. When I get to the bridge, I want to speak to someone in charge."

As the turbolift sped him up to *Intrepid's* saucer module, Aubrey silently sparred with his instincts. His common sense told him that what he had just said to Benjamin was absolutely correct. The odds favored an oversight by Starfleet resulting in a missed update.

His instincts on the other hand---instincts ground and chiseled by the horrors of the Dominion War---were on high alert. For they had just caught the first whiff of danger in the air.

And the trouble was... his instincts were seldom wrong.

Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Chapter 5 by Gibraltar

"It worked!" the man practically squealed with enthusiasm.

"That was never in doubt," the fixer replied patiently. "However, we are still charting the various after-effects of the discharge. It appears we may have been correct in our assessment of its effect on subspace geometry in our spatial contour modeli---

The squat reptilian clapped his hands eagerly. "Save your explanations for the technicians. All that concerns me is that it worked as promised. Five of the mighty Federation's starships swatted from existence as if by the hand of a god!" He regained some of his composure and the man took a long drink from a liquid bulb. "How soon until you can deliver another of these?"

The fixer stared at him as he fought to mask the disbelief and disdain that threatened to spill forth from his mouth. "We have already discussed this topic, repeatedly. It took seven months to acquire sufficient quantities of trilitium and to generate the polaric isotopes necessary to construct the device."

"But you're building more of them right now, yes?"

The fixer briefly fantasized about breaking the bulbous neck of the infuriating little man, but he gave no outward indication of his growing irritation. "No, we do not. The Cartel does not invest in theoretical weapons systems. With the success of the prototype, we now possess concrete proof of its effectiveness. They may now be willing to bankroll more of the devices."

The man waved his soft hands in a dismissive gesture. "I will pay whatever you ask, but I'll need more of these if we are to make a realistic bid to control access to the Bog."

"You realize," the fixer said, attempting to underscore his point, "that in all likelihood the device will have created a subspace dead-zone out that extends out to a maximum of three lightyears from the point of detonation. Spacecraft will be unable to traverse that area at warp, and further use of additional weapons in close proximity might prove cumulative in their effect."

"Meaning?"

The fixer stymied the sigh that threatened to escape him. "Meaning that if you set off too many of these weapons near the Bog or anywhere else, you may inadvertently leave entire regions isolated, beyond the reach of warp travel."

"Yes," the man hissed, his smile wider than ever. "I certainly hope so."

Lieutenant(j.g.) Kuenre Shanthi, chief science officer of the starship *Gibraltar* and son of Fleet Admiral Thousana Shanthi, stared at his display screen as he issued directions to Ensign Lightner at the helm. "Another two minutes on this heading and we'll be clear to resume course for the Velkamis system."

Lightner nodded, the sandy-haired youth uncharacteristically solemn as he navigated their way around the region of rent subspace left by whatever had annihilated the task force. The thought that Dominion warships could pounce on their aging vessel at any moment filled him with a gnawing anxiety.

Lightner had graduated from the academy early; the product of Starfleet's accelerated wartime curricula that churned out junior officers after three years, sacrificing subjects such as philosophy, history, and exo-sociology in favor of tactical skills that would hopefully keep them alive in a dynamic battlefield environment.

The war had ended by the time Lightner received his ensign's commission. Despite that fact, Lightner had survived many close scrapes during his first year of service aboard *Gibraltar*. Peacetime had not proved so terribly peaceful within the powder keg that was occupied Cardassian territory.

Lightner would have to have been blind not to notice the fear that clouded the eyes of the senior officers whenever the subject of renewed Dominion aggression came up. Some of them had even confided to him, usually on leave and when plied by strong drink, that they had fully expected the Federation to lose the war.

He glanced over his shoulder at Lar'ragos who occupied the command chair. Lightner offered, "So, do we have a plan if the Dominion attacks, sir?"

Lar'ragos didn't bother to look up from the padd he was studying. "Yes. We run. If we're lucky, we'll get far enough to find someplace to hide."

Lightner grinned nervously. "What, no genius tactical gambits guaranteed to overwhelm Dominion warships? C'mon, sir, didn't you ever take the *Kobayashi Maru* test?"

Lar'ragos finally looked up from his padd and scowled. "If I'm not mistaken, you aren't supposed to know about that exercise until you've taken it, Ensign. And afterwards, you're sworn to secrecy about it."

Lightner blushed and cleared his throat. "Then why does everyone seem to know about it, sir?"

As he shook his head amusedly, Lar'ragos went back to his padd. "The Dominion is the personification of the no-win scenario, Mister Lightner."

"But we won, sir." Lightner emphasized.

"Only because Captain Sisko walks with the gods, Ensign," came the El-Aurian's enigmatic response. "And even then, it was a very near thing." Lar'ragos glanced up to nod his head in the direction of the viewscreen. "Mind your post."

Lightner turned back to his console just in time to change their heading. "Now on course to the Velkamis system, Lieutenant. ETA fourteen hours, six minutes, present speed."

Lar'ragos turned towards the science station. "How long until we're out of the zone of comms interference?"

Shanthy shook his head. "I still can't determine that, sir. The subspace radio blackout zone is significantly larger than the area that interferes with warp travel, but we probably won't know where the interference actually terminates until we're out of it."

The lieutenant absorbed the response without comment, resuming his personal correspondence on the padd.

At the one hour mark to *Gibraltar's* arrival at the Velk homeworld the senior staff took up their posts. Sandhurst elected to keep the ship at yellow alert rather than arrive at their destination in what might be considered an aggressively defensive posture.

"Comms continuing to clear, sir," Shanthy announced. "We could probably punch a signal through to the Velk planet from here. It'll be a bit garbled, but we've routed as much auxiliary power to the transceiver array as we can."

"Acknowledged." Sandhurst looked to Ramirez as she slid into her seat in the lower bridge well and held up his crossed fingers accompanied by a wistful smile. She gave him a grim smile and inclined her head in response.

"Something of note, Captain," Lar'ragos spoke up from Tactical. "Velk military craft are not on the assigned patrol routes we'd been told to expect. Also, the orbital traffic around the Velk homeworld is approximately forty percent higher than what we anticipated."

"Any clues as to why?" Sandhurst asked.

"*Nagasaki* indicated the Velk envoy had been warned of civil unrest at home," was Pell's portentous rejoinder. "We could be seeing their response to a planetary security crisis."

Sandhurst pursed his lips thoughtfully as he attempted to divine how a world on high military alert might react to their solitary arrival and the news that their envoy had been killed. "Open a channel, Juneau."

"Aye. Channel open, sir."

"This is the Federation starship *Gibraltar* hailing Velkohn orbital control."

They waited in tense silence as the seconds ticked by. When the warbling, static filled audio response finally came, more than one person manning the bridge started. "----altar, we read you, but your ---nal is garbl-----e advised that a state of emer-----xists on Velkohn due to terro-----ions against our infra-----an-- poli-----dership."

Sandhurst gestured to Ops and inquired, "Can you clean that up?"

Juneau tapped at her board. "Trying, sir."

"*Gibraltar*, we read you, but your signal is garbled. Be advised that a state of emergency exists on Velkohn due to terrorist actions against our infrastructure and political leadership."

"We understand, Velkohn. I regret to inform you that our diplomatic convoy was also the target of an attack. Five Federation ships were destroyed by an unknown weapon. Envoy Jivin Sharm was among the victims."

This time Juneau buffered the response through the computer before broadcasting it.

"Our grief embraces your own, *Gibraltar*. We request you hold position once you reach the system boundary. Our military and rescue craft are taking priority at this time in the orbital zone."

Sandhurst's worry lines grew accentuated. "On behalf of the Federation, I'd like to offer our assistance. We have medical and emergency supplies onboard that could be of help."

Moments passed, the quiet on the bridge growing until it became a palpable presence. Sandhurst broke the silence by tapping his combadge. "Sandhurst to Taiee, start preparing your people for disaster triage and mass casualty operations. Have your staff familiarize themselves with everything we know about Velk physiology."

"Right away, Captain," came the nurse practitioner's prompt response. "We'll be ready when needed."

Finally, the Velk replied. "Gibraltar, we accepted your offer of assistance. Please assume geo-synchronous orbit above the capital city and await further instructions."

Sandhurst settled back into the command chair and let go a brief sigh of relief. He had hoped this whole endeavor, with all its accompanying losses, wouldn't have been for naught. He swiveled around to face Lar'ragos at Tactical and spoke briskly. "Pava, put together a discrete security detail for the away mission." Lar'ragos opened his mouth to speak, but Sandhurst got there first. "Phaser sidearms only, no rifles."

His initial query preemptively answered, the El-Aurian nodded curtly. "How many team members, sir?"

"Taiee plus one medic, you, Pell, and myself."

Ramirez's head snapped up at this bit of information, her eyes hooded.

Sandhurst stood and headed for his ready room door. "Exec, let me know when we're fifteen minutes out."

He moved across the office and took a seat behind the desk. Sandhurst counted to ten, then triggered the door to the bridge open, revealing a startled Ramirez on the cusp of pressing the annunciator. "C'mon in, Commander," he offered with the merest hint of a smile.

She obliged but preferred to remain standing behind the chairs facing the desk. "Bad idea," she said simply.

"Probably so," he conceded. "Nevertheless, security considerations notwithstanding, this is going to have to be one of those times the captain leads the away team for diplomatic purposes."

"Strong Federation leadership in the face of adversity?" she asked, voice tinged with cynicism.

He shrugged lightly. "You can be sure Zorek would have done it, were our positions reversed."

"Zorek's dead," she said flatly.

Sandhurst scrutinized her briefly, a slow smile forming on his features. "God, I hope your first officer is just as big a pain in your ass as you've been to me."

Her frown trembled on the verge of crumbling in a bout of mordant laughter. "I've said my peace," she said finally.

He nodded. "So you have. Resume your post, Commander."

Ramirez turned and strode out, leaving the captain to the stillness of his thoughts as he considered the challenges to come.

Columns of black smoke towered above the capital city as multiple fires consumed entire boroughs, set to the cacophonous dirge of hovering fire suppression craft and the wail of emergency sirens. Sandhurst and his team arrived in the midst of the chaos and confusion. Lar'ragos' security detail fanned out to take up defensive positions as a small Velk contingent approached.

Most of the stout, sturdy reptilians were clad in obvious battle dress, various weapons and devices attached to harness points. Another, dressed in what Sandhurst guessed were civilian clothes, stepped forward. "Welcome to Velkohn; would that circumstances were more favorable. I am Drugan Pos, adjutant to Civil Minister Wohar."

"Likewise," Sandhurst returned as he looked past the man at the low ovoid constructs that appeared to be the favored architectural style of the Velk. "I'm Captain Donald Sandhurst. We're here to help in whatever capacity you'll have us."

"Our gratitude is yours, Captain." The man gestured down an embankment to a waiting ground-car, an armored-looking heavy transport. "My instructions are to bring you to Wohar. He's awaiting your arrival at a shielded location."

Pell looked befuddled. "Doesn't Minister Wohar lead the Ministry of Civil Affairs?"

Drugan Pos blanched, his eyes red-rimmed. "That was correct until twenty-one hours ago when the murderers decapitated most of our elected government. Now, Minister Wohar is the *de facto* head of state."

Sandhurst and Pell exchanged a worried glance. The captain moved to where Lar'ragos stood and asked, "Opinion, Pava?"

Lar'ragos looked less than pleased. "Their security situation is obviously tenuous at best, sir." A muffled **crump** in the distance was followed

by a mushrooming cloud of orange flame and dark smoke boiling into the sky from amidst a cluster of buildings some kilometers away. The lieutenant raised a sardonic eyebrow as he uttered softly to Sandhurst, "Saying our status is vulnerable doesn't quite do it justice."

"Message received," Sandhurst replied as he turned back towards Pell. Lar'ragos' hand on his bicep caused him to stop.

"Just so we're clear, sir. If whoever is responsible for this makes an attempt on our team, I *won't* be playing nicely with others. Expect a body count." Lar'ragos underscored his statement by ramping his phaser to a lethal setting with the weapon still holstered.

Sandhurst stepped into him and glowered down at the smaller man. "At ease, Mister Lar'ragos. You're on the leash until I say otherwise. Are we clear?"

Lar'ragos merely smiled that strange, troubling little smile of his that he saved for just such occasions. "Absolutely, captain-my-captain."

As he approached Pos, Sandhurst gestured to the waiting transport vehicle. "After you, sir."

Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Chapter 6 by Galen4

USS Intrepid

Gamma Quadrant, Orbiting Gambis home world

Stardate: 54114.3

Much to Lieutenant Commander Adol's displeasure, it had taken no less than five attempts to establish communications with the Velk home world. His routine hail to the senate's COMM network had been bounced around to every government branch save the one he wanted. On one occasion he had been disconnected.

Exasperated, the Andorian security chief had come very near threatening the last person to whom he'd spoken and raising his voice to match. He was rewarded with yet another transfer, this time to a government office overseeing something he hadn't clearly understood. It certainly had not sounded like it was under the auspices of the Velk Senate.

Captain Aubrey had walked onto the bridge just in time to hear part of Adol's less than civil oratory. He cocked an eyebrow, but Adol only gazed back innocently, while gesturing at the main view screen with his antennae.

A chubby reptilian was waiting, looking out at the bridge officers with what seemed to be restrained excitement.

"Mr. Adol, who am I speaking with?" Aubrey asked, unhappy with the lack of introduction.

His jaw set, Adol stiffened with irritation. "I apologize sir. I've had trouble getting through to the senate. My inquiry has been re-directed all over the planet. I have no idea who they just connected me with."

"I am Mileth, civilian Governor of Key-Aiph City." The man readily volunteered. His voice was calm and evenly tempered, like most officials who schmoozed their way through public speaking. Only his body gave away his anxiety. His eyes scurried about, and he shifted constantly in his chair, as though preparing for a sudden exit.

"Captain Jason Aubrey, commanding the Federation starship *Intrepid*. Mr. Governor, it's a great pleasure to make your acquaintance." The captain intoned sincerely. "Perhaps you can help us. I'm trying to contact Toleth Vin, the senate over-seer."

"Ahhh...I'd have thought someone would have told you by now." Mileth replied quietly.

The captain took his chair. "Told us what, exactly?"

"Ahhh...the government assassinations." He looked around nervously. "The Senate is ahhh...gone, you know. All of them, dead. Victims of a terrorist assassination. Social order has been momentarily lost."

Shantok passed along a puzzled expression to Aubrey, who reflected it back to her.

"I'm deeply sorry to hear that. Do you know who's behind these attacks?"

"We have suspicions. But we're presently consumed with restoring order."

"Then may I speak with the acting head of state? I'd like to offer humanitarian assistance. We're only one ship, but we have some supplies aboard that could help."

Mileth now seemed confused and a little suspicious. "But...I thought you were already working with Civil Minister Wohar. Isn't that why you're here? Has something happened to him as well?"

Fending off impatience, he forged ahead. "I'm afraid there's been a misunderstanding. We're not in the Velkamis system at present. However, if Wohar is the acting head of government, perhaps you can relay our offer to him."

The governor gave one of those "your wish is my command" sorts of gestures with both hands. "Of course."

Aubrey smiled, emoting a graciousness that he didn't feel. "Thank you. Now, I have a question about our diplomatic convoy. It was-----"

"Terrible, terrible. I agree, yes." Mileth interrupted. "I'm sure you know we'll do everything in our power to punish those responsible." He bowed his head in a perfect illustration of misery. "Your people and mine have suffered a grave loss this day."

Aubrey tilted his head to one side, trying to sort through what he had just heard. "To what loss are you referring?" He asked carefully.

The governor's eyes bugged open. "I meant no offense. Ahhh...maybe your culture sees sacrifice as a positive event." He leaned toward the screen, as if he were now taking the bridge officers into his confidence. "But I want you to know that I will make my influence known for as long as it takes."

The captain felt as if he was being asked to solve a riddle. "As long as it takes? To do what?"

"Why, to implement justice of course. Justice." He hit his chest with a portly fist. "Let your Federation know that even if Wohar does nothing, I will see to it that your officers didn't die in vain. I promise that the loss of your ships will be avenged. As will the murder of Jivin Sharm and his attaché."

Silence descended like a shroud over the bridge. Then, hushed whispers began as crewmembers started to voice their apprehension to one another.

Jason Aubrey rose from his chair, feeling his stomach settle somewhere between his feet. "Are you saying our convoy was...destroyed?"

"Yes. As you well know."

Lieutenant Douglas Pal, senior Operations officer, wheeled around from his post. "Captain, it's not possible! There were *five ships*, some of our best officers-----!"

"As you were, Mr. Pal." Shantok ordered. Her stern voice quickly extinguished all extraneous noise on the bridge, allowing the captain to continue his conversation.

In the brief exchange that followed, Mileth gave what little information he had on the attacks and the political upheavals now sweeping his world. He made only a vague reference to a subspace weapon when pressed for details of the cataclysm. Concerning the identity of the possible aggressors, he could only offer speculation, most of which focused on any number of unscrupulous agencies that allegedly operated from the Bog. His wild theories smacked of fiction.

"My deep apologies for seeming confused." Mileth concluded. "At first I mistook you for----"

"Governor Mileth, were there any survivors?" Shantok interjected with uncharacteristic rudeness.

Mileth presented both hands in supplication. "No ahhh...our sensor net showed a complete loss. Well, except for that *other* ship of course. Please accept my grief as your own."

Squinting in sudden surprise, Aubrey moved towards the screen. "'*Other* ship'?" He repeated. "You didn't mention that before! Are you saying one of our vessels survived the attack?"

Abruptly, the screen began to waiver and sputter. "You know-----ready. Don't-----ople-----unicate?"

He spoke over his shoulder to Adol. "What's happening to the signal?"

"Interference." Adol replied quickly. "Seems to be originating in another sector. I'll try to compensate." His hands moved over the tactical board.

"Governor Mileth," He tried again. "Please let Wohar know that we're on the way. And inform the other Starfleet ship of our presence."

"Yes. Wo-----I can-----orm-----him. Int-----stand me?"

The screen crackled and a low hiss came over the speakers. Then the picture disappeared.

"Not what I would call an improvement." The captain observed derisively. He walked back to Adol's tactical station.

"Sir, the scope of the interference is extensive. It just came out of nowhere. And it's increasing exponentially."

"Can you regain contact?"

Adol frowned like a man handed an incomplete jigsaw puzzle. "I'm afraid not. The entire Velkamis system has been blacked out. Communication is impossible from this distance."

"What's causing the interference? The skies were clear a few minutes ago."

Adol shrugged helplessly. "I've never seen this type of pattern before. It's almost like..."

"Like what?" He prompted.

The entire room fixated on Adol as he took a moment to find the right word. "A storm. Like an ion storm, but this disturbance is propagating through subspace. It's not a natural phenomenon-----in my opinion, sir."

Aubrey spent a few moments studying a far corner of the room. His expression was nearly tranquil, as though he were enjoying a pleasant daydream. When he began to give orders once more, he did so almost casually. "Yellow alert. Adol, send an encoded Priority One message to

Starfleet Command. Include my last six log entries. As a precaution, let's mirror the data to a warp-capable log buoy. We'll launch it when we get closer to the wormhole."

"Aye, sir."

Stepping down to the lower command well, he drew up behind his helm officer. "Ensign Sorna, lay in a course for the Velkamis system at full impulse. Take us to warp seven the moment we clear the Cochrane Boundary."

The young brunette nearly jumped at the order. "Aye, captain. Laying in course and speed."

He could feel it. He was no empath, but he might just have been. Anxiety and trepidation were now humming through his officers like a live current. They watched him expectantly-----ready to burst with questions and overwrought guesswork.

At the right time, he would solicit their ideas. But not just yet. He had learned the hard way that command officers often paid a heavy price for letting speculation run rampant on the bridge.

He dared a look at Shantok, who was unmoved by the electricity in the air. He wanted to offer her words of comfort. He wanted to tell her that Governor Mileth was not the most credible source of information-----and that even if what he had said was true, then the surviving Starfleet ship was likely the *Nagasaki*. (Their lack of response notwithstanding.)

Captain Zorek was the most experienced of the procession, and his ship the most formidable. During the war, *Nagasaki* and *Intrepid* had briefly shared company as part of Tango Fleet. While fighting in the battle for Betazed Aubrey had seen first-hand just what a redoubtable adversary the elderly captain was. Few members of that late task force were still around today, and it was no accident that Zorek's ship was counted among them.

But he offered none of those thoughts-----because to a Vulcan, platitudes and statements of false hope were offensive. If Zorek were dead, Shantok would need her dignity now more than ever.

Instead, he raised his head defiantly at the starfield before him.

"Engage."

Intrepid banked away from the Gambis homeworld and hurtled out of the system at one quarter the speed of light.

Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Chapter 7 by Gibraltar

The last six hours had proved especially busy for the crew of *Gibraltar*. However, aside from the bustle of cargo offloading operations, their time in orbit had proved blessedly incident free.

Ramirez entered the transporter room in time to see Sandhurst and the rest of the away team regain physical cohesion. Their faces were grim as they stepped down off the platform. “Bad?” she asked.

Sandhurst sighed. “Bad enough. Their government is in shambles, and the infrastructure damage has set their post-Dominion recovery efforts back nearly a year.” The away team members surrendered their sidearms, tricorders and other gear to the transporter chief and then stepped into the corridor. “We spoke with the nominal head of government, the former minister of civil affairs.”

“However,” Pell added, “there are at least a dozen different individuals or factions claiming leadership status at the moment. Figuring out who’s really in charge is going to take some work.”

“Any idea who’s behind the attacks?” the exec asked as Taiee trudged past. The nurse practitioner and her assistant hefting a large trunk filled with Velk data crystals containing much of the species’ accumulated medical knowledge.

Pell frowned. “That depends on who you ask. Some parties are convinced it’s the Dominion, while others point to homegrown separatist groups or regional crime syndicates. Since no one has yet claimed responsibility for the attacks, there are no definitive answers.”

The team members began to drift off, some heading to get something to eat, others returning to their duty posts. The captain halted Lar’ragos in his tracks, “Not so fast, Pava.” The El-Aurian turned back, looking pensive.

Sandhurst shifted his focus back to Ramirez and inquired, “Status of our cargo transfer?”

“Ahead of schedule. We’ll be completed within the next three hours.”

“Excellent,” Sandhurst remarked without much enthusiasm. “When we’re finished with that, we’ll remain on station here while Pell and I work to try and cobble together some kind of governing coalition. I’m not holding out much hope, but we’ve got to at least make an effort.”

“Aye, sir.” Ramirez inclined her head in the direction of Taiee. “Once the lieutenant uploads the Velk medical database and syncs the information with the EMH program, we’ll be ready to start bringing up casualties from the surface for treatment.”

“Very well, keep me apprised, Commander.” Sandhurst pivoted on his heel, heading off down the corridor as he called back to Lar’ragos. “Walk with me, Lieutenant.” Lar’ragos appeared reluctant, but nonetheless moved to catch up with him as Sandhurst rounded the corner.

As Sandhurst stepped into the turbolift alcove and pressed the call button, he took a moment to inspect his friend. “You want to tell me what’s going on with you? I haven’t seen you this keyed up in a while.”

Lar’ragos spent a moment staring at the floor before meeting Sandhurst’s gaze. “I’m not sure, actually. I’m just... off.”

The lift car arrived, and they stepped aboard. Sandhurst selected Deck 5, senior officer’s quarters. “How so?”

“It’s difficult to explain. My abilities are... well, they feel scrambled somehow. I’m having trouble reading people and situations with my usual insight.” He looked uncommonly self-conscious. “And when I’m not in possession of my ‘cheats,’ I have a tendency to become a bit... edgy.”

Sandhurst considered that admission for a moment before he remarked, “That subspace weapon the Orions tried to use on us in the Pierosh system last year put you in a coma for three days. If I’m understanding Shanathi correctly, whatever was used to destroy our task force was several orders of magnitude more powerful. Do you think that might have something to do with it?”

Lar’ragos shrugged with his hands. “It’s the only thing I can think of that makes any sense.”

The lift arrived at its destination, but Sandhurst did not move to exit the car. “Pava, special perceptions or no, I need you at my side right now. More than that, I need you focused and steady. If we’re facing something the Dominion has set in motion, I’ll be counting on your experience and training to help guide us through it.”

The lieutenant nodded distractedly. “I understand, sir. I apologize for my outburst planetside.” He took a deep breath. “I’ll get my head on straight, Captain. I promise.”

Sandhurst gripped the smaller man's shoulder. "See that you do." With that, he walked out of the lift, leaving Lar'ragos to struggle with his doubts.

The large viewscreen in the briefing room now contained live images of over a dozen 'delegates,' who claimed, some even legitimately, to have leadership standing among the Velk population. Sandhurst and Pell sat side-by-side, facing the viewer with assorted padds crowding the table top in front of them.

Sandhurst marveled at Pell's patience with the squabbling factions, as well as her ability to cite fundamental similarities between some of the groups that had already led to more than one coalition being formed before their eyes. Time and again, Pell interrupted the delegates' quarreling to remind them that their planet was in crisis, and that quibbling over minutia would be of benefit to no one.

"I would call attention to the fact that your military is rudderless at present," Pell prodded an obstinate officer who held the analogous rank to a colonel in the Bajoran militia. "If an invasion of your world is forthcoming, your military must be united under a single banner in order to function."

This, unfortunately, incited another barrage of claims, allegations, and arguments in regard to which civilian body would be placed in charge of the planet's armed services. Sandhurst muted the audio pickup and leaned in to whisper to Pell, "I've got to take a break. Otherwise, I may start targeting their cities from orbit."

"Fine by me," she returned after an exasperated sigh. "So long as Prelate Voulst and his little band of constitutionalists are the first to fall."

Sandhurst suppressed a wry smirk as he reactivated the audio. "Delegates, again we thank you for your continued cooperation and input. A brief recess is in order before we continue this discussion."

"*How is it you get to decide when we break for a recess?*" squawked one of the representatives, a disagreeable religious figure much reviled by the others.

"I'm the one with the starship," Sandhurst deadpanned as he severed the communications link. "Oh... thank the Prophets" he breathed as the screen darkened. He rested his head on his folded arms atop the table. "Ojana, I don't know how you do it."

"Sedatives," she replied. "You'd be surprised how much crap you can put up with when you're floating on five cc's of ambizine."

He laughed. "I'm glad you can maintain a sense of humor."

She reached over to rub his back with one hand. "Growing up in refugee camps helps a person distinguish importance from impudence. Most of the early rounds of negotiation are for show. Once they've postured sufficiently, they'll start concentrating on where their individual groups will end up in this new leadership hierarchy."

The door chimed, and Pell quickly reeled in her hand as Sandhurst sat up straight in his chair. "Enter."

Ramirez stepped into the room and glanced at the deactivated viewer before moving over to the table. "Taking a break, sir?"

"Thankfully yes," Sandhurst affirmed. "What's going on?"

"Three issues that require your attention, sir. First, a Velk sentry outpost has reported what they believe to be a large warship inbound from the direction of a local stellar cluster. Their scans proved indeterminate as to specifics, due to the growing subspace interference in this region. That leads in to the second subject, that being Shanthi believes the communications blackout zone is actually growing, radiating outward from the point of detonation. He estimates that in another two hours, we won't even be able to contact the surface from orbit."

Sandhurst's expression darkened. "That makes sense. Destroy the Federation task force and simultaneously garble the region's communications to mask an attack on the planet from the oncoming warship."

"Lar'ragos agrees with you, Captain," Ramirez said, sharing that view herself. "He's recommending going to red alert and moving to intercept the oncoming vessel."

Sandhurst blew out a long breath as he mulled that over. "Just us? If that's a Dominion battle cruiser on route, that'd constitute the galaxy's shortest intercept ever."

"The Velk are offering to send a squadron of their patrol craft along with us," Ramirez informed him.

"You said three issues," Pell pointed out. "What's the third one, Liana?"

Ramirez moved to the viewer and linked the screen to the ship's memory database. "This newscast was sent to us from someone on the surface using an untraceable civilian transceiver array. Obviously, someone down there thought we'd find it interesting."

An image appeared there, overlaid with Velk text that the computer translated into Federation standard script. The scrolling undercarriage on the image read, *Velk Envoy to Federation Spotted Aboard Matroba Trade Station*. "This image was apparently taken sixteen hours after the destruction of our task force," Ramirez elaborated. The jumpy, grainy image showed someone who certainly appeared to be Envoy Jivin Sharm being hustled through a crowded concourse aboard a bustling space station by two unnaturally large Velk.

'Or...' Sandhurst thought with a sudden thrill of recognition, '...two average sized *Jem'Hadar*.'

"Someone managed to abduct Sharm out from under our noses?" Pell asked, her voice laden with skepticism.

"That," Ramirez countered, "or the Envoy Sharm we had aboard the *Nagasaki* was a Changeling."

"Where is this Matroba trade station?" the captain solicited.

"It's the primary trade outpost for commerce between Velkohn and the Bog," Ramirez replied crisply. "It's four lightyears from here. ETA at Warp 8 is thirty-four hours."

Sandhurst rubbed the bridge of his nose tiredly. "How many ships can the Velk assemble on short notice?"

"Given current circumstances, perhaps twelve. Their maximum speed is Warp 6, and their armaments are on par with late 23rd century Federation technology."

Sandhurst looked morose as he weighed his options in silence while his XO and second officer looked on. Finally, he announced his decision. "Commander, set all hands to battle stations and make arrangements for the Velk squadron to form up with us. We'll lead the intercept with the oncoming vessel. Provided we survive that encounter, we'll set course for the trade station and investigate the possible sighting of Envoy Sharm."

Pell appeared stymied. "And the delegates?"

He cocked his head apologetically and Sandhurst offered, "You've got thirty minutes to explain the situation and convince them to cooperate amongst themselves. Tell them that if whatever ship is bearing down on this system gets past us, it will quickly become their problem. That ought to underscore the severity of their situation for them."

Pell nodded reluctantly as she made peace with that decision. "Yes, sir."

Sandhurst stood and headed for the door with Ramirez following in his wake. "Let's go make nice with the neighbors, Exec."

Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Chapter 8 by Galen4

USS Intrepid

Gamma Quadrant-En Route to Velk home world

Stardate: 54115.7

Directly aft of the bridge sat a spacious conference room. A visitor would notice immediately that the room was oversized for an *Excelsior*-class ship. The long table and generous concave windows were luxuries more common to larger fleet ships. Like many of her attributes, the briefing lounge was an accidental bonus. It had come with the new bridge module which had been installed out of necessity during her refit.

Her crew certainly had no complaints about the accommodations. During the war, the senior officers had spent many a tense hour in this room, and they valued its spacious and soothing ambience.

Today's meeting was no exception. It was the second in three days as the command staff gathered for a final time before entering the Velkamis system, which was only hours away.

The journey thus far had been spent in exhaustive battle drills on the holodeck and preparing sickbay for the expected number of casualties. Nearly every spare room on the ship had been converted to a triage ward or small sickbay.

Because mission preparations had left little time for open discussion, the captain had earmarked the present meeting just for that purpose. This would be the last chance to voice opinions, objections or offer advice.

At the head of the table, a bleary-eyed Captain Aubrey sipped coffee, nurturing the ignoble wish that their arrival could have been later in the day. Starfleet training had changed many of his natural habits over the years----but no amount of conditioning would ever make him a morning person.

After the customary greetings were exchanged, Shantok opened with a short science briefing.

Standing, she activated a viewer set into the bulkhead opposite the table. The image depicted a three dimensional graph whose center was twisted and broken. "As you know, we're seeing the aftermath of a subspace eruption. By analyzing the dispersal radius and decay rate of the event, our Astrophysics department has extrapolated the likely 'flashpoint' of the eruption and its initial intensity."

"What exactly is a 'subspace eruption'?" Aubrey queried.

She took in the group with a somber expression. "The forced entry of subspace geometry into normal space."

"Ma'am, this subspace eruption would have been powerful enough to destroy our convoy?" This came from Lieutenant Douglas Pal, the senior operations officer.

Shantok was candid. "More than enough. Any object with a mean density of less than a hundred million metric tons would have been disassociated at the subatomic level."

She continued. "Subspace fractures near the vicinity of the event are severe enough to make warp travel in those areas impossible. So far, only communications and sensors have suffered in the region we're currently traveling through. However, if enough of these ruptures were set off in the Velkamis sector, warp speed could eventually become unachievable throughout the region."

She folded gracefully into her chair and completed her presentation. "Regrettably, with communications and sensors impaired, we have no way to locate Federation transponder signals or any other evidence that survivors might be present near the epicenter."

Pal was in one of his rare talkative moods, no doubt stoked by coffee. "Captain, if the Dominion is preparing for another war against us, they would begin by seizing the territories they gave up in the armistice. The subspace explosion that took out our ships might be a first strike weapon."

Adol leaned over the table, his antennas arching forward with him. "He's right. That would be a logical first step. With respect, I still say we make a run for the wormhole. We have to warn Starfleet before it's too late."

"What about our mystery ship?" Asked Counselor Perboda. The Orion man's imposing physique and magnetic charisma brought undivided attention. "If there's another Starfleet vessel out there, we can't just run out on them."

"They're already gone, if they have any sense." Adol grumbled dismissively.

"But we're basing our decisions on untrustworthy information." Perboda reminded everyone. "We have no way of knowing if this 'Governor

Mileth' was being truthful with us."

Aubrey cleared his throat to gain attention. "It's prudent at this point to assume he was. And as for the other Starfleet ship, I'm sure they would have continued on to Velkohn to offload their supplies and give what aid is possible. Just as we're attempting to do now."

Dr. Kella Lisern, the ship's chief medical officer, seemed mildly surprised. The Bajoran's dark features moved into a gentle frown. "How can you be so sure?" She asked.

Aubrey slid his eyes towards the window, absorbing the elongated stars. "Because that's what I would have done."

The debate and discussions continued much along the same lines for another ten minutes before the bosun whistle piped over the intercom, interrupting the lively dialogue.

"Bridge to Captain."

It's getting so no one can finish a conversation around here anymore, he thought whimsically. "Go ahead."

"Rodriguez here, sir. Long-range sensors have identified a contact closing on our position. Intercept in twenty-three minutes."

"Can you identify it?" The captain asked, without much hope.

"Negative, sir." Came the expected answer. "Subspace interference is hiding the details from us. We have no power signature and no profile."

"We're on our way. Captain out." He stood to signal an adjournment. Before leaving, he looked down the table to his chief engineer. "Mr. Benjamin, your last report said you'd increased sensor output by 28% by channeling auxiliary power through the main deflector. Any chance you can give me more?"

"No, sir. Sensor output is at maximum." Benjamin replied, unhappy with his own answer. "It might be better if we weren't getting extra interference from the Bog."

Aubrey looked to Shantok for elaboration.

"The Bog is known for high concentrations of Theta radiation." She expanded. "Our close proximity will doubtless cause more sensor difficulties."

"Remind me to plan my next vacation here." He quipped as they all exited the briefing room.

Moments after the bridge crew assembled to their posts, the captain ordered the tactical data displayed on the main viewer.

Against a jittery background of hexagons, a single blip floated leisurely at the edge of sensor range.

Settling against his command chair, Aubrey considered the blip as though he were admiring a piece of fine art. "Our mystery ship, perhaps?"

"Perhaps." Shantok considered. "Inconclusive from this distance."

"Umm... Captain?" Benjamin turned hesitantly from his engineering station. "I just might be able to increase the range on our sensors after all. It would only last for about a second, but I could use a power flush from the impulse engine's actuators. We might be able to get a larger picture at least."

Aubrey offered the young man a half-smile. "Good work. Give me what you have, Lieutenant."

Energetically, Benjamin tapped out a succession of commands.

Aubrey turned expectantly to the viewer. The picture's snowy surface cleared, and for a split second the image expanded, showing not just one sensor contact, but many, all tightly packed into a near perfect arrowhead----an arrowhead whose tip was jutting right towards them.

The picture snapped back to its former poor quality and limited scope.

"Oh my *God*." Ensign Sorna whispered from the helm position.

At OPS, Lieutenant Pal was already hard at work analyzing what they had all seen. One of his hands sprinted over his board while the other stroked his blonde goatee nervously. "Unable to ID the other contacts either, sir. I'm verifying sensor data to confirm validity."

Aubrey's mouth drooped enough to convey disappointment. Otherwise, he seemed impassive.

Shantok stepped away from the freestanding station she was using and collected herself next to Aubrey's chair. "If Lieutenant Pal verifies what we saw----then it would seem that our situation has changed."

"I would say so."

Pal looked over his shoulder. His drawn features telegraphed the report before he spoke. "Confirmed sir. Valid contacts. All of them on an

intercept."

"How many?"

"Thirteen sir, including the one in front."

"Perhaps they're the Starfleet task force-----at least in part?" Shantok postulated as the cluster of blips now materialized on the main screen.

"Negative, Commander. Mass is uniform and therefore inconsistent with the diversity of our convoy vessels."

"Sir, take a look at how those ships are grouped." Adol pointed at the main screen, his face a wary mask. "They're in a tactical formation. That's an attack force out there."

The captain measured his first officer for the smallest sign of hope-----maybe a possibility that Adol or Pal had overlooked. There were times when even Jason Aubrey wanted to evade the truth. A new Dominion War was simply too awful to contemplate.

"I'm forced to agree." She said, banishing his futile wish. "Considering the circumstances, the odds are in favor of hostile entities."

"With no chance of outrunning them." He acknowledged quietly. "So, we'll have to fight our way through and survive long enough to warn Starfleet."

"Thirteen to *one*?" Sorna exclaimed under her breath. She was silenced by a warning look from Pal.

Like so many times in the past, the battle-hardened crew watched their captain for the inevitable order. And for the hundredth time they wondered if this new call to arms would be their final one.

"Battle stations." Captain Aubrey declared.

Over the muted shriek of the red alert klaxon, Shantok spoke in subdued tones. "Our odds of survival are not high."

"Granted." He replied. "We'll have to rely on hit and run tactics to get through that armada out there. And for that, we'll need the element of surprise."

"Would I be correct in surmising that you're about to 'pull something out of your hat'?" She asked. If her voice betrayed a longing for reassurance, it was beyond the detection of anyone but her captain.

He cemented his lips into a tight smirk. "Mr. Pal, please let me see the astrometric data on the Bog. And send it to my personal interface."

"Thirteen to one. This won't exactly be a fair fight, will it?" Adol complained.

Aubrey studied the command station near his chair, his eyes hardening into the leer of a predator. "Well Mr. Adol," He retorted. "If it makes you feel any better, we'll try to go easy on them."

Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Chapter 9 by Gibraltar and Galen4

USS *Gibraltar*

A gravid hush had fallen over the assembled bridge crew as the *Gibraltar* led the Velk flotilla closer to their intercept with the oncoming vessel. Visions of an enormous and deadly Dominion warship flitted through their minds, and no amount of positive thinking could overcome their certainty that a ninety-year-old escort and a dozen middling Velk patrol cutters would prove short work for as ferocious an enemy as the Jem'Hadar.

Sandhurst turned around in his chair to face the Tactical console as he directed a carefully neutral expression at Lar'ragos. "How many quantum torpedoes do we have again?"

"Eight," the Tactical officer replied dispassionately. "Plus, our compliment of forty standard photons, sir."

He faced forward once again and Sandhurst briefly met the intense gaze of Ramirez at her post in the lower bridge well. He finally set his eyes on the streaking starscape of the main viewscreen. "Tightbeam comms to the Velk ships. Inform them that if this is a Dominion warship, we'll be targeting their propulsion systems first, followed by weapons."

Lar'ragos raised an eyebrow. "Shoot 'n scoot, sir?"

"Correct," Sandhurst affirmed. "If we can slow them down or knock out their warp drive altogether, we give ourselves the chance to fall back to Velkohn and regroup. Hopefully, Starfleet can provide us some backup by then."

Lar'ragos grunted, "Keep hope alive."

"Hope for the best..." Sandhurst cited the ship's unofficial motto.

"...plan for the worst," Lar'ragos finished for him.

"Accelerate to Warp 8.3 and prepare to launch the tactical probe," Sandhurst ordered.

"Aye, increasing to 8.3, Captain." Lightner nudged the starship forward.

The Class-5 probe's warp sustainer engines would serve to keep the device close to Warp 8 while *Gibraltar* fell back to wait for the Velk squadron to catch up. Hopefully, the probe would allow them a glimpse of what they were up against.

"We're now at 8.3, sir."

"Launch probe," Sandhurst said quietly.

"Probe away," Lar'ragos confirmed.

"Decrease to Warp 2 and standby to join up with the Velk."

As he cast a glance towards Shanthi at the Sciences station, the captain studied the young man's dour expression. "I'm guessing the subspace interference isn't abating?"

Shanthi turned away from his display, his eyes weary from staring at the monitor. "Yes and no, sir." He accessed his board, transferring the image from his display to the main viewer. "As you can see, the subspace interference from the attack on our convoy has dissipated this far from the point of detonation. However, the incoming ship is approaching us from the general direction of the Bog."

Sandhurst studied the graphic, taking note of the glowing nimbus of energy surrounding the scattered star systems that comprised the Bog. "That's all theta radiation?"

"Yes, sir," Shanthi corroborated. "I'd estimate that centuries of mining in the Bog have generated massive quantities of theta radiation that now extend out in a spherical corona over a lightyear in diameter. The approaching vessel has undoubtedly detected this and has moved to place itself between us and the Bog."

Sandhurst nodded slowly as he summarized, "Using the background radiation to blind our sensors."

"That's about the size of it, sir."

"Clever," Sandhurst muttered.

USS *Intrepid*

Gamma Quadrant, intercepting unknown forces

The bridge crew hunched over their panels, staring intently at the darkness ahead, willing themselves to see enemies that were millions of kilometers away-----but nearly sitting on their laps, in terms of astronomical distances.

"Estimating six minutes before hostile firing range." Pal reported tersely from OPS.

"Bring all phasers to ready. Load tubes fore and aft." The instructions flowed from Aubrey with practiced ease. He scanned the bridge with confidence, letting each crewman see his trust. "Commence battle preparedness."

"Shields are up. Phaser banks one through fifteen online; quantum torpedoes set for high speed discharge." Adol confirmed smoothly.

Intrepid was one of few older ships to carry quantum torpedoes. During the war, Starfleet had given her a compliment to better prevent the ship's classified technology from falling into enemy hands. Since then, she carried them only if their mission profile warranted it. Aubrey was grateful that the yearlong exploration of the Gamma Quadrant had justified the payload.

"Dr. Kella reports that sickbay is on Code Blue for battle triage." Shantok dutifully announced.

Lieutenant Pal scratched his goatee thoughtfully. "Captain, subspace interference is thinning out in this region. It's because we're moving away from the epicenter of the eruption. As we do, the interference ripples are diminishing."

"True." Shantok validated from her own station on the upper deck. "In addition, theta interference is dissipating as we travel away from the Bog."

"In other words, we're losing our invisibility." Aubrey admitted unhappily.

"In a manner of speaking. However, we should be able to identify the contacts and establish communication within the next minute."

Seeming not to hear, the captain spoke out to the center of the room. "Bridge to engineering. Mr. Benjamin, stand by to channel subspace energy through the deflector, as we discussed. That should keep our friends out there blind for another few minutes."

"Aye, sir." Came the steady voice from the speakers. Benjamin's elusive confidence was paying a visit - hardly a surprise now that he was back in his element.

"Sir. I should point out: this will be our last chance to make a positive ID." Shantok seemed detached and official as she spoke.

"Wait a minute," Adol suddenly exclaimed. He looked with alarm at his board. "I have another contact - much smaller; it's moving at warp eight point three. Possible collision in two minutes on present heading."

The captain's response was automatic. "Helm, execute evasive pattern Tango Three. Mr. Pal, can you tell if it's a torpedo?"

Pal frantically scanned his readings. "Interference is still too high to read details, Captain."

Sorna's next update nearly overlapped Pal's. "Tango Three confirmed. Object now receding away from us and not pursuing."

Aubrey felt a final touch of hesitation. If he let nature take its course, the approaching vessels would soon stand revealed, due to the dissipating interference. But if they were hostile, he would be giving up his only advantage-----an advantage they would badly need to survive.

To the intercom he said, "Mr. Benjamin, proceed with sensor blind."

"Aye, sir. Commencing surge."

From *Intrepid's* secondary hull, a high-energy subspace field spread out into space-----a cone of interference whose frequency precisely matched that of the ambient noise around her.

"Now showing sensor jam." Adol stated.

Aubrey settled casually against his chair. "Ensign Sorna, please accelerate to warp nine point three and resume original course."

"But sir, *our* navigational sensors are jammed as well. We're flying blind." Sorna observed uneasily.

"Steady as we go." He said gently. "Follow your pre-programmed flight path."

The commanding officer turned his chair to face the tactical station just behind him. "If this works, by the time they have a sensor fix on us, we'll be just behind the attack force. We'll match speed, then bring all weapons to bear on the lead ship-----a phaser and torpedo salvo at full yield. We'll then target engines on the smaller ships before veering off at maximum warp."

Adol's face tightened with concentration as he prepared for the coming ordeal. "'Hit and run' tactics." He affirmed.

"And Mr. Adol," Aubrey said conversationally, "I know this doesn't need to be said, but----"

"Don't fire without your direct order." The Andorian completed for him. "There's a small chance they're not enemy craft. Understood, sir."

Aubrey nodded approvingly and turned back to the viewer. From the corner of his eye he saw Shantok studying him. He could almost feel her uncertainty. It was not the support he was accustomed to. He felt both annoyance and regret at the idea that he might have to prove himself again to her.

"Engineering reports auxiliary power on automatic feed to the shields." Pal added.

"Commencing attack run. Pattern: Aubrey-Sierra." The young helm officer said nervously. Through dry lips she continued, "Intercept in seven, six, five, four..."

USS *Gibraltar*

"Probe telemetry?" Sandhurst inquired urgently, not bothering to look over at the Science station.

There was a brief pause as Shanthi tried again to cut through the cocoon of interference surrounding the approaching vessel. "The craft is now radiating a scattering field, Captain. The probe just passed our target... not getting much except approximate mass." Shanthi shot Sandhurst a quick glance, "Too small to be a Dominion battleship, too big to be a Dominion fighter."

"Ops, patch me through to the Velk task force. I want them to broadcast our challenge hail in concert with us. That should be sufficient to burn through the comms interference."

"Aye, sir. Standby." Seconds crept past. "Link established, Captain. The Velk are ready to broadcast."

"Approaching vessel, this is the Federation starship *Gibraltar*. You will identify yourself immediately or you will be presumed hostile and we will open fire. This is your only warning." He muted the audio and Sandhurst called back to Lar'ragos. "Lieutenant, prepare to coordinate fire with the Velk. If we don't get a response, that ship's going to have to punch through a wall of photon torpedoes at warp. I don't care who you are, that's going to hurt."

Lar'ragos affirmed the order, slaving the Velk tactical systems to his board as he set a proximate target, centering his firing reticule on the densest region of interference.

USS *Intrepid*

"Intercept in six, five, four, three, two-----"

"Incoming transmission." Adol abruptly exclaimed. Without waiting for the order, he put it on the bridge speakers.

"-----*Federation starship Gibraltar. You will identify yourself immediately or you will be presumed hostile and we will open fire. This is your only warning.*"

Aubrey sensed what type of man might lie on the other end of the transmission. The voice had carried a grim determination with it, as though its owner were resigned to cleaning up other people's messes - and resolved to doing so by any means necessary.

But the dilemma of who was who had just become a moot point. For *Intrepid* had just swept into the midst of the Velk's rear flank at warp nine, bearing down on the fleet like an attacking eagle.

On the main viewer, a procession of small craft flew by. The simple design of the ships became visible, confirming their origin.

"Captain, sensors have identified the vessels as Velk patrol cutters." Pal said excitedly. "And I'm now reading a Starfleet transponder signal at 350,000 kilometers off our starboard bow."

"Reduce speed and match orientation of the trailing ships." The captain stood from his command chair. "Mr. Adol, hail the-----"

He was interrupted by a dull thumping noise, followed by a deep vibration in the deck.

"We're being fired on." Shantok announced. "Two Velk warships are launching torpedoes."

Something else punched the ship, this time with more force.

"Three more volleys. Direct hits portside aft and on the starboard forequarter. Shields at 94%. No other damage."

"Sir," Shantok said with quiet earnestness. "The warheads are low-yield by Starfleet standards. But enough hits will produce significant damage."

Having reached the same conclusion, Aubrey tapped a panel on the command board next to his chair. "Velk forces. This is the Federation starship *Intrepid*, Captain Jason Aubrey commanding. We mean you no harm. Please break off your attack."

It was only a matter of seconds before the response came. This time the deck shook harder and the lights dimmed.

"That was a full spread by both ships. Forward shields now at 81%." Adol's hands hovered eagerly over the firing controls. "Sir, I could take out their weapons array with just a few shots..."

"Stand by." Aubrey returned.

"Why are they still attacking?" Sorna asked angrily. "They have to know we're Starfleet by now."

"Captain, the Velk fleet is breaking formation and coming about. They're arming torpedoes." Adol gritted his teeth, and anxiety laced his next words. "We can't take a salvo by that many ships."

"And we're not. Sorna, reverse engines. Take us out of warp and hold position."

Ensign Sorna's expert fingers danced over the CON board. "We're secure from warp speed," she verified within seconds. "Now showing all stop."

Aubrey stepped up to the command deck. "Open a channel to the *Gibraltar*." Glancing over Adol's shoulder, he indicated the tactical display with an index finger. "Keep one eye on that fleet in the meantime. If they take any more shots at us, we'll have no choice but to return fire."

USS *Gibraltar*

"New sensor contact!" Juneau shouted. "It's appeared on our port-aft quarter, distance three-hundred fifty-thousand kilometers. It's matched speed and course with our flotilla."

Sandhurst grimaced as he barked, "Where the hell did they come from? Helm, engage intercept course. Tactical, identify that ship."

Lar'ragos paused, looking skeptically at his scan results as if trying to decipher a foreign language. "Captain, target reads as a Federation *Excelsior*-class starship."

Shanthi spoke up from the Science station. "Sir, it appears they suddenly accelerated during their final approach, effectively jumping ahead of their interference wave and catching us off guard."

"Nice," Ramirez said, her tone tinged with admiration. "A warp intercept Picard Maneuver."

Juneau glanced back from the Ops board. "The Velk have just opened fire on the *Excelsior*, sir."

Sandhurst pivoted in his chair to face Tactical and fixed his troubled expression on Lar'ragos. "Pava, can you override the Velk weapons arrays?"

"Trying, sir. They disconnected from our tactical link to engage the ship when it dropped in on top of them. Looks like they're panicking."

Pell looked up from her post in the well. "The ship's transponder isn't broadcasting, and they're too far from us for a visual identification of their registry."

"Incoming hail from the ship," Juneau announced, enabling audio.

"*Velk forces. This is the Federation starship Intrepid, Captain Jason Aubrey commanding. We mean you no harm. Please break off your attack.*"

"*Intrepid's* dropping out of warp and is falling behind us," Juneau updated. "Velk ships adjusting course to pursue." She looked across to Lightner at the helm and Juneau whispered, "Isn't Aubrey the lunatic that set off the genesis device in the Kokala nebula during the war?"

To his credit, Lightner minded his post and assiduously ignored her.

Sandhurst toggled the comms from his chair and hailed the Velk formation. "Velk defense vessels, this is *Gibraltar*. You are firing at a Federation starship. You will cease fire immediately or I will begin disabling your vessels."

"Captain," Ramirez glanced up from her console. "*Intrepid's* power signature and armaments are reading as comparable to those of a *Galaxy*-class. If that's really one of ours, she's been upgraded significantly."

Sandhurst nodded curtly, still focused intensely on the tactical plot map displayed on the main viewer. "Acknowledged, Exec. See if you can confirm those modifications through our database."

Lar'ragos looked frustrated and growled, "Velk attack wing now on approach to the *Intrepid's* coordinates. They're arming torpedoes."

As he shook his head in resignation, Sandhurst said in subdued voice, "Fire a full spread of photons, warhead yield one-fifth of standard. Hit the four ships closest to *Intrepid*. Looks as though we'll have to get their attention the hard way."

Lar'ragos hands flew across his board to make the necessary modifications to torpedo yield in seconds. "Aye. Torpedoes away, sir."

"Incoming hail from *Intrepid*, Captain. Directed at us specifically."

"On screen."

The image on the viewer shifted from that of four crimson missiles rifling towards their Velk targets to the visage of a Starfleet captain seated on the bridge of his ship. "Gibraltar, *this is Captain Aubrey. We're under attack by Velk forces and may be forced to take defensive action. Urgent that you respond.*"

Sandhurst opened the channel. "We read you, *Intrepid*. I've just opened fire on the lead Velk ships with low-yield torpedoes. We're hoping to bring them to their senses."

USS *Intrepid*

"Acknowledged, *Gibraltar*. We're tracking your fire."

"Direct hit by all torpedoes. Someone over there is a good shot." Adol muttered approvingly.

"Velk fleet is dropping out of warp close to our section." Aubrey continued, glancing at a panel mounted next to his chair.

Lieutenant Pal studied his data carefully. "Velk fleet is in disarray, Captain. Two ships have broken off and are approaching us slowly; others are following an elliptical trajectory around us at one-eighth impulse. I show overlapping COMM chatter from all ships. It looks like the ranking Velk over there is being challenged."

"I hope you can talk some more sense into them, Captain. Captain...?" With a polite smile, Aubrey looked openly at his counterpart. "I'm sorry I don't believe we've met."

Inclining his head in a collegial gesture, Sandhurst offered, "*Donald Sandhurst, Captain Aubrey. You gave us quite the scare. We were convinced that you were likely a Dominion battleship inbound to strike at the Velk homeworld.*"

"We had the same misgivings about you and your task force. Happily, we were both wrong. Still, I would have preferred bumping into you under better circumstances."

"Likewise," Sandhurst returned, toggling his comms to hail the Velk. "*Velk task force, I regret the necessity of firing on your ships, but you were pressing an attack on one of our starships. Stand down immediately. The Intrepid possesses significantly greater firepower than Gibraltar, and if we were to continue firing on one another, your forces would find themselves at a distinct disadvantage.*"

After a moment's pause, Pal announced, "Velk ships are standing down. They're disarming their tactical systems, sir."

"You have a way with words, I'll grant you that." Aubrey said. "Now that that's settled, I suggest a meeting between us and our respective command staffs, so we can compare notes. If you agree, we could convene aboard the *Intrepid* in one hour."

There was the briefest hesitation from Sandhurst before he replied, "*We'll see you in an hour then, Captain.*"

Interlude

Chapter Summary

Interlude by Gibraltar

The Command and Control Center of Starbase 375 was bustling as the members of the tactical, logistics, and support teams raced from station to station, conferring with their fellow officers manning sensor and data terminals throughout the cavernous two story circular compartment.

In the calm center of the storm of activity was Vice Admiral Bruce Coburn. He sat observing a host of large view screens that dominated one bulkhead. Coburn watched with a discerning eye the dispositions of three separate Starfleet task forces presently engaged with Talarian forces in and around the Castal, Galen, and Zurdaan star systems. He allowed his mind to wander only slightly as he listened to snippets of conversations from the surrounding commotion.

"...hospital ship *Mercy* reports having struck a gravitic mine in orbit of Castal II. They have serious casualties and structural damage..."

"...Captain Shelby reports the Talarian 4th Militia is withdrawing back towards their staging area at Braselius IX. She indicates their larger ships are now apparently armed with photon torpedoes and high-output Ferengi disruptors..."

"...re-supply convoy is due to rendezvous with Task Force Backstop at assembly point Luster at 03:00 Zulu-time..."

"...are having to fall back from phase line Obelisk near the Galen asteroid field. They report the science ship *Ijav'Re* was lost with all hands during an ambush that also damaged the *Kursk* and the *James Kirk*..."

The Talarian offensive had begun innocuously enough. The 'Little Cousins' (as they had been disparagingly nicknamed by Starfleet, a reference to their similarity in appearance and aggression to the larger Klingons) had been saber-rattling for months along their mutual border with the Federation. Their military buildup had been only a minor concern to Starfleet Intelligence and Federation defensive strategists who had seen no appreciable improvement in Talarian military technology since the Galen border conflicts some twenty years earlier.

Unfortunately, as happened every so often, those 'in the know' were caught off guard when elements of the Talarian 1st, 2nd, 4th, and 7th militias surged into Federation territory to overwhelm a smattering of Border Service patrol cutters reinforced by only a handful of starships. The Talarians had somehow come into possession of contemporary weapons systems in sufficient numbers to leave Starfleet reeling and fighting a defensive withdrawal across a three and a half lightyear front.

Coburn rubbed the bridge of his nose tiredly, cursing whoever had provided the Talarians with the capability to inflict so much damage in so short a time. It would all be for naught, of course. Starfleet, once fully mobilized, was far too powerful a force to allow the Talarians to maintain their current toehold in three Federation systems. Invariably, this little invasion would amount to no more than a minor historical footnote. In the here and now, however, the casualties among the civilian outposts and colonies that had been attacked were second only to those suffered by Starfleet in the first few hours of the assault. With the Fleet spread so thinly these days, each loss was another twist of the knife left buried in the organization's gut at the end of the Dominion War.

"Admiral, sir, might I have a moment?" It was Captain Oglesby, the base's strategic operations officer.

Coburn gave the captain his full attention and nodded. "Go ahead."

Her face looked pinched as Oglesby reported, "Sir, DS9 says they've picked up telemetry from two separate starship log buoys approaching the comms array on the Gamma Quadrant side of the Bajoran wormhole. The buoys are from the ships *Intrepid* and *Gibraltar*, and both report the probable destruction of the diplomatic task force to the Velk homeworld led by the *Nagasaki*."

Coburn, his brain already near the overload point with the minutiae of ongoing Talarian operations, merely blinked, momentarily stunned by this unwelcome bit of news.

"Destroyed? How? By whom?"

"Unknown, sir. There was a report of general unrest on Velkohn shortly before some kind of massive subspace displacement erupted right on top of the task force. *Gibraltar* was apparently lagging behind with engine trouble and recorded the entire incident on sensors. Captain Sandhurst has elected to push onward to the system in hopes of offering assistance."

"And *Intrepid*?" Some of Coburn's color had returned as he processed the tragic information.

"*Intrepid* was completing high-level diplomatic contact with the Gambis and Captain Aubrey had hoped to rendezvous with the task force at Velkohn. As far as we can tell, neither ship knows of the other's presence in the GQ." Oglesby gave him a pointed look. "As you might imagine, they're both requesting immediate assistance."

Coburn let out a long sigh heavy with regret, "Naturally." He took a moment to tabulate current ship deployments. As he forced command metal into his bearing and backbone, Coburn raised his eyes to meet Oglesby. "Captain, circumstances being what they are, there's no way we

can spare a single ship to support them. Have DS9 access the comms relay and transmit recall orders for both ships. They are to return to DS9 immediately."

"Understood, sir. Be advised that the subspace eruption appears to have caused widespread communications disruptions between the Velkamis system and the wormhole, hence the ships' use of the warp buoys."

The admiral nodded. "Have DS9 dispatch the *Defiant* through the wormhole just long enough to send a flight of long-range comms buoys carrying the recall orders to the Velkamis system."

Oglesby spun around smartly on one heel. "On it, sir."

Coburn turned his attention back to the war board, pondering how the losses suffered in this latest fiasco with the Talarians would affect the ongoing insurgency in Cardassian territory. Not for the first time he mused wryly that they did not pay him nearly enough for this job.

Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Chapter 11 by Galen4 and Gibraltar

USS *Intrepid*

"I don't recall a starship *Gibraltar* being assigned to the task force." The captain mused thoughtfully. "They must be Jellico's replacement for us."

"Their survival is something of a curiosity." Shantok said, "considering the nature and scope of the weapon that destroyed the other ships."

"You don't know the half of it." Pal threw in without invitation.

"You have something to share with the rest of us, Lieutenant?" Adol chastised. But the barb was an innocuous one. Adol and Pal had been roommates at Starfleet Academy and were also lifelong friends. Although how they ever got along was a mystery for the ages. Somehow Adol's cynical and aggressive platitudes seemed a counter weight for Pal's flaccid and deeply religious spirit, and both of them balanced each other like two ends of a see saw.

Grinning, Pal uttered a dramatic "*Sir, yes sir.*"

Captain Aubrey sighed irritably. It was times such as this that he regretted the casual atmosphere he had fostered on the bridge. "Mr. Pal."

"Sorry, Captain." Pal was already in professional mode again. "I checked Starfleet records on *Gibraltar*." He turned around, his face wearing concern and wonder all at the same time. "She's a...*Constitution* class vessel, sir."

Ensign Sorna looked across at him as though he had just grown antlers.

"You must be accessing old data," Adol replied smugly. "The *Constitutions* have been out of active service for a good ninety years."

"Not this one." Pal retorted. "She's one of the ships that was re-commissioned during the war. She usually just pulls escort duty, from what I can see."

"Logically, Jellico would pick just such a vessel to represent the 23rd Century in his flotilla." Shantok mentioned.

"*Gibraltar*...sounds familiar. If I'm not mistaken, they were involved with that mess in the Briar Patch a while ago." Standing, Aubrey strolled in front of the OPS and CON positions, casting studious looks at the main viewer. "But it still begs the question of how a ninety-year-old ship survived an attack that destroyed five state of the art cruisers."

"Sir, until we re-establish an uplink with Starfleet, the *Gibraltar's* our only support in the Gamma Quadrant." Adol was becoming gloomier by the moment.

"True enough. Hopefully, our COMM Buoy will make it safely to the wormhole."

"And until we either leave or get re-enforcements, our only back-up is a floating museum piece." The Andorian snorted.

A flicker of annoyance sparked behind Aubrey's usually pacific eyes. "Be that as it may, the crew makes the vessel, not the other way around."

He let a meaningful silence go by before ascending to the command deck for an exit.

The silence was broken by Shantok's grim conjecture.

"Always assuming that they are in fact *Gibraltar's* crew," She intoned. "And not Changelings preparing to seize our vessel."

USS *Gibraltar*

Sandhurst braced one arm on the console edge, leaning across the workstation to look over Shanthi's shoulder. "Any signs of Dominion technology aboard the *Intrepid*, Lieutenant?"

"No, sir," Shanthi replied.

Lar'ragos stepped over from the Tactical station "Even if they had commandeered the ship, I doubt the Dominion would be that careless."

“Still, this is a little *too* convenient,” Sandhurst observed. “After everything that’s happened since we crossed into the Gamma Quadrant, a Federation starship just happens to appear where none are reported to be. A starship that coincidentally possesses nearly three times the firepower a vessel of her class should have.”

Ramirez joined the conversation, standing from her post in the well to address the others on the upper deck. “Starfleet records indicate *Intrepid* is an experimental test-bed for merging new technology with older Starfleet designs. A lot of the know-how used in resurrecting *Gibraltar* likely came from work carried out aboard *Intrepid*.” She looked openly skeptical of Sandhurst’s conclusions and added, “And I’d remind you that Captain Fendro of the *Leeds* told us Aubrey was on some sort of classified assignment. We just assumed it was a mission in the Alpha Quadrant.”

“That may well be, but I’m not taking any chances.” Sandhurst tapped his combadge, “Bridge to engineering.”

“Ashok here, sir.”

“Lieutenant, I want you to send an engineering team to the computer core. On my order, they are to immediately pull the isolar banks from the master security command module in the following progression: delta, alpha, omicron, and then theta. Have you got that?”

“I... uh, yes, sir. I don’t understand why...”

“It’s not necessary for you to understand, Mister Ashok, only for you to comply. I’ll be sending Ramirez down presently with additional orders.”

Sandhurst gestured for Ramirez to join him in his ready room, and she obediently followed him inside. Once the doors had closed behind them, she observed, “You’re trying to lock them out of our command prefix codes, aren’t you?”

The captain appeared reasonably impressed by her powers of deduction. “Correct, Commander. Actually, it’s a bit more complicated than that. I’m going to change our prefix code.”

She frowned in response. “I didn’t think that was possible, sir. There are over a dozen safety and security lockouts to prevent anyone from doing that.”

Sandhurst moved to the captain’s safe secreted behind a picture on the bulkhead. He entered the combination and reached inside to withdraw a single isolar chip. “Correct again. There are actually fifteen individual lockouts and security firewalls. Fortunately, you happen to be speaking with one of only a handful of people in the Fleet who know how to bypass all of them.” He held the isolar chip up for her to observe. “I’ve prepared *this* to alter our prefix code to a random series of figures that will be chosen by you.”

Ramirez’s frown threatened to turn into a scowl. “You... prepared that in advance as a general contingency? Feeling a little paranoid these days, sir?”

As he closed the safe, Sandhurst favored her with an ironic grin. “No, I created this during our mission to the Briar Patch when I thought the odds were very good that Picard was going to try and stop me from going after Pell.” He moved towards the desk. “And yes, thank you, I *am* feeling a bit paranoid today, given the present circumstances. That’s why I’ll also be taking Taiee along with us to do some impromptu blood screenings of Aubrey and his senior staff.”

Sandhurst handed the iso-chip to Ramirez. She stared at the innocuous looking data strip for a moment. “And if *Intrepid* has been compromised by the Dominion?”

“I’ll check in every fifteen minutes. If I miss a check in, or fail to give the proper countersign, you’re to assume the ship is in Dominion hands and that Lar’ragos, Pell, Taiee and I have been captured. If that happens, you try to utilize their prefix code to take control of *Intrepid*. In case that doesn’t work, you’re to open fire and disable their propulsion and weapons systems. Then you run away as fast as possible.” He eyed her closely. “Am I clear?”

She met his gaze unflinchingly. “If you want me to lie and say I won’t try to rescue you, that’s fine.” A smirk tugged at the corners of her mouth. “I won’t attempt to rescue you.”

A resigned sigh escaped him. “Damn it, Liana...”

She stepped closer. “What are you going to do, Captain? Throw me off the ship? Commander Ramirez doesn’t leave her people behind, and *Captain* Ramirez sure as hell never will.”

“Fine,” he conceded. “Use your best judgment. But I’d hate to have you beam back a Changeling mimicking one of us.”

She appeared to consider that briefly. “That’s a risk I’ll have to take, sir.”

Sandhurst took a seat behind the desk and gestured for Ramirez to be seated as well. “Let’s go over the fine print before I send you down to meet with Ashok.”

Sandhurst and his party stepped onto the transport pad. Taiee was carrying a medical kit containing blood sampling equipment. In addition to

the other medical gear included in the carryall was a partially disassembled phaser disguised as a field sterilizer unit. Hopefully, the device would not trip *Intrepid's* transporter sensors, and might be hastily assembled to provide the *Gibraltar* team with a low-yield weapon in case their worst fears were realized.

As he glanced at Lar'ragos, Sandhurst said, "Their chief of security is an Andorian with a distinguished combat record." He added unnecessarily, "Be on your toes."

"I like Andorians," Lar'ragos replied laconically. "They taste like chicken."

Sandhurst shook his head and stifled an inappropriate laugh. He then reached out to give Pell's hand a brief squeeze as he kept his eyes focused on Chief Townsend at the control station. "Energize."

USS *Intrepid*

"Shantok to Aubrey. Mr. Adol, Counselor Perboda and I are standing by in transporter room one."

"*Very good.*" Came the response over the communicator's tinny speaker. "*Mr. Adol, please confirm security measures.*"

Tapping his combadge, Adol began to recite the pre-arranged plans. "This deck has been evacuated of non-essential personnel. I have security teams Baker and Zulu out of sight and covering all access points. Turbo lifts to and from this deck are restricted by manual-code input." Pausing, he continued going through his mental checklist. "Computer is set for continuous scan on our guests. Any aggressive movements or indications of shape shifting will trigger containment fields to immobilize the hostiles. Overlapping fields will then seal off the rest of the deck and emergency bulkheads will close."

"Our shields and weapons will be activated at the same time, in the event more changelings are aboard *Gibraltar.*" Shantok finished.

There was approval in Aubrey's voice. "*Very good. As I mentioned before, I doubt seriously that we'll need any of these measures. There's something about this that just doesn't smell like the Dominion.*" He amended his opinion before he set off any protest. "*But I agree the precautions are necessary. Please keep me advised of any developments. Aubrey out.*"

Stepping behind the transporter console, Adol began staging the system for use. "*Gibraltar* has signaled that they're ready for transport." He reported presently.

"Bring them aboard please." Shantok said.

"Initiating transport." As Adol worked the controls, he looked puzzled. "I'm only reading four people."

Counselor Perboda shrugged. "They're probably just being cautious by sending a small party over first."

Lights gathered above the transporter pads.

"No weapons detected. But..." He caught Shantok's attention. "One of them is carrying a medkit." Unconsciously, Adol reached over, feeling the small phaser concealed under the left sleeve of his uniform.

Shantok only nodded, apparently deciding the news was not unexpected.

The shimmering blue energy thickened into matter, and four people appeared on the transporter stage.

"Welcome aboard the *Intrepid.*" She lowered her head slightly, a show of respect roughly equal to a bow. "I'm Commander Shantok, first officer." She gestured towards the transporter console. "This is Lt. Commander Adol, chief of security."

Adol smiled thinly at the party, scrutinizing them with a look that held neither trust nor suspicion.

Indicating the large olive-green man next to her, Shantok said, "This is Lt. Perboda, our ship's counselor."

The Orion immediately flashed a toothy grin. "I'm glad to make your acquaintance." He said warmly. He might have been greeting long absent friends rather than potentially hostile strangers.

Sandhurst nodded somewhat warily to Perboda. "Thank you, Counselor. I'm Donald Sandhurst." He turned to introduce his compatriots. "This is Lt. Commander Pell, our diplomatic officer. Our chief tactical officer, Lt. Lar'ragos, and CMO, Lt. Taiee."

Adol peered at the unassuming man, his concentration momentarily broken. *Could it really be Pava Lar'ragos?* He wondered. He recovered quickly; reminding himself that there would time enough to indulge in hero worship when proper identities were established. Until then, he wouldn't lower his guard.

Shantok absorbed Taiee's medkit, and then raised an eyebrow at Captain Sandhurst. His face hardened as if he were silently challenging her unspoken question. Ultimately, she decided against voicing it. It was an inquiry to which she knew full well the answer.

"If you'll follow me," she said, "we'll convene just down the corridor."

The Starfleet officers exited the transporter room, the respective crews keeping an inconspicuous eye on one another.

Within a few minutes they entered a medium sized lounge. It was windowless but tastefully colored in warm tones. The bulkheads were adorned with a row of oil paintings, each picture showcasing a different vessel from *Intrepid's* design lineage. Some of the paintings had bronze plaques below them, indicating former namesakes lost in the line of duty. Among those were the *Constitution*-class ship and her crew who had perished a century ago-----and the ill-fated *Intrepid*-class model, destroyed with all hands just before the war.

As the doors hissed shut behind the group, Perboda walked over to the polished wood conference table. He casually picked up a medkit, which had been waiting on the table's surface.

He looked uncomfortably at Shantok, who turned to face Sandhurst's group.

"Before our official meeting begins, Captain Aubrey would like to confirm that no one present is an imposter." She began with typical Vulcan bluntness, "As you know, the surest way to verify that is with blood screenings." Shantok nodded her head at Taiee's own medical case. "We shall do the same of course."

Counselor Perboda knew enough to keep his body language welcoming and friendly. He had not had time to review the profiles of *Gibraltar's* senior staff, so he was relying on his people talents to evaluate the visitors and how they would respond to Shantok's less than tactful request.

Sandhurst inclined his head towards Shantok. "I'm glad we're all on the same page, Commander." He gestured to Taiee, who stepped forward and opened her medkit. Sandhurst pushed up the sleeve of his uniform jacket and stepped forward towards Perboda. "Any time you're ready, Counselor."

Lar'ragos stood by, still as a statue as he dissected every word, gesture, and nuance of the *Intrepid* crew with his innate talents. Unfortunately, he had no idea how thoroughly Changelings might mimic their victims and their emotional states. Federation security had tried using Betazoid telepaths to detect shape-shifting infiltrators during the war, but eventually came to believe that the Changelings could recreate the surface thoughts and emotions of those they had replaced.

Then, as Shantok spoke, Lar'ragos detected an undercurrent of pain and loss in the tonality of her voice and the cadence of her speech. He probed deeper and was rewarded with an image from the ether of a younger looking version of the commander being tutored by someone who could only have been the formidable Captain Zorek.

That was it, her tell, her Achilles heel. There was only one way to be certain she was who she appeared to be. However, if she were the real Shantok, it risked traumatizing a wound that had not yet begun to heal. Lar'ragos nearly hesitated, but the safety of his captain and fellow crew were at stake. Impulsively, the El-Aurian cleared his throat, directing his next words at *Intrepid's* XO. "We were all saddened by the loss of Captain Zorek, sir." He focused intensely on the Vulcan woman as he chose his next words carefully and channeled as much empathy as he could muster into his voice. "I grieve with thee, Commander."

At first glance, it seemed Shantok was unfazed by his remark. But privately, she had been caught by surprise. Until that very moment, she had stubbornly refused to acknowledge her grief, because, quite logically, all the facts were not yet in. She had been waiting to see if *Gibraltar's* crew were authentic, and then to confirm the details of the attack for herself during the course of their meeting with Aubrey. It had been a tidy arrangement with the truth, albeit a delicate one.

No more. Lar'ragos's expression of empathy, and the conviction with which his words had been uttered, had just erased any doubts about Zorek's death.

Only a very keen eye could have caught her subtle reaction, invisible to the average person.

But subtle or not...she had flinched.

And that, she now understood, was precisely the reaction Lt. Pava Lar'ragos had been looking for.

It would appear that he's not content to wait for blood screenings, she thought with resignation.

And there was one more surprise. She harbored no offense at the intrusion, something that was out of character for her-----because even for a Vulcan, she was insufferably private.

Holding his eyes with her own cat-like stare, Shantok nodded once, in acceptance. They looked at each other for just a moment longer, and to those present, it seemed a deeper level of communication was occurring.

She stepped away, presenting herself in front of Lt. Taiee. "At your convenience." She said, pushing up her sleeve.

Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Chapter 12 by Gibraltar and Galen4

Once the crew's identities had been confirmed and basic trust between the personnel established, the levee of mutual paranoia collapsed, and the cooperative process leaped ahead. Sandhurst called over the rest of his senior staff, who met with Aubrey's senior officers in the briefing room. As the crews sat across from one another, Ramirez's barely bridled intensity set an obvious counterpoint to Shantok's reserved demeanor, even in the face of such recent personal loss. Juneau fidgeted while shooting repeated glances at Cal Benjamin, and Lar'ragos looked on with passive equanimity, apparently heedless of Adol's piercing scrutiny.

Sandhurst brought the *Intrepid's* officers up to speed on everything that had transpired since *Gibraltar* had arrived in the Gamma Quadrant, right up to their nearly fateful rendezvous hours earlier. As he brought his update to a close, the *Gibraltar* captain summarized bleakly, "So, all we have to show at present for nearly twenty-five hundred Starfleet dead is a brief snippet of footage of what appears to be Sharm being escorted by Jem'Hadar soldiers. Velkohn itself is on the precipice of descending into civil war, and parties unknown in our vicinity have access to a super-weapon that we know little to nothing about."

He turned slightly in his chair to gauge the impact of his statement on the *Intrepid's* officers. Sandhurst realized that he must quickly establish his place in the food chain, as well as that of his crew. "Per Starfleet regs, Captain Aubrey is clearly the final authority here, by virtue of his ship's tactical superiority as well as his experience and time-at-grade as captain." He locked eyes with his counterpart, "I accept your authority without qualification, but I would like to make an argument for taking *Gibraltar* back to the planet to try and help establish some kind of effective interim government." Sandhurst realized the importance of publicly acknowledging Aubrey's status in front of his own senior staff, as it would immediately lay to rest any doubt as to who was ultimately in charge.

The other captain nodded graciously to Sandhurst. Aubrey was not a man who was driven to lead. He would have been just as comfortable taking orders were their situations reversed. But he accepted Starfleet regulations in this matter, just as Sandhurst did. He was grateful for the man's professionalism. Aubrey had met his share of officers whose insecurities would have been a liability in this situation. Time was often squandered away with posturing, rather than resolving the crisis at hand.

"I'm certainly in favor of giving any humanitarian aid to the Velk." He began carefully, feeling the weight of his command responsibilities double. "I'm less enthused about helping them create an interim government. As everyone here already knows, the Prime Directive forbids us from taking sides in a planet's internal conflicts. Therefore, any aid we give will have to be nonpartisan."

"Respectfully, Captain," Pell spoke up, "things are so bad right now between the competing factions, that without a neutral voice guiding them in their negotiations, war will likely break out in less than a week. Captain Sandhurst and I have already managed to get the parties talking, and we'd like to pick up where we left off while *Gibraltar* assists with disaster relief efforts." The Bajoran's look was serious as she underscored her point. "Despite the fact that we're a small escort ship, we've got good people, and this isn't our first time to the rodeo, sir. We've been very careful not to take sides."

"Granted." He said to Pell. Turning back to Sandhurst, he continued. "Don't misunderstand me; you and your crew's abilities aren't in question here. You've made admirable progress towards stabilizing the climate on Velkohn. And I think that it makes sense for you to continue your efforts." Folding his hands in front of him, he addressed *Gibraltar's* officers. "My advice, for whatever it's worth, is to not underestimate your role. I've been down this road myself on more than one occasion. I know how easy it is to have your objectivity compromised."

Shantok spoke next. "Sharm's apparent survival may offer hope. If it were possible to retrieve him, his return to Velkohn could fortify the situation. As the only survivor of the former government, he could be regarded as their rightful leader."

"Or it could make things worse. Sharm's return could be seen as a threat by any interim government whose members opposed the previous administration." Adol put forth with his usual pessimism.

Ramirez interjected, "Sharm's status as the last living member of their provisional government might give him the status of de-facto leader of the otherwise decapitated administration. However, convincing the remaining factions of his legitimacy may take some doing." She turned to look at her captain. "And it's worth noting, sir, that if we're headed back to Velkohn, we're going to need additional personnel and resources."

Sandhurst nodded in agreement. "True enough." He glanced pointedly at Aubrey, "What are your plans for the *Intrepid*, Captain? If we're splitting up and *Gibraltar* returns to the planet, I won't send recovery teams to the surface without a sufficient security presence. Any medical and security personnel you can spare would be enormously helpful."

In response, Aubrey let his gaze drift between Adol and Dr. Kella Lisern, *Intrepid's* CMO. "Mr. Adol, Doctor: please determine who we can spare from your departments while still maintaining combat efficiency." He indicated Shantok. "Commander, once you have their recommendations, you'll coordinate with *Gibraltar* on personnel transfers. Mr. Benjamin..."

But *Intrepid's* chief engineer wasn't present.

At least, not mentally.

He was fidgeting with his PADD, casting nervous glances at the *Gibraltar* officer across the table from him. The person of interest was a young, freckled woman who had a somewhat girl-like demeanor about her. Lt. Juneau, if Aubrey recalled her name correctly. For her part, she was doing a bad job of pretending that Benjamin didn't exist. Her eyes were fixed rigidly towards the head of the table, as though she were memorizing every word the senior officers were saying.

His tone hardened. "Mr. Benjamin." He repeated.

Benjamin snapped around with the embarrassment of a cadet who had dozed off during an academy lecture. "Sir?" He cleared his throat. "Yes sir?"

"I'd like you to oversee the transfer of our relief supplies to *Gibraltar*." Aubrey's stare lingered; relaying unhappiness at Benjamin's woolgathering-----particularly in front of visitors. Then he gave Sandhurst a respectful nod. "At your discretion of course."

Sandhurst returned the gesture in kind. "We're available at your convenience, Captain."

"In regards to our plans; close to twenty-five hundred Starfleet officers have died. We're going to find out who's responsible and why they did it. I think a good place to start our investigation is the last place Sharm was sighted. Therefore, we'll be proceeding towards the Bog."

He paused, and for the first time since the meeting began, Jason Aubrey's expression darkened ominously. "I want to be candid with all of you. This new weapon is a direct threat to the Federation. It's likely that I'll be taxing Starfleet regulations to the breaking point before this is over."

Sandhurst, Ramirez, and Lar'ragos appeared to share a wan smile as Pell looked decidedly uncomfortable. Sandhurst noted, "That's alright, Captain. We've developed a certain... flexibility where regulations are concerned. Tax away." He cast a glance down the table at Juneau and Sandhurst added, "Seeing as we're going to have a compliment of your personnel aboard our ship, I'd propose assigning one of my officers to *Intrepid* as a liaison." He looked to Aubrey, "With your permission of course."

"That sounds like a good idea." Aubrey agreed "We'll take aboard anyone you recommend."

Juneau paled, realizing that she had just been nominated.

Ramirez confirmed it with a nod of her head as she examined the junior lieutenant from down the table. "Excellent plan, sir. I've the perfect person in mind."

Benjamin caught on as well. He faced her squarely across the table for the first time since she had come aboard. She finally acknowledged him, but her expression was little more than a blank mask.

Moments later, the meeting was adjourned with the agreement that personnel and supplies would be exchanged between the vessels over the next two hours.

As they stepped out into the corridor, Ramirez gave Pell an amused look. "Our first time at the rodeo? Do they *have* rodeos on Bajor?"

Pell's cheeks colored, and she chuckled self-consciously. "Not as such, sir. However, I'm not beyond dipping into my cache of human idioms when the situation warrants." The two women moved off, laughing, and headed for the transporter room.

Juneau stood in the passageway awaiting Benjamin as she tried hard not to squirm. She glanced up as he approached, the young engineer clearly feeling as awkward as she did. "Cal," Juneau said softly.

"Livvy," he replied in an equally subdued tone. "It's been awhile."

"Since the inquest," she clarified unnecessarily.

"Yeah..." Benjamin rubbed the back of his neck, looking as though he'd rather be anywhere else in the universe. "So, you're going to be our liaison?"

"Looks like," Juneau said noncommittally.

Benjamin seemed to come to a decision, forcing himself to stare directly into the junior lieutenant's face. "We're obviously going to have to work together, Livvy. It's not going to be comfortable for either of us."

She scowled. "I'll manage. Thanks for your concern, though."

He raised an eyebrow, his expression incredulous. "Oh, is that it? After three years suddenly it's all *my* fault? If memory serves, the board of inquiry found us both equally culpable, *Lieutenant*."

Juneau's face darkened with anger, and her voice lowered an octave. "At least you've been able to move past it, Cal. You're a chief engineer, one of the youngest in the Fleet. Me? I get bounced from assignment to assignment, someone who gets pawed off on one unsuspecting captain after another. If it weren't for all the people killed in the war, I'd never have made JG!"

Benjamin recoiled from Juneau's sudden outburst, taking a step back. "I... I'm..."

She moved forward, closing the distance. "Did I mention I'm one unsatisfactory fitness report away from being cashiered out of Starfleet completely? Ramirez has my number, Cal, and the really damning thing is I honestly can't blame her!"

His mouth moved, but no words issued forth.

Juneau sneered as she turned her back and started off down the corridor. "Good comeback, Cal. You should save that one for the next time the two of us are in front of a review board, they love that kind of articulate defense."

Standing alone in the hallway, Benjamin was left to ponder what exactly had just happened.

Lar'ragos strode into *Intrepid's* security office, giving a friendly nod to the duty officer behind the monitor station. "Afternoon, Ensign. Is Commander Adol about?" After a brief wait, Lar'ragos found himself ushered into Adol's office, where the Andorian was busy shifting duty assignments in order to free up some of his personnel for transfer over to *Gibraltar*. The El-Aurian brought himself to attention, announcing, "Lieutenant Lar'ragos, reporting as ordered, sir."

Adol glanced up from his monitor, acknowledging the man's presence with a bob of his head as his antennae cut thoughtful arcs through the air. "At ease, Lieutenant." He gestured to a chair in front of the desk, "Please have a seat."

Lar'ragos obliged.

Adol inspected him over the top of his monitor for a moment before reaching out and pushing the data terminal aside. "I have to admit to a bit of idol worship where you're concerned, Mr. Lar'ragos. I've been reading about your exploits since I was at the academy. Fighting the Cardassians at Tevrin IV during the border wars, the last man off Tzenketh when they attacked our embassy, serving with the Special Missions Teams behind Dominion lines... you've accumulated quite the record."

Lar'ragos appeared immune to the accolades and replied simply, "It's been my privilege to serve Starfleet in times of crisis."

Adol shifted in his chair, part of him reluctant to begin the next line of questioning. "Do you mind if I inquire into what may be a personal matter, Lieutenant?"

"Not at all, sir."

"Why did you pass on the *Enterprise*? It's the most prestigious assignment in the Fleet." Adol tried to make the query sound more like personal curiosity and less like an interrogation but couldn't quite pull it off.

Lar'ragos smiled wistfully. "An old friend of mine earned a captain's commission at the end of the war and needed good officers. I felt that my experience and abilities would be of benefit to him."

"And the reason you've remained a lieutenant for seventeen years?"

The older man shrugged lightly. "I'm comfortable where I'm at, Commander. Besides, I've the rest of my career to promote, should I change my mind."

"It must be nice," Adol observed dryly, "to be effectively immortal."

Lar'ragos chuckled, "I'm not phaser-proof, sir. I'm as vulnerable as anyone else when it comes to doing this job, and I've the scars to prove it." His friendly smile evaporated as he deduced where Adol was going with this line of questioning. "My people aren't ciphers to me, Commander. While it's true that *Gibraltar's* security division has taken more than its share of casualties this past year, those were due to circumstances beyond anyone's control." He leaned forward slightly, his expression deadly serious. "I won't needlessly endanger your people. I'll ask no more of them than I do of myself."

Forcing himself to relax, Adol nodded wordlessly, absorbing the man's statement and weighing it against what he knew of the man's service record. "It's difficult for me to trust someone else with the lives of the people under my command." Adol tried to smile but was only able to manage a morose looking smirk. "Even a living legend."

He met the Andorian's piercing gaze and Lar'ragos assessed, "I'm actually glad you're concerned. If you accepted signing over your people without hesitation, I'd be worried."

"Now," Adol said, shifting topics, "what kind of equipment do you need? I've got Class-3 combat armor, isomagnetic disintegrators, photon mortars, and we've even got a couple of six-person hover sleds in storage."

Lar'ragos looked impressed. "That's quite the arsenal, Commander. Expecting a war?"

Smirking, Adol explained, "We've spent the balance of the last year on our own in the Gamma Quadrant. It pays to be prepared."

As he nodded approvingly, Lar'ragos said, "Since you're offering, I'll take a couple of the mortars and both the hover-sleds. I've got a dozen sets of Class-4 holomesh armor and five Special Warfare Interceptor/Fast Transports that can escort the sleds."

Adol blinked, “SWIFTS? How’d you get your hands on Class-4 commando armor and special forces hovercycles?”

Lar’ragos grinned. “It’s all in who you know, sir.”

Velkohn

The sounds of battle had grown louder in just the past half hour, the percussion of heavy artillery causing the building to tremor in sympathy with those unfortunate souls on the receiving end of the barrage. The city’s business district was being torn apart by armed factions trying to wrest control of the planet’s monetary and communications infrastructure, promising to leave this district’s once proud architecture a graveyard of burned-out, skeletal shells, as had been the fate of the governance district the previous day.

The three Velk sat around a circular table, their only source of illumination a weak hand-held lantern covered by a piece of red cloth to preserve their night vision. One of them monitored the display screen of a portable subspace transceiver, his eyes fixed to the ever-changing data stream. “The localized interference is subsiding,” he noted with relief. “Finally.”

“Too late,” answered another, a communications earpiece affixed to his auditory orifice. “Our forces have broken and are retreating towards the athletic complex near the river junction.”

“Where are they running to?” the third one asked bitterly. “The transport skiffs have already left. They’ll either be surrounded and slaughtered or pushed into the river and drowned.”

The one with the comms earpiece merely flexed his facial spines, the Velk variant of a head shake. “They’re panicking, there isn’t any order or plan to this retreat. It’s a rout.” His features registering disgust, he dislodged the earpiece and tucked it into a pocket. “They’re finished. *We’re* finished.”

“Perhaps not,” the first one offered, his voice tinged with the merest hint of hope. “I’ve just accessed a surveillance satellite; the Federation starship isn’t in orbit.”

“So? That, in and of itself means nothing.”

“It may suggest that our transmission was detected, and that they’ve gone to investigate Sharm’s sighting.”

“Sharm,” the second one spat. “That duplicitous little worm. I wonder how the Cartel got him away from the Federation squadron before they were annihilated?”

“How doesn’t matter,” the third one announced. “The Federation’s involvement was our last, best hope for stability. With Sharm’s help, the Cartel has us at each other’s throats. They needn’t lift a finger while our world tears itself apart. They’ll simply swoop in after the dust settles and establish control, no doubt with Sharm installed as a Prefect.”

The first one appeared skeptical. “Won’t the Federation intervene? Thousands of their military personnel have just been murdered.”

“No, their laws prohibit them from becoming involved in the internal affairs of other cultures.”

As he adjusted the signal gain on the transceiver, the first Velk maintained his stance. “The Federation won’t simply walk away from this. The Cartel’s new weapon will be mistaken as a resumption of hostilities with the Dominion. I wouldn’t be surprised if a few days from now our skies are darkened by dozens of Starfleet ships.”

“I think that very unlikely,” said a disembodied voice from somewhere in the room.

The three Velk at the table froze, their facial spines quivering in alarm. The second one reached for the pistol at his hip, only to be sent flying from his chair as a Jem’Hadar soldier de-shrouded and bludgeoned him across the temple with his rifle.

The third Velk, moving with practiced swiftness, drew a knife from his chest harness and slashed at the Jem’Hadar’s Ketracil-white tubule. Shockingly, his blade glanced off nothing more than armored breastplate, no narcotic delivery system to be found. The soldier replied by swinging his rifle around and sending a stun discharge into the Velk’s midsection, leaving the smaller reptilian insensate on the floor.

The last of the Velk merely sat where he was, seeing no sense in offering further resistance.

“Not going to run? Not going to fight?” the voice echoed in the confined room.

The Velk sighed as he moved to deactivate the subspace transceiver. “There would be no point.”

The voice’s owner began to laugh, a high-pitched, trilling giggle that would have set the Velk’s hair on end, had he possessed any. *“I credit you with knowing when to bow to the inevitable. The Federation, however, doesn’t seem to have learned that lesson. If their ships dare return, I shall enjoy educating them about the fundamental truths of this quadrant. Slowly... ever so slowly...”*

Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Chapter 13 by Gibraltar

"Communications interference is abating, sir," Shanthi announced from the Science station. *Gibraltar* and her Velk escorts were returning to the reptilians' home planet and had just penetrated the last expanding sphere of subspace disruptions caused by the detonation of the mystery weapon days earlier.

Seated in the command chair, Pell Ojana turned towards him. "Let me know when we begin picking up signals from Velkohn, Lieutenant. We need to know what's been happening there."

The young scientist answered in the affirmative as he turned back to his console and adjusted his subspace signal filters to search for known Velk transmission frequencies.

"Picking up increased comm traffic from the Velk formation, Commander," Chief Ziang noted from Ops. "Looks like they're calling home for updates as well."

Pell nodded to herself and reflected that even when they reached the planet, it could take days or weeks to convince all the vying factions to return to the negotiating table. The dialogue she and Sandhurst had established before breaking orbit had undoubtedly collapsed soon afterward. Without a dispassionate outside party to act as arbiter, the various power blocs would have fallen to bickering amongst themselves and snapping at one another like a ravening pack of Cardassian *kethel* hounds.

Pell heard Shanthi's resonant voice calling out, "Now receiving Velk radio traffic, sir. I'm reading an appreciable jump in the amount of high-security encrypted transmissions in the vicinity of Velkohn." He ran a standard long-range approach scan and the lieutenant frowned, his brow furrowing. "Sensors indicate significant recent damage to planetary infrastructure. I'm seeing large population displacements from urban areas, as well as collapse of power grids, transportation networks, and commercial activity."

She experienced a sinking sensation in her stomach and Pell inquired, "I don't suppose that could be attributed to some kind of natural disaster?"

Shanthi looked up from his board to fix her with a grave expression. "No, sir. It appears active fighting has broken out among two or more of the planet's factions."

"Yes," she breathed, "of course." Pell resisted the impulse to notify the captain straight away. Both he and Ramirez had finally agreed to try and get some sleep, having had few opportunities for prolonged rest in the past week. *Gibraltar* was still eighteen hours from reaching orbit of the troubled world. She would let them sleep undisturbed before breaking the tragic news that Velkohn had apparently already spiraled into open warfare. "Initiate yellow alert," Pell ordered.

Minutes later, Pell was in the midst of reviewing a primer on high-risk diplomatic interventions that had been authored by Curzon Dax some forty years earlier when the ship lurched unexpectedly.

Jostled in her seat, the Bajoran looked to the Ops station. "Sitrep."

Ziang shifted the viewer to an aft orientation, showing computer enhanced representations of the Velk ships holding formation with them. Flashes of light and searing explosions clouded the image as the Velk patrol ships exchanged fire with each other. "Reading weapons fire between our escort craft, Commander."

"I'm guessing they've just received updates from home," Shanthi observed dryly.

Ensign Lightner glanced back over his shoulder from Helm as a missile impacted one of the closer Velk ships, causing it to yaw hard to port and then vanish as it tumbled out of warp in what must surely have been a terminal re-entry into normal space. "They may not be aiming at us, sir, but with all that fire we could easily end up as collateral damage."

"Agreed," Pell said as she resituated herself in the center seat. "Shields up, sound red alert. All hands to battle stations." She muttered a silent apology to Donald before calling out, "Senior officers to the bridge."

Shortly after stepping into the command center and receiving a quick briefing, Sandhurst ordered the ship to all-stop. Sensors now indicated that of the eleven ships escorting them back to Velkohn, three had been destroyed outright, and four more were damaged. One of the damaged craft had been crippled and was unable to proceed under its own power. Two of the others had continued ahead towards the planet, apparently unwilling to become involved in the fighting.

The situation was developing so quickly there was no time for a staff meeting, and so Sandhurst presided over an impromptu discussion on the bridge.

"The final two Velk craft have adopted a hostile posture and are approaching the crippled ship. They'll be within weapons range in six minutes, sir," Ops kept the others apprised of the emerging situation. "The ship is now broadcasting a general distress call."

Ramirez, who had arrived on Deck 1 less than thirty seconds after the captain, took a seat at her station in the well. She looked up at Sandhurst who was now ensconced in the command chair. Ramirez elected to play devil's advocate and offered, "Do we intervene to save the crew of the disabled ship?"

Pell answered before Sandhurst could muster a reply. "This is clearly an internal Velk matter. Any attempt by us to interfere could be interpreted as a violation of the Prime Directive."

As he gave the diplomatic officer a patient yet pointed look, Sandhurst countered, "They're asking for help, and this doesn't constitute a battle now that their ship is no longer a viable threat."

"Respectfully, sir," Pell interjected, "that line of reasoning will never fly with an after-action review. We know better."

"We could beam the crew off and let the other faction destroy the ship. That neutralizes the primary danger to them anyway, right?" This from Lightner, who had turned around in his chair to join the debate from the Helm station.

Shanthi nodded in agreement with the ensign's sentiments as he offered up, "We've got time to warp in and beam the survivors off. If the other faction objects, we can simply render the rescued Velk over to a nonaligned third party on the planet who can hold them until the fighting is over."

Pell was still focused on Sandhurst like a laser, seemingly impervious to the input from the others. "This is developing into a full-scale war, Captain. Any actions on our part that might be perceived as taking sides would completely undermine our position as a neutral arbiter." She softened her expression, glancing at Ramirez. "I don't want to see those Velk officers die any more than you do, Commander, but though helping them might salve our collective conscience in the short term it will effectively end our mission right here, right now."

Rarely one to offer unsolicited input, Ashok turned from his workstation. "What of the group that ship's crew belongs to? How will we appear to them if it's discovered that we sat by and did nothing while their comrades were slaughtered?"

Ramirez quirked an eyebrow in silent accord with the taciturn engineer, and leveled what she hoped was an appraising look at her captain.

"Three minutes," Ziang updated from beside Lightner as the chief petty officer continued monitoring the countdown.

Feeling nearly every gaze in the room locked solidly on him, Sandhurst took a long moment to weigh his options. As he watched the chronometer on his armrest display, he gauged many possible outcomes that might result from a rescue of the crew.

"We're now being hailed directly, Captain." Ziang stayed facing forward, doubtless reluctant to make eye contact with Sandhurst.

Sandhurst watched the chrono approaching the two-minute mark as he spoke, "On audio, Chief."

The message was marred by static and the pops and hiss of barely functional comms equipment. "*Gibraltar, please respond. We have taken damage to our propulsion and weapons systems and are unable to defend ourselves. The approaching ships have allied themselves with the Numander Front and are refusing to accept our surrender! Please assist us, Gibraltar!*"

Sandhurst toggled off the transmission from his chair as he cast a glance over his shoulder at Lar'ragos. "You've been quiet, Lieutenant. Anything to add?"

Lar'ragos had stood vigilantly at the Tactical console just behind the captain's chair, remaining uncharacteristically mute during the earlier exchange. His expression inscrutable, the smaller man spoke softly, "You're equally damned no matter what you decide, sir. Myself, I'd rather be condemned for saving lives than for doing nothing and watching others die."

Sandhurst turned back to face the screen and appeared to have come to a decision. "Stations, people," he ordered. As the senior staff returned to their duties, Sandhurst launched into a litany of commands. "Helm, warp jump us in between the threat vessels and the crippled ship. Exec, have all transporter rooms ready to commence evacuation of that vessel, and make sure Sickbay is standing by for casualties. Tactical, if the oncoming Velk ships open fire, I want you to throw off their aim with the tractor beam. If their warheads explode prematurely as a result, I won't lose any sleep over it." He turned to look at the Engineering station. "Mister Ashok, be prepared to extend our shields around that ship should it become necessary."

A chorus of voices acknowledged his commands, and *Gibraltar* leapt forward, transitioning through warp space only briefly before coming to rest alongside the wounded patrol ship. Her counsel having fallen on deaf ears, Pell resumed her station in the well, opposite that of Ramirez.

"Forty-five seconds until threat vessels are in firing range," Ziang stated as he tracked the progress of the oncoming ships.

Ramirez called out, "Transporters are bringing the first wave of survivors aboard, sir."

"Incoming transmission from the approaching ships, sir."

Sandhurst set his jaw and dipped his chin slightly as he eyed the forward screen. "On the viewer, Chief."

A male Velk in military garb took shape there, his cranial protrusions flared in agitation. *"Captain, I warn you not to assist these traitors. Their kind have taken up arms against the rightful government of the Numandrian province. Even now, their death squads are butchering the females and offspring in our home cities!"*

Sandhurst tried to sound a reasonable note as he replied, "It is not our intention to prevent the destruction of the vessel. You may do with it as you please. I will not, however, sit idly by while helpless people are killed in front of me, regardless of the crimes of their allies on Velkohn." He sat forward, consciously trying to project an aura of calm towards the enraged ship commander. "Barely half an hour ago you and the men aboard that ship were brothers-in-arms. They'd have given their lives for you, and I'm certain you'd have done the same for them. Am I to believe a single transmission from your homeworld has swept all that aside?"

"Visual records of our nesting creches and homesteads burning while our females are being defiled have a way of focusing one's attention, Captain."

Sandhurst grimaced, forced to concede the point. "Nevertheless, these men aren't responsible for those crimes, and I won't see them killed outright for their affiliations. If you wish to try them as criminals after this conflict has ended, that's your choice."

"So much for your vaunted Federation neutrality," the Velk captain spat. *"This is your final warning. Leave now or I'll have no choice but to fire on your vessel."*

As he muted the transmission, Sandhurst looked to Ramirez. "Status of the evacuation?"

She replied, looking tense, "They've got two crew pinned under a partially collapsed bulkhead in the engine compartment. We can't beam them out due to radiation leakage from their reactor."

His expression pinched, he enabled audio. "Velk warship, we are initiating an evacuation of the damaged vessel. I ask you not to interfere. If you attempt to do so, I will use whatever force is necessary to safeguard my ship and the vessel under our protection."

"If you are in range wh---"

Sandhurst terminated the conversation and stood. "Ashok, extend our shields around that ship and keep them up, no matter what. Use whatever you have to, including life support if necessary." He moved for the turbolift as he tapped his combadge. "Lt. Taiee, meet me in transporter room two immediately, prepare for blunt trauma, crushing injuries and radiation exposure. Ashok, I'll need one of your engineers and an industrial phaser cutter as well." Sandhurst stepped into the turbolift, calling out, "Exec, you have the bridge," as Lar'ragos darted between the closing doors to join him.

Pell and Ramirez exchanged a troubled look as the XO left her station to move to the captain's chair. "What just happened?" Pell asked, genuinely confused.

"He changed the rules," Ramirez replied as she seated herself.

"He does that a lot," the Bajoran observed.

Ramirez nodded grimly.

Sandhurst arrived minutes after the rest of the team after conferring with Ramirez by communicator. He maintained the crouch he had assumed prior to beaming over to the wounded ship. The captain eased himself through low-ceilinged corridors filled with sparking power taps, ruptured coolant lines, and flickering lighting. His radiation-hardened EVA suit protected him from the toxic gasses that obscured the passageways, and his helmet's faceplate served to visually enhance his surroundings and allowed him to navigate the dark, buckled hallways on his way to the engine room.

He arrived to find Lar'ragos already on scene, standing in front of a sealed pressure door in his own EVA garment. Sandhurst moved to step past him, but the lieutenant blocked his path. "Sorry, sir. Lt. Taiee's orders. She says you can't go in there."

Sandhurst scowled through his faceplate and muttered, "Pava, this isn't the time for joking around." Again, he moved to pass, but found himself anchored by Lar'ragos' vise-like grip on his bicep.

"I'm not kidding, Captain," he said, his flinty tone carrying across the comms channel and into Sandhurst's helmet. "Taiee says you absorbed too much radiation last year in the E'Mdifarr belt. I'm sure you remember the mission. It's the reason the Maquis put that hundred bars of latinum bounty on your head." In response to Sandhurst's grimace, Lar'ragos moderated his tenor. "I have standing orders not to allow you to go in there. She and Petty Officer Hervolt have things under control."

"I came over here---"

"Yes," Lar'ragos cut in. "You came over here to be all heroic and take charge. We all get that, sir. However, according to the CMO you can't go in there, and to be blunt, right now your place is on the bridge of your ship."

Sandhurst's acerbic response died in his throat as the ship lurched, causing him to brace himself against the bulkhead.

Lar'ragos frowned inside his helmet. "Looks like Ramirez and Pell aren't having any better luck with the other Velk than you did."

Another jolt sent both men scrambling for purchase on the already shaky looking walls. Sandhurst's comms receiver crackled, Ramirez's voice punching through the radioactive interference in the vicinity. "Sir, we're taking a beating out here, and with our shields extended around the patrol ship, we're draining power fast. Estimated time to shield failure is three minutes, fifteen seconds."

"Understood," he replied, setting the chronometer on his suit's wrist display.

He stood in silence with Lar'ragos as the ship was buffeted by repeated blows to the fragile shield bubble surrounding both vessels. Seconds ticked past. After a particularly vicious blow, Ramirez commented through Sandhurst's receiver, "Faster would be preferable, sir." The edge to her usually icy calm demeanor communicated the seriousness of their situation more fully than her words.

The door juddered open with difficulty, Taiee and the engineer Hervolt shuffled out, supporting an injured Velk between them. Taiee's hand actually extending into the man's torso, pinching off an arterial bleed. The medical officer paused to look up at Sandhurst, her expression tight. "The damn protoplaser suture won't work in this radiation." She craned her head inside her helmet to look back through the doorway as she added, "We can't get the other man out, sir. There just isn't enough time to cut through the support that's crushing him."

He leaned in to look for himself and Sandhurst caught sight of a Velk engineer writhing in pain beneath a solid looking strut that lay atop his midsection and legs. "You couldn't give him a sedative?" he asked, trying to keep the dismay out of his voice.

"No, a sedative would have killed him with his blood pressure as low as it is. And now I have to get this man to safety first," she said firmly. "Then I can go back and put the other man under."

"No time," Sandhurst said, checking his chrono. "We're losing shields in less than two minutes. It'll take nearly that long to get this one moved to the beam-out point."

"Can you give them a hand with him, Captain?" Lar'ragos asked. "I've got this." He reached into the open medical kit dangling from Taiee's shoulder by a strap and grasped a charged hypospray delicately in his gloved hand.

Sandhurst shared a brief yet telling glance with his security chief, then nodded curtly. He moved to support the other side of the injured Velk so that Taiee could concentrate on keeping him from bleeding out.

As they moved off down the corridor, Lar'ragos discharged the hypo into the air, the sedative dissolving in a brief mist. He drew his phaser and stepped through the door into the engineering compartment.

"C'mon, c'mon," Ramirez muttered under her breath from where she stood just behind the Ops and Helm stations.

Chief Townsend's voice announced, "Lt. Lar'ragos is aboard, sir."

Ramirez experienced a surge of relief. On the viewer, *Gibraltar's* failing shields shimmered under the barrage being laid down by the attacking Velk ships. She called back to Ashok, "Draw the shields in." Ramirez reached out to touch Lightner's shoulder. "Ensign, get us out of here. Any heading, Warp 5."

Gibraltar pulled in her shields and shot away, leaving the now abandoned Velk ship to the mercy of her sisters, whose continuing fusillade erased her from the universe seconds later.

Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

Chapter by Galen4

Outpost Dragga 'Rig On the edge of "The Bog" Stardate: 54114.9

"So, your precognitive powers are again demonstrated." The Jem'Hadar soldier told his companion with a hint of sarcasm. He gestured at the small viewer built into the wall panel of their ship. The image displayed a Starfleet vessel. "They have come."

A squat reptilian leaned back in a chair that was at least one size too big for him. As he grinned, he raised a glass of thick nectar towards the soldier in salutation. "Of course they have. Starfleet people are nothing if not tediously predictable."

The Jem'Hadar took a moment to watch the *Excelsior* class ship, studying it with the wary interest that one might show towards a deadly new pathogen. "They have come here to investigate the sighting of Jivin Sharm on this outpost."

The reptilian shook his head sadly at the vessel. "Yes. Even now a group of their officers are blundering around our facility under the erroneous belief that they are blending in with the locals." He extended a long slimy tongue into his glass. The muscle probed the contents of the container like a tentacle before retreating with a glob of amber liquid. "They're really quite pitiable," he said after a loud gulp.

The soldier was all business. "You may wish to know that all governmental order has crumbled on Velkohn. A full-scale civil war is now in progress."

"And the insurgents?"

"They have been captured and moved to a secure location." The Jem'Hadar announced with pride. "They'll be debriefed, to find out who else they may have passed information to. Then they will be executed. As we agreed."

This prompted a wide smile from the other man, who decided to commence the happy occasion with another round of vociferous slurping and gulping.

Annoyed by the cavalier response, the soldier stepped forward and loomed over the shorter being. "What of Starfleet? There are now two ships to contend with, when you assured us there would be none." Glancing at the viewer he added, "I think they should both be destroyed. As a precaution."

The reptilian offered defiance. "It might be best if you left the role of thinker to me." He said quietly. Standing, he moved around the Jem'Hadar as though he were furniture. "Those ships have by now made contact with their headquarters. If more of their vessels are lost under suspicious circumstances, the Federation will have little choice but to mount a quick response. And we're not yet in a position to fend off such interest."

"They are a nosy, self-righteous people." The Jem'Hadar said with disgust. "They may find a way to uncover the truth and alert the population."

"With our leak now contained, that would be unlikely. And once I'm installed as the rightful leader of Velkohn, I can order them both away."

"If you can get the general population behind you." The soldier reminded him. "As well as the numerous military factions. To say nothing of the former governments of the nation states who have splintered and are all vying for power. I remain skeptical."

Unperturbed, the stocky alien slurped up the rest of his nectar. "You won't be after I provide the population with proof of Federation duplicity. Proof that they have orchestrated our destruction by interfering in our affairs." Basking in what he mistakenly believed was rapt attention, he continued. "And when this terrible revelation has been exposed, who do you think the people will turn to for guidance? How many will turn their arms toward a more tangible enemy---an alien enemy?"

The Jem'Hadar retained his look of contempt. "I *know* the strategy. I was involved in its conception. Our plan is a sound one. Whether or not you can live up to your boasts, is another matter."

Jivin Sharm spat on the floor in anger. "My *boasts*?" He sputtered. "I don't need your approval! You have no business---"

"Do not forget your place, Jivin Sharm. You'd do well to remember that we are not puppets like the Alpha and Gamma breeds." He drew a hand across his breastplate, which bore no feeding mechanism. "We are not slaves to the White," With a menacing sneer he added, "Or to any being. Our allegiance is given willingly. And can be withdrawn willingly."

Sharm tilted his head in acceptance, knowing that his brazen play-acting had now reached its limits. "So," he said, opting for a change of subject, "It's time for envoy Sharm's miraculous return. Wouldn't you say?"

He headed towards the exit. "When we force the Starfleet officers to affect my 'rescue' it will need to look authentic. Be sure your operatives kill most of them in the battle." He cast a final look at *Intrepid* on the small viewer. "The same goes for their ship. Just leave some of it in one piece. After all, they're my ride home." He chortled at his own wit.

The soldier walked beside him as they moved out of the vessel and into the docking berth that led to the outpost.

The Jem'Hadar warrior restrained from burying his dagger in Sharm's skull. But it was a very near thing.

Captain Aubrey sat his empty wine glass down and reached for the bottle of burgundy on his desk. As he uncorked it, a frown moved across his features. It suddenly occurred to him that he was now on his third glass of wine, not his second. Real wine, no less. Not synthehol.

Not so very long ago, drinking while on duty would have been unthinkable. In the past he would have been running his stress away on the holodeck, not chasing after it with alcohol. Long distance running was one of his passions, and he usually took solace in testing the upper limits of his endurance. He had never wanted for any other type of diversion.

At first he began bringing out the bottles from his collection to toast special occasions with the crew and then later to privately celebrate his own accomplishments. Gradually, the special occasions had degenerated into excuses. And now he didn't even bother to make those anymore.

The lights in his cabin were dimmed, so that he could better see the stars through his window. They were beautiful, but not at all like the silent spectators that ancient people had believed them to be. Countless planets and untold billions of life forms twirled around those suns, some of them malevolent beings who mirrored humanities worst attributes.

But none of them were worse a monster than Jason Aubrey.

His door chimed.

He hastily put the bottle and glass away, feeling like a teenager who had been caught pilfering his father's liquor cabinet. "Come."

Counselor Perboda entered, his large green body moving with a grace that often surprised people upon their first meeting.

"Counselor." Aubrey said. He ordered the lights to full brightness.

Perboda took in the disarray of Aubrey's quarters. He took note of the uniform tunic strewn on the deck and the smell of wine on the captain's breath.

"Any word from the away team?" The captain asked. Commander Shantok, Adol and a small security detail had beamed over to the outpost a short time ago to investigate Jivin Sharm's sighting. To date, the outpost's unsavory residents had not been forthcoming. After three hours, it was becoming obvious that the trail had gone cold.

"Commander Shantok called in a few minutes ago."

"And?"

"Well, let's see; translating from Vulcan into plain language, her report basically states that so far there's been no new developments." The Orion grinned at his own joke. "But all kidding aside, they are chasing down a promising lead. Her next check-in is in two hours."

Aubrey bent over and rescued his tunic from the floor. He gave it a few good shakes before putting it on. "Any signs of aggressive behavior from those ships in the Bog?"

Perboda stretched leisurely. His casual demeanor was not something he discarded easily, even for the benefit of a superior officer. "Not so far. We've counted ships from seven different species docking at the outpost since we arrived; everyone from Klingons to the Nyberite Alliance. Most of them seem to be mercenary vessels or stolen craft whose pilots are not aligned with any particular government."

"It's what we humans might call a 'Wild West' frontier around here. We'll need to stay on our toes."

"They do keep scanning us about every ten minutes. But we're maintaining yellow alert as ordered."

"Anything else?" Not for nothing had the Orion delivered a report in person that could have been relayed via intercom.

He brought his studious eyes upon the captain. "Frankly, yes. We're overdue for our appointment."

Aubrey feigned regret. "You're right, Counselor. I really need to make the time. My apologies. We'll get together as soon as this mission is over."

When the counselor replied, his famous smile was conspicuously absent. "With respect Captain, its always 'right after this mission is over' or

'next week.'" He brought emerald eyebrows together. "But somehow it never happens. You're quite the moving target."

The captain quickly garbed himself in his command persona. "Have I given you cause for concern, Counselor?"

"*Should* I be concerned about something, sir?"

The other man widened his eyes innocently.

Perboda looked about the room with exaggerated interest; so that Aubrey would know his change in living habits hadn't gone unnoticed. "Sir, whatever's going on, I'm here to help. You do know that, don't you?"

Aubrey would have liked nothing better than to speak about his feelings. The trouble was, he couldn't.

He imagined telling the counselor that he had really been born in the 20th century, not this present era. He could predict the questions that would come next. And the answers were complicated, even to him...

As a child he had stumbled into a temporal incursion from the future. The resulting ordeal had left him emotionally scarred and in the end, mortally wounded.

Out of empathy (or possibly guilt) a Section 31 agent who had been involved in the incident decided to go rogue and save Aubrey's life. To that end he had taken the boy with him into the 24th century.

The operative had changed Aubrey's memories as an act of kindness. He had only wanted to spare him any further anguish. And for a time it had worked. The child grew to adulthood, all the while believing himself a native of the 24th century.

But recently his real memories had been restored. He now carried a "new" past, which competed with the fictional one, both histories merging into a hodgepodge of episodes that contradicted one another for the most part.

That was hardly the worst of it. He had also learned that he was a "focal point" in time. Had he continued life in the past, it would have led to the extinction of humanity. Indeed, he was forced to see that destruction firsthand. In how many timelines was Earth a rotting, empty graveyard, little more than a curiosity for alien archeologists?

Because of him.

He believed that he had reconciled his feelings of guilt, but in retrospect that might have been a conclusion hastily drawn.

The sympathetic eyes of his ship's counselor were beckoning, tempting. He longed to unburden himself.

It was not to be. Due to the circumstances of his time displacement and the involvement of Section 31, the entire incident and all events relating to it had been classified. Consequently, he was under orders to remain silent.

"We'll talk, Counselor. Soon. I give you my word." *It just won't be about anything significant*, he amended to himself dejectedly.

The bosun whistle piped through the speakers at that very moment.

"Bridge to captain. Urgent."

Aubrey blinked. "Go ahead, Mr. Pal."

"Away team is reporting they're under attack. They have casualties."

By the time Lt. Douglas Pal had completed his sentence, the captain was already out the door and heading down the corridor at a fast trot. Perboda easily kept pace beside him. "Emergency beam out. Get them out of there!"

"Sir, a scattering field just erected in that part of the outpost. It's inhibiting transport and creating sensor ghosts."

Aubrey continued his orders from within the turbolift. "Transporter room two; divert auxiliary energy to the angular confinement beam. Rotate phase oscillation. I want them out of there now."

"Aye, Captain. I'm on it!"

Pal broke in. *"Sir, we've now lost contact completely. Communications are being jammed at the source. We're blind and deaf."*

Aubrey entered the bridge. He was coolly focused again, any personal dilemmas tucked neatly away where he wouldn't stumble over them. "Helm, move us to within two hundred meters of the outpost's eastern hub. That was the away team's last known position. We're going to punch through that interference even if I have to do it with phasers."

"Taking us in, sir." Ensign Sorna confirmed from the CON station.

Lt. Rodriguez scanned his tactical board, his face taught. "Captain, I'm reading a heavily armed warship of Velk design. It just detached from the outpost. It's sporting state of the art weapon signatures including high yield disruptors and torpedos. They're moving to intercept." With

grim resignation, he confirmed what Aubrey knew was coming next. "Their guns just went hot, sir."

Aubrey dropped into his command chair. "Shields up. Ready all weapons." He instructed through gritted teeth.

An instant later, disrupter fire tore into *Intrepid's* shields.

Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

Chapter by Gibraltar

USS *Gibraltar*, en route to the Velkamis system.

Sickbay was so crowded with the wounded from the Velk ship that Taiee almost didn't see the doors part to admit another gurney. This one was pushed by Lar'ragos and escorted by one of her med-techs who was busy transfusing fluids to the broken reptilian upon the mobile bed.

Taiee completed the last of a dozen monomolecular sutures that would serve to keep her Velk patient's innards firmly within his torso before turning to the newly arriving patient. She gave Lar'ragos a curious look as she asked, "We missed one?"

As she ran the sensor wand from her tricorder over the man, Lar'ragos replied in an even tone, "This is our other friend from the engine room."

She spared him a surprised glance. "That's impossible; it would have taken ten minutes with an industrial cutter to free him." She charged a hypo and injected the Velk, gesturing for two technicians to transfer the patient gently onto the primary exam table. "How'd you do it?"

"Hand phaser," he answered simply.

She shook her head, raising the bed's clamshell support frame over the injured solider. "If you want to be coy, fine, don't tell me."

He answered quietly. "I'm serious, Doc."

"You didn't have time," she repeated as she conducted a scan of the man's extensive internal damage.

Lar'ragos smiled at that. "Only if you make the completely unwarranted assumption that time is a linear constant." He favored her with a wink before stepping back into the corridor.

He pressed the enunciator to her door again, fearing he already knew the reason behind her absence from what had become their shared cabin.

Her voice finally responded to his third attempt, sounding tired and angry. "*Come in.*"

Sandhurst stepped through and into Pell's quarters, taking a moment for his eyes to adjust to the gloom. The stars that streaked past the rectangular viewport gave him a momentary sense of vertigo, set as they were against the darkness of the rest of the compartment. After a half minute of awkward silence, he could just make her out, lying on the couch under the window.

He skipped the tiresome initial inquiries to which he had already guessed the answers. Instead, he said simply, "It was good advice, and I probably should have taken it... but I didn't. That's going to happen from time to time, and you'd best make peace with that fact now."

"Don't treat me like a child, Donald," she said from the shadows, her voice tinged with regret. "What am I doing here?"

He frowned, the gesture lost on Pell in the darkness. "On this mission or on this ship?"

"*Gibraltar*," she clarified. "We both know a ship this size doesn't need a diplomatic officer, and having a command qualified second officer is more of a formality. That leaves you as my sole reason for being aboard."

"That was enough for you six months ago."

She sighed. "That's when I thought you had a legitimate reason for wanting me here."

"I don't?" He had meant it as a question, but was unable to edit out the sarcastic inflection.

"I'm a diplomatic *expert*, Donald!" she said more hotly than she'd intended. "This is what I do, what I'm trained in. I gave you my professional opinion about an especially delicate and potentially volatile situation, and you brushed me off in favor of the rest of your senior officers because their answers made you *feel* better."

Sandhurst's jaw set. "I believe it was the correct course of action. Those men have families, people who love them. I don't think you'll hear any of them complaining that they were rescued."

"That's not the point," Pell said as she sat up and swung her legs over and onto the floor. "You took this job, not just your captaincy but your original Starfleet commission, knowing full well that you might be called upon to step back and let matters take their natural course despite your personal feelings and beliefs." She paused, and he could see her head cocked to one side, silhouetted against the streaking starfield. "It's

easy to perform a hypothetical gut check in an academy classroom. Out here in the real universe, this is where it really counts.”

“You’re not going to quote chapter and verse from Commander Krazner’s prime directive seminar, are you?” Sandhurst had been trying to lighten the mood, but the attempt at humor missed the mark and only seemed to agitate Pell further.

“You’ve been reliving the same scenario for a year now,” she observed. “Aren’t you tired of it yet?”

“Meaning what, precisely?”

“You know exactly what I’m talking about,” Pell snapped back. “The Briar Patch, Yashk’lin IV, that whole mess at E’Mdifarr. You’ve been trying to atone for past failures, but time and again you end up getting in over your head and dragging your crew in with you.”

“Well,” he remarked as his face flushed with anger, “that’s about the most awful thing you could have accused me of.”

“Tell me it isn’t true,” she replied.

“Not entirely true,” he stated heavily, a hint of concession in his voice. “Don’t get me wrong, Lakesh plays into it and always will to some extent, but there’s more to this.”

“Such as?”

“Thousands of Starfleet personnel have just been killed, and no one seems to know why.” He moved slowly towards the couch, sinking down onto it next to Pell while being careful to give her adequate space. “I could stomach the losses during the war because I knew that ultimately those deaths were helping to keep the Federation free. But this... this was murder, pure and simple.” Sandhurst looked toward her to meet her barely visible eyes. “I’m not giving up again. I’m not walking away again. Not ever.”

“Absolutes get people killed.” Pell took a deep breath to calm herself, and then continued. “If the only people you’re going to listen to are the ones who agree with you, there’s no place for me here.”

“I’m sorry if you feel that way,” he said quietly. The thought of being without her twisted his insides, though he refused to show it. “If you have to leave, I’ll be very disappointed, but I’ll understand.” He reached out, resting a hand on her shoulder. “It’s important for me that you appreciate why I’m doing this.”

“And that is?” she asked.

“If the Dominion is behind these attacks, then we’re at war again. If it’s someone else, then they’ve killed our comrades in cold blood, and I won’t let that go unanswered.”

“What, you’ll take revenge on them? That’s not how Starfleet operates, Donald.”

“One person’s revenge is another’s justice,” he uttered quietly, his tone heavy with menace. “The last time I backed away from a similar situation, countless people died as a result. I learned my lesson then.” Even in the dark she could see his expression harden, his jaw clenching. “We’ll find these people, and they *will* answer for what they’ve done.”

She reached out gently and took his hand in hers. “You didn’t have a choice last time. If you’d disobeyed General K’Vada’s orders, you’d have been destroyed, and those people would still have perished.”

He shook his head fractionally. “We’ll never know, will we?”

“I know the similarities between Velkohn and Lakesh are uncomfortable for you, but you have to maintain your objectivity here. There are going to be too many dangers, too many pitfalls on Velkohn to go rushing in there with some kind of martyr complex.”

“I know,” he exhaled, a long breath that seemed to drain the energy from him. Sandhurst reclined back on the couch and closed his eyes briefly. He reached out a hand to brush the bulkhead with what Pell thought to be tenderness. “I love this old girl, but I can’t bring myself to keep putting her through the meat-grinder mission after mission. There comes a time when it’s necessary to admit there’s just some jobs she can’t do, some enemies she can’t be expected to fight.”

Pell studied him. “And what’s the solution to that dilemma?”

“I don’t know... yet,” he confessed.

“And speaking of vulnerabilities,” Pell picked up her train of thought, “you can’t keep running off impulsively to do outrageously dangerous things. That’s what Liana and I are for.”

He mustered a dark chuckle in response. “When Captain Glover rushes off to do something heroic, he’s being daring and proactive. When I do the same thing I’m being impulsive and reckless. Is that it?”

Pell squeezed his hand as she retorted, “Your motivations are purer than his, I’ll give you that. Terrence is better at weighing the odds, though.”

“There just ain’t no justice, I tell you...”

She lay back next to him, resting her head on his shoulder. "Please. You're talking to a Bajoran."

"Oh... right."

"Decelerating from warp to sub-light. Now at full impulse, Captain." Lightner, ever the earnest young professional, narrated the ship's entry into the Velkamis system.

"Any sign of a welcoming committee?" Sandhurst asked.

Behind him from Tactical, Lar'ragos assessed, "Negative, sir. Only minimal interplanetary traffic detected. No signs of any military formations in orbit of Velkohn or elsewhere."

"Status of the Velkohn's orbital defense grid?" Ramirez asked.

Chief Ziang replied, "Weapons platforms are on hot standby, but none are presently targeting us, sir."

"That's a plus," Lightner piped up.

"If one of those platforms so much as blinks in our direction I want it slagged." Sandhurst craned his head to look back at the security lieutenant. "Understood?"

Lar'ragos bobbed his head. "Absolutely, sir."

Pell studied her board, trying to grasp the volatile situation unfolding on the planet ahead. Taiee stood beside her, looking over the Bajoran's shoulder as she helped to identify potential locations for setting up medical and relief centers.

Ramirez looked across at the pair from the other side of the well. "There's some promising spots on the eastern peninsula where several refugee processing centers have been set up."

Taiee nodded warily. "Yes, but I'm concerned about attracting unwanted attention to those areas. They're vulnerable as it is with all those displaced people. The last thing I want is a firefight in the middle of refugee camp."

"With the additional security personnel on loan from the *Intrepid*, we can repel any attack, Doc. The Velk would have to make it past us to get at the refugees. That's not going to happen."

Taiee looked back to see Lar'ragos' gaze fixed on her. "Can I get a guarantee on that?" she asked, smiling uneasily.

"You just did," Pava replied coolly.

Taiee, Ramirez, and Sandhurst shared a brief, appraising look. The captain inclined his head. "Take whatever and whomever you need and make it happen."

28 hours later...

Automated phaser emplacements tracked the overhead flight of Velk reconnaissance aircraft from the periphery of the Federation cordon around what was becoming known as Camp Hope. Within the hastily assembled encampment, Starfleet medical personnel attended to a growing number of displaced civilians. Most were hungry and many were injured after days of fleeing the sporadic fighting that had consumed many of the planet's major population centers. The most severely wounded were beamed aboard the ship, attended to by the holographic physicians who had assimilated the totality of Velk medical knowledge.

Taiee was busy cross-typing blood samples when Medical Specialist Yoichi approached. "Doc, I've got something you're going to want to see." He led her to a small tent, containing a Velk woman and her young daughter. The child was wrapped in blankets and her wounds were bound with grimy sheets saturated with yellowish reptilian blood. Taiee glanced at Yoichi's medical tricorder, her eyes widening fractionally at the image displayed there. "Gods... that's..."

"Yes," he confirmed as he gestured to the mother. "She says it contains a message for us."

Taiee looked to the woman with disbelief evidenced on her features. "You consented to this?"

"It was the only way," the woman said simply. "We were searched by the military many times on our way here."

Taiee worked quickly but delicately. She unwrapped the girl's bandages, and with Yoichi's assistance, the two healers removed the alien padd device from within the clumsy incision that scored the girl's abdomen.

Taiee began repairing the damage to the girl's internal organs as Yoichi began programming the tissue regenerator for Velk cellular structure. Master Chief Tark, *Gibraltar's* senior non-commissioned officer and Lar'ragos' indispensable right-hand Tellarite stood staring at

the padd's screen as the device dripped yellow gore onto the plasticeen sheeting that served as a floor.

"Something interesting, Tark?" Taiee asked distractedly.

"You could say that," he snuffled brusquely as he quickly turned and ducked through the tent flap.

Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

Chapter by Galen4

“Return fire.” Aubrey directed after the second round of phasers raked over his ship. The Starfleet vessel lashed back. The Velk warship seemed to ripple as its shields distorted from the impact.

Intrepid used the time to drop out of the line of fire, diving behind the outpost’s western hub. Each hub was one half of a dumbbell-shaped structure. Numerous docking arms sprouted from each of the two bulbs like thorns.

But the attacker moved with the agility of a hawk. The Velk ship accelerated into an elliptical course, coming within meters of *Intrepid's* stern. As the ship flashed by it unloaded a salvo of photon torpedoes at close range.

The bridge quaked under the crew’s feet. A vacant bridge console belched out sparks. Aubrey was appalled at his enemy’s callousness. Using torpedoes this close to the structure could easily destroy the dilapidated space station.

And the stakes had just risen higher, for the away team had managed to get out a brief message saying that they had relocated and were now desperately protecting Jivin Sharm. That had been the last contact before the station’s jamming field closed the communications window for good.

“Direct hit to our aft quarter. Shields at seventy-one percent.” Lt. Javier Rodriguez called out from the tactical station. The young officer had been with the ship since the Dominion War. His tactical skill was on a par with Lt. Commander Adol’s. “Still no response to our hails.”

From OPS, Lt. Douglas Pal scowled at his console. “Captain, those are definitely not Velk weapons.”

Aubrey contemplated the beating his ship was taking, mere minutes into the engagement.

“You don’t say,” he quipped.

“The energy signatures are similar to that of Jem’Hadar fighters,” Pal added solemnly. He knew the weight of this statement. Even without turning around, he could feel the tense stares upon his back.

“Mr. Pal, collect all the data you can for later analysis. Helm, Z minus two hundred meters, evasive pattern Theta-Four. Engineering, set auxiliary power to float. We’ll need it reallocated to different shield grids at a moment’s notice----our friends are highly maneuverable and can hit us from multiple vectors.” Aubrey had snapped off the orders without hesitation, his mind effortlessly pursuing several different avenues of thought at once.

And then, without warning, another memory fragment fell into place. He was a child again, many centuries ago. He had been in some type of gift shop with his father. There had been figurines of ballerinas and Olympic athletes sitting on a glass shelf. They were exquisitely crafted, particularly the ballerinas with their pretty long legs, shapely bodies and elegant feet.

The merchant had affixed a sign on the glass shelf next to the figurines. It read:

*Lovely to look at lovely to hold.
But if you break it, consider it sold.*

He swatted the recollection away with annoyance, noting ruefully that his new memories often found the most inopportune times to surface.

As the dueling starships regained a firing solution on one another, the space between them thickened with overlapping beams of phaser energy. The battle raged for a full minute as both opponents exchanged a barrage of weapons fire.

The news became worse with each round. Rodriguez somberly updated the damage report. “Shields at sixty-four percent. Structural damage to decks seven and nine. Rear torpedo launchers offline”

Aubrey had few options. He could retreat and leave the away team and Jivin Sharm to their own devices. There was always a chance they might survive and he could attempt retrieval later.

Or he could continue the firefight. *Intrepid* had the heavier guns and would probably win the contest in the end. But it would take time, and the outpost could be destroyed in the process, given how ruthless his adversary was. The away team might also perish and Sharm could be lost or re-captured. And without him, all hope for Velkohn might die. He needed a third option, a tactical advantage over his enemy, something that would make the battle short and one sided.

“Mr. Pal, when we first arrived, you told me the outpost has virtually no security to speak of.” He inclined his body forward, his voice

dropping low with urgency. “Could you tap into the central network and take control of the station’s main systems?”

“Yes sir,” he affirmed. Almost apologetically, he added, “But sir, the outpost has no weapons.”

Straightening in his chair, Aubrey allowed a half-smile to emerge. “That’s not what I’m after.”

They played cat and mouse. The commander of the Velk ship was shrewd. He or she wasn’t underestimating *Intrepid’s* firepower or enhancements. They were careful not to fight at close quarters, where the outcome would be dependent upon a contest of strength. Instead, they used their agility to full advantage, weaving between the cylindrical docking structures as they raced around the outpost, striking through openings in the traffic as various ships arrived and departed. They knew the Starfleet ship couldn’t match their maneuverability and would be cautious of returning fire near civilians.

Aubrey could only speculate that his attackers brandished some serious clout, since no other vessel or anyone on the station was challenging their dangerous behavior.

Once more, an opening appeared between the outpost and the two ships. The Velk cruiser prepared to unleash another series of rabbit punches before ducking swiftly behind a massive docking arm.

All at once, a tractor beam jumped from the station and snared the nimble attack ship, immobilizing it like a fly in amber. The ship’s commander was taken by surprise and made a knee-jerk decision; kicking the impulse engines into full power to pull away.

The station’s aging tractor beam began to buckle, slowly releasing its grip. But those fleeting moments were all the time Aubrey needed. His foe was now moored, her superior maneuverability robbed.

The Starfleet ship came about, creating a deadly line of sight between her primary banks and the enemy. In desperation, the Velk fired on the tractor beam’s emitter, cleaving the emission spire in half.

They nearly escaped. But just as the warship blasted forward, it was stabbed by weapons fire. As their shields began to collapse *Intrepid* struck again and again, tossing javelins of phaser light until finally the Velk’s unprotected hull began to shred.

Pal took a long gaze at his data. “The Velk ship has been crippled, sir. Weapons and engines are down.”

Aubrey didn’t respond. He watched his adversary on the main viewer. He thought about how vicious they were. He thought about their wanton disregard for life and what mercy they might have dispensed had the situation been reversed.

Something dark moved inside him, demanding to be heard. Perhaps an echo of the man who, in those alternate histories, had destroyed humanity’s future.

Lt. Pal eventually turned his chair to see why Aubrey hadn’t responded. For a moment, he didn’t recognize his commanding officer. It was as though a depraved stranger had taken the captain’s place.

The other ship spun helplessly, energy crackling along its hull.

All it would take is two more shots, Aubrey reflected mechanically. *Two more shots and they would never threaten anyone in this sector again.* His lips parted to give the order.

But if you break it, consider it sold.

“Captain?” Rodriguez inquired gently.

Slowly everyone turned in Aubrey’s direction.

Rodriguez spoke again, this time with greater urgency. “Captain, I have the away team’s location.”

But if you break it, consider it sold.

Blinking rapidly, the starship captain stepped away from the viewer. And it seemed he was stepping away from something else as well. He took his seat, hard features softening into their familiar pattern. “Take us there, Ensign Sorna.”

Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

Chapter by Gibraltar

Mmm, what you say?

Mm, that you only meant well? Well, of course you did.

Mmm, what you say?

Mm, that it's all for the best? Ah of course it is.

Mmm, what you say?

Mm, that it's just what we need? And you decided this.

Mmm what you say?

What did she say?

-Imogen Heap, *Hide and Seek*

The sub-surface bunker complex rotated slowly in front of them, rendered in three dimensions courtesy of the holosuite's projectors. Sandhurst, Ramirez, Lar'ragos and Tark stood analyzing their potential objective, each of them holding counsel with their own fears as they scrutinized the nearly countless threats and traps storming such a structure would pose.

"The first question," Sandhurst offered, "is whether it's even possible to successfully assault the target?" He looked askance at the others. "Assuming it can be done, the question then becomes... is it worth the risk?"

Ramirez was first to answer. "This will be extremely difficult and highly dangerous, but I think it's doable." She locked eyes with her captain through the transparent hologram floating between them. "We'll lose people, that's a certainty."

"I'll second that," Lar'ragos said with nearly clinical detachment as he rendered his professional assessment. "Even utilizing tactical drones, portable shield generators, and a reinforced assault team, we're talking about breaching a facility with a single entrance that's been hardened against just the sort of attack we're proposing."

Tark nodded reluctantly. "I'm afraid I must agree, Captain. With their transporter inhibitors preventing direct beam-in, any entry team will be forced into this pre-established kill zone," the Tellarite raised up on his toes to point to a series of hardened bunker-like rooms just below the main surface access hatch.

Ramirez studied the schematic for a few moments, then pointed to a corner of the rectangular-shaped facility. "What if we modified one of our phaser banks for sub-surface drilling and used it to punch down into the structure and knock out their transporter scrambler? Then we could use the same borehole to either beam out the prisoners or send an assault team in behind their primary defenses."

"Too risky," Sandhurst countered. "If what our informants are telling us is accurate, the transporter inhibitor is located in the center of the lowest level of the facility. Phasering down through the complex, even from an outside angle, risks collapsing the entire structure. The prisoners they're supposedly holding there won't do us any good if they're dead."

"Are we certain we're not being manipulated?" Lar'ragos asked. "It's awfully convenient that a padd containing the schematics of this facility and volumes of information on their defense setup just happens to find its way to us. Our going down there armed for bear would likely play right into the hands of any number of factions who want to appear as being opposed to 'foreign' intervention in their power struggle." He looked to Ramirez, who dipped her head in silent acknowledgment. "Someone could either be setting us up to take out their opponents or is hoping to make us the publicly recognized bad guys. Or both."

Ramirez added, "You can be certain that if we do this, our claims of neutrality will go right out the window. We'll have committed ourselves to opposing at least one faction in this civil war, and will therefore be suspected of supporting whoever they're currently fighting." She turned toward Sandhurst, "Pell is trying to bring the various power blocs back to the negotiating table as we speak. This Op would undermine everything the both of you have tried to establish since we arrived."

Sandhurst absorbed that in silence.

Tark took the opportunity to speak in the conversation's lull. "The question remains. Is it worth it to assault the target?"

Lar'ragos frowned. "If the information we've been given is accurate, those prisoners may hold crucial data on who attacked our task force, and why. Ultimately, it's a matter of mathematics. Are the lives of a dozen Starfleet personnel worth discovering who was behind the murder of twenty-five hundred?"

"How do we know *Intrepid* isn't tracking down who's behind all this as we speak?" Ramirez queried. "We could attack the target and rescue the prisoners, taking casualties in the process while torpedoing our neutrality, only to end up with no actionable intelligence. How would we explain that to Captain Aubrey when he returns, especially if he's discovered the answers in his absence?"

"This isn't about Aubrey and his people," Sandhurst replied carefully. "I'm sure they're more than capable, but we can't simply take it on faith that the answers are out there in the Bog for *Intrepid* to find. If we don't act now and the prisoners are executed or moved, we could lose our only opportunity to learn the truth."

Tark stepped through the rotating hologram to come face to face with the captain. "How is this *not* a Prime Directive violation, sir? If we rush in to a Velk military facility, shooting up the place and releasing their prisoners, that seems to me to be the definition of interfering in another species' internal affairs."

Lar'ragos turned his senses on his captain and friend, trying to divine Sandhurst's response to what could easily be considered a challenge both to his authority and judgment. To his surprise, Sandhurst easily parried the verbal joust. "The attack on our task force technically occurred before their civil war started. Is that a flimsy justification? Sure, but under the circumstances it works for me, Master Chief." He looked down at the pugnacious Tellarite. "Where do you stand on this? Should we just turn around and go home? Leave a comms beacon behind to commemorate the unresolved deaths of all of our comrades?"

Tark's porcine features twisted in disgust. "Hell no, Captain. I want to go planetside and dish out some hurt on those bastards." The grizzled non-com reigned in his base instincts. "But what I want and what duty allows are rarely the same thing, sir."

"Sir," Lar'ragos interjected, "Ashok's managed to reconstitute our shields, but due to the pounding we took while rescuing that ship, our defensive capacity is only forty percent of nominal. If we poke this hornet's nest on the surface, you can be sure *Gibraltar* will quickly become a target herself."

Sandhurst studied his old friend while formulating his reply. He suspected that Lar'ragos had sensed his growing angst about the ship's relatively fragile condition. At her last major refit, the yardmaster had told Sandhurst that should the ship take any additional significant damage, her age and the accumulated wear from the tumultuous past year would necessitate *Gibraltar* being decommissioned and scrapped.

He sidestepped the El-Aurian's observation as he turned to look at all three of his personnel. "I appreciate your input, it's been invaluable. After considering your words, as well as the clearly precarious rationale behind the mission, I'm going to go ahead with the rescue operation, but on a volunteer-only basis." In response to their surprised expressions, the captain added, "I'm prepared to lead the mission myself, if necessary."

"Uh..." Lar'ragos began thoughtfully, then coughed into his fist.

Ramirez winced ever so slightly and shook her head fractionally. "Sir, that wouldn't be an optimum utilization of your natural talents and abilities."

Tark raised his bushy eyebrows appreciatively and smiled broadly at Ramirez.

As he folded his arms across his chest, Sandhurst found himself trying to repress an ironic smile of his own. "So, what I hear you saying is that my leading such a mission would result in--"

"...wailing and gnashing of teeth, sir," Lar'ragos finished for him. "A disaster of biblical proportions, to use a human aphorism."

"...significant problematic tactical permutations," Ramirez threw in.

"...bad, bad things, sir." Tark finished for the group.

Sandhurst pursed his lips thoughtfully, appearing to examine his subordinates closely. "Message received. May I consider those voluntary requests to join the rescue mission?"

The decision having been made, Ramirez shed the devil's advocate role she had donned for the occasion. She glanced at the others before turning back to the captain. "We'll get it done, sir."

"You always do," Sandhurst affirmed.

Lar'ragos set his foot atop the bench in front of his security locker, cinching tight the legging on his combat armor. He frowned suddenly and without turning he addressed the individual who had entered silently to stand behind him. "Lieutenant... Mitsu, isn't it?"

The junior lieutenant nodded at Pava's back. "Nicholas Mitsu, sir."

He turned to face the security officer on loan from the *Intrepid*. "What can I do for you?"

"Respectfully, sir, I'd like to ask why I wasn't given the option of volunteering for your mission?"

"I'm taking nearly all my personnel with me, Mister Mitsu. That leaves you and the others that Captain Aubrey transferred aboard to watch over *Gibraltar's* medical and relief teams currently operating on the surface."

Mitsu protested, "I assure you, Lieutenant, my people and I have trained hard for any contingency. Commander Adol's seen to that."

"I know that," Lar'ragos answered as he slid a combat knife into an integrated scabbard on the thigh of his armor. "In fact, I'm counting on it."

“Sir?” Mitsu looked perplexed.

His expression caught somewhere between grim determination and sardonic humor, Lar’ragos sighed. “Look, son, I’m not questioning your abilities. I am, however, cognizant of the fact that those of us who’ve volunteered for this ill-advised mission face almost certain courts martial if we’re fortunate enough to survive.”

“But, sir, babysitting the medics...”

His face darkened and Lar’ragos leaned forward as his voice lowered an octave. “Tread softly, Lieutenant. Those ‘medics’ have saved my life and those of my friends on any number of occasions. After we pull this little stunt there will almost certainly be reprisals aimed at our recovery teams.” He took a moment to look over the short but sturdily built Asian man. “Am I mistaken to entrust these people to your protection?”

Mitsu blinked, his gaffe suddenly very apparent. “No, sir. I’ll make sure they’re kept safe, sir. You have my word.”

“Good to hear, Mitsu.” Lar’ragos closed his locker, tucking the helmet from his commando armor under one arm as he passed the security JG. “I’ll hold you to it.”

Sandhurst stepped into the observation lounge just as Pell was wrapping up the last round of negotiations. He could see the exhaustion written on her face and evident through her slow, deliberate movements as she switched off the viewer and took a long sip of Vulcan mint tea.

He moved just far enough into the room for the doors to close behind him, but otherwise remained still.

Pell craned her head to look at him, apparently too tired to bother rotating the chair she’d sat in for the past seven hours. She met his gaze with something approaching resigned acceptance. “You realize that there might be hope of stopping this, Captain?” she said with an awkward formality.

He nodded but said nothing.

She continued, “We’ve actually garnered a good deal of support through our humanitarian and medical support teams on the surface. Leaders of some of the main factions are starting to realize the situation is spinning out of control and they’re endangering the stability of their entire civilization.” She yawned unexpectedly and took the opportunity to rub her weary eyes. “Sorry.”

“No,” he sighed. “I’m the one that’s sorry.”

Pell fell silent for a long moment, choosing her next words carefully. “We have the chance to save an entire world from chaos and collapse. If you launch an attack on that installation, we’ll lose all support, and any chance of heading off a planetary disaster.”

“It’s not that simple...”

She rose from her seat, her eyes pleading but her voice strong and steady. “Of course it is. It’s exactly that simple. All you have to do in order to help save millions of lives is give up on avenging the deaths of nearly twenty-five hundred.” Pell moved to stand before him. “That’s the kind of math that Captain Zorek would have appreciated.”

Sandhurst frowned and blurted, “I’m getting tired of competing with Zorek’s ghost, Commander.”

Pell opened her mouth to speak, but found she had nothing to say to that.

“Noting that we’ve differing opinions on our next course of action is a grotesque understatement,” Sandhurst offered, his voice softening. “This isn’t about the Velk anymore, Ojana. I don’t know if what’s happening down there is the result of their being manipulated or of genuine factional infighting, but ultimately it’s *their* affair. My only concern now is finding who’s responsible for destroying our task force and bringing them to justice.”

“Well,” she remarked coldly, “that’s a pretty clear line in the sand, Captain. I hope you can live with the consequences.” She walked past him to the exit without another word.

“Me too,” he whispered to the void after the doors had closed behind her.

Gibraltar’s shuttle bay bustled with activity as engineering personnel put the finishing touches on the extensive weapons modifications to the three shuttles that sat abreast of one another in the cavernous hold.

Lar’ragos, clad in his full combat regalia, skirted an anti-grav pallet loader as a crew chief affixed one of the team’s special warfare hovercycles to mountings fitted to the side of the Type-8 shuttle *Kon Tiki*.

“It’s been a while since you’ve been allowed to play with all your toys,” Ramirez remarked with forced humor as she sidled up beside him.

He ran his teeth across his lower lip in an unconsciously anxious gesture. “Yeah... I hope it’s enough.”

As she glanced around to ensure their relative privacy, Ramirez pulled Lar'ragos aside into a small maintenance alcove. "This feels wrong."

Lar'ragos shrugged as much as his armor would allow. "Not my call, Commander."

She blew out a frustrated breath, looking away at a team of similarly clad security personnel walking up the aft ramp into the passenger compartment of the *Heyerdahl*. "I was hoping we'd be able to talk him out of this. Maybe I should have tried harder?"

"He's the captain. It was his decision, and he made it. Besides, he's pulled victory from the jaws of defeat before. Don't we owe him the benefit of the doubt?"

She nodded uncertainly, then closed her eyes briefly and seemed to center herself. "Okay... sorry, just pre-mission jitters. It's been some time since I've led a combat assault team."

"It's like riding a bicycle," he said comfortingly. "A bicycle with shooting and confusion and screaming and wounded people bleeding everywhere... but a bicycle nonetheless."

Her mouth twisted into a barely contained smirk of darkest satire. "You're a shit, Pava."

"Always have been, sir. It's my greatest failing."

She pushed him playfully ahead of her towards his awaiting shuttle.

The three shuttles plummeted from the sky like a single blazing meteor, their shields repelling the extreme heat of atmospheric entry and appearing as a brilliant fireball visible across most of the continent below them. They had maintained such close formation with one another that they appeared as a solitary sensor return to the defenders on the surface.

At the helm of the lead craft, Brett Lightner fired a salvo of micro-torpedoes that swarmed ahead of the falling shuttles and sought out sensor arrays, phaser emplacements, and a surface-to-space missile battery mounted aboard a Velk naval vessel five kilometers off the nearby coast. One by one these targets vanished from his tactical panel's threat board. The ensign looked across to Commander Ramirez in the co-pilot's seat. "First threat package neutralized, sir."

Ramirez's expression wasn't apparent through the closed faceplate of her special forces combat armor. The eerily organic-looking mimetic holomesh was currently inert, but it glistened wetly in a criss-cross pattern across the underlying ceramic shell. "Excellent, Mister Lightner. I've successfully jammed local communications, and the thoron field I'm emitting should scramble any fiber-optic land lines in the vicinity of the bunker."

"Acknowledged," Lightner replied tersely as he reached out suddenly to toggle the phasers and vaporize an incoming missile launched from an unidentified source. "Getting a little busy out there," he remarked quietly to no one in particular.

Ramirez keyed the comms. "Pava, you ready over there?"

"Affirm," came his tinny reply from the *Heyerdahl*, cycled through a host of encryption matrices. "*We'll drop off the SWIFT's on our approach, while Brett punches down through the first two 'kill zone' levels and then provides over watch.*"

"Copy that," she returned, checking her board once again to confirm all the chess pieces were in play. She hailed *Gibraltar* and announced, "We're on final approach to the target. Status is go."

"Gibraltar copies, Kon Tiki. *Proceed as planned.*" Sandhurst's voice sounded tight with tension, even over the heavily scrambled channel.

"Alright, boys and girls," Ramirez breathed, "here we go."

Lar'ragos was first down into the dark, cavernous opening Lightner had blasted through the surface. The two underlying levels of ferro-steel reinforced thermocrete slabs that measured a meter thick apiece were now holed through. The twin discus shaped tactical drones that had proceeded him were scanning the vicinity looking for threats and traps. He brought his phaser rifle up and the El-Aurian followed the drones into the gloom, heading for the partially buried staircase leading deeper into the bowels of the facility.

Back on the surface, Petty Officer Dunleavy and her team continued to suppress any Velk activity on the ground from atop the backs of their SWIFT assault hovercycles. Meanwhile, two of the three shuttles kept enemy fighters and reconnaissance craft at bay.

Lar'ragos ramped the setting on his rifle and vaporized the rubble choking the stairway before tossing a stun grenade from his satchel down into the well. After the muted thump and greenish flash, he sent the drones ahead. The internal tricorder display inside his helmet announced the silent arrival of Ramirez, Tark, and nine others as the rest of the assault team glided down behind him on the energies of their variable gravity harnesses.

Ramirez joined him at the mouth of the crumbling stairwell, her sarcasm evident over the comms channel as she swept the first visible stair landing with her rifle. "You're not terribly big on the subtle, are you, Pava?"

He rolled his eyes inside his helmet. "Please. As if they don't know we're coming."

"True enough," she remarked. She gestured to the descending stairs with her phaser carbine, "Care to take point, Lieutenant?"

"I'd be delighted, sir. Thank you for asking."

After conferring briefly with the drone scouts from inside his helmet, Lar'ragos raised his compact pulse-phaser rifle and started down.

The conflagration of weapons fire within the narrow concrete passageways chewed at the walls, ceiling and floor, sending bits of shrapnel zinging in all directions as a host of collimated energy beams and pulse blasts competed with sonic disruptors and ballistic projectiles.

Security Specialist Sharpe ducked back behind cover as his grenade skittered down the corridor. It flared briefly and sent a half dozen hastily assembled Velk soldiers slumping to the floor. A handful of their comrades staggered backwards in a clumsy retreat to the next descending staircase. "Resistance appears to be stiffening," the young man observed helpfully.

Lar'ragos surged forward as Ramirez covered his advance. The El-Aurian's stun blasts caught one of the fleeing Velk between the shoulders and spun him into the wall before the squat reptilian collapsed to the ground.

They reached a T-intersection in the passageway and Pava sent one of the drones darting around the corner where it was met with a fusillade of heavy fire that overwhelmed its limited shielding and exploded the device in midair. "Bring the shield drones forward," he ordered over the assault team's comm-net. Eight large spheres moved soundlessly up the corridor, a pair of the devices occupying each corner of the passage.

Master Chief Tark utilized the forearm control interface on his armor to urge the spheres forward into the adjoining corridor. There they divided into two groups of four, each quartet heading in separate directions. The drones extended a shield wall between them that deflected or absorbed incoming enemy fire, but was attuned to the rotating weapons frequencies of the Starfleet assault squad and was permeable to their phaser discharges.

The *Gibraltar* team split in two, each moving up the corridor in opposite directions. They fired through their advancing shield-walls as the Velk were forced back yet again. Ramirez called to Lar'ragos as their individual fire teams separated down the hallway. "Pava, things are getting too hot down here."

"Really? Damn, apparently I'd missed the memo--"

"Shut up and listen! We're on level four of eight, and at this rate we're going to be chewed all to hell long before we ever get to the prisoner containment bloc. We need to split up. I'll take my team to the lowest level and knock out the transporter scrambler while your team locates and rescues the prisoners. That'll give them two groups of intruders to defend against, and hopefully once you've got the prisoners we can beam straight out of here."

Lar'ragos winced as a photon stun grenade whistled over his shoulder from the under-slung launcher on Tark's phaser rifle behind him. "Seriously, Master Chief, what the hell? You want to switch sides and fight for the Velk, all you have to do is ask!" He turned his attention back to Ramirez as he answered, "It's a good plan, though I'm not crazy about halving our resources."

"It's that or we pack it up right now and back out."

He considered it for a brief moment. "No, you're right." He crouched and gestured for Tark to move up to take the lead position to continue the advance as Lar'ragos utilized the helmet's limited neural-link to call up a schematic of the complex on his faceplate. "Okay, let's map this out..."

Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

Chapter by Galen4

A short time before the attack on *Intrepid*, the away team found a public place to meet and evaluate their progress----or lack thereof, as it happened. They had just concluded a grueling three-hour search of Outpost *Dragga 'Rig*, (or *Matroba* as it was known to the locals who frequented the Bog) and had come up empty handed. The Bog's Theta radiation played havoc with sensors, so their tricorders were restricted to short range, meaning the group had to canvas the outpost one painstaking meter at a time.

The outpost itself further stymied their progress. No one officially claimed ownership of the large trade station; it had been haphazardly assembled by myriad species over the last few centuries, much of it looking like the result of a hasty afterthought. There was no directory to consult, and the interior followed no logical pattern.

The six of them had split up into teams of two, in hopes of finding some trace of Jivin Sharm. They had now reconvened to compare notes.

Lt. Commander Adol was concerned when he noticed that Ensign Ravas had acquired a bruise on her left cheek. He looked her over with grim efficiency. "When you reported to me that you ran into a 'little trouble', you said it was, and I quote, 'no big deal'."

The young African woman just smiled mischievously. "It wasn't for us, sir. But it sure was for *them*."

"We didn't look for it, sir." Ensign Wells broke in, before his irreverent partner could dig herself into a hole. "The locals caught on to us right away. And as you can see, Starfleet officers aren't too popular around here."

Adol and Shantok spent a few minutes debriefing them. Their reports added up to a whole lot of nothing. It was obvious that their effort to blend in with the outpost residents was fooling no one, despite their civilian attire. Adol had expected as much. With a Starfleet ship hanging off the station, people were alert to anyone who seemed out of place. Their questions had been met with silence, suspicion or outright hostility.

Only Shantok's encounter with a Gorn trader held promise, but she wasn't generous with the details.

Afterward, Adol ordered his detachment of four guards to take up standard watch positions while he and Shantok stood near a merchant's shop on the main promenade. The shop was burnt and abandoned. Graffiti covered the metal gate, which was spread across the small entrance. Adol noticed that at least ten different languages were represented by the tangled scrawl of lettering, three of which he didn't recognize.

Trying to appear as pedestrian as he could in his native clothing, he leaned against the metal gate while he spoke to Commander Shantok. "I notice you didn't expand much on your encounter with that Gorn we ran into on the way here. You *did* spend a while talking to him." He tried to read her expression, to see how close he could come to predicting her answer.

"I was considering the value of my lead. However, it appears to be the only viable one we have. I think we should pursue it." She said, sweeping their surroundings with her gaze. "The Gorn claims to have seen someone resembling Jivin in this very section of the outpost."

"How long ago?"

"Today".

Adol was far from enthusiastic. "With respect, there are Velk all over this outpost." He pointed across the small avenue to a throng of reptilians who was gathering at a shop that had just opened. "There are four right over there. How do we know it was Jivin at all?"

She adjusted the drab scarf that was wrapped around her neck. "The Gorn stated that our target was in the company of beings that he described as Jem'Hadar."

Adol's antennas stood at attention. He squinted at her. "How reliable do you think his claim is?"

She raised her eyebrows as though the question were absurd. "I would have no way of knowing. However, the description is consistent with the records that were given us by the *Gibraltar*."

Not for the first time, Adol wished that Shantok were more judicious with her use of telepathy. As a Vulcan/Betazoid hybrid, almost any secret could be hers for the taking. The galaxy was virtually an open book to her should she ever choose to read it.

But she almost never did. Violating another being's privacy was morally reprehensible to her. She kept her telepathy in check with an iron fist, only releasing it under dire circumstances and even then, only after careful deliberation. Privately he speculated that there was more behind her mental chastity than ethical considerations. He often wondered if she was afraid----afraid of losing control of her abilities and what that might entail for her sanity...and the safety of others.

He gave the bustling walkway another look before sighing tiredly. "I have to tell you, I'm not optimistic. According to *Gibraltar's* data, Jivin

was sighted here more than two days ago. Ships come and go every hour without having to file flight plans or crew manifests. He could have been taken off the station at any time-----with no trail left for us to follow.”

“We’ve yet to search the Western hub.” She offered in the Vulcan equivalent of desperation.

So named by the crew, the “Eastern” and “Western” hubs were opposite ends of a giant dumbbell. The Eastern complex contained shops, recreation facilities (such as they were) and an assortment of lodging rooms that catered to a diverse crowd of beings from two quadrants. While the Western hub was...

For a moment, Adol forgot himself and thought she was joking. “Ma’am, the Western hub is a mining complex that’s over a century old. It’s barely capable of supporting life. The Theta radiation levels are dangerously high, probably from using unsafe and substandard containment fields.” He looked at her carefully. “That place is almost a microcosm of the Bog. There’s no practical way to search it on foot and sensors would be all but useless. The few people who work there are the walking dead, no doubt from radiation poisoning.”

The reminder was an unnecessary one, but Shantok only nodded as though Adol had agreed with her suggestion. “Making it an ideal haven for kidnapers.”

He spread his arms in exasperation. “This *whole station* is an ideal haven for kidnapers----assuming he’s even still here.” When she returned his exclamation with silence, he just shook his head. “So I guess I’m going to have to come up with a way to make this work.”

Shantok was impassive. “For the time being, it is merely a proposal. First, we’ll dispense with our current lead. Should our search here prove fruitless I’ll propose an examination of the Western hub. Captain Aubrey will decide if such an effort is worthwhile, not me.”

He grinned at her wickedly. “Except that you have a way of getting our skipper to do your bidding.”

She seemed to consider the statement seriously. “If only it were so.” She stepped away. “It’s time for my report to the ship. Please give instructions to your guards.”

Adol set about doing just that. He motioned them together as he walked over to relay orders.

That’s when the children appeared. They seemed to come from nowhere. They were a twosome, a boy and girl of about twelve humanoid years. The boy might have passed for a Terran. The girl was harder to pin down. She had a coating of blue fur that covered an ape-like face. Bright yellow hair ran unkempt from her head and luminescent green eyes nearly glowed from the apex of a sloping brow. She was a study in primary colors. They ran towards the away team, yelling excitedly.

Ensign Ravas scanned them both with a hidden tricorder before tapping a COMM unit built into her sleeve. “Two subjects approaching at 3 o’clock. No weapons or explosives.”

“Maintain yellow status.” Adol replied briskly. “This could be a diversion.”

The boy ran up to Ensign Wells while the brightly hued girl stopped short before Ravas.

They spoke in an eager rush.

“Please, do you have food to spare-----?”

“May I have your cloak-----“

“Can you take us to Velkohn?“

“Can you-----?“

“Would you-----?“

“May I-----?“

Wells and Ravas did their best to placate the children while looking about warily. The other two guards moved forward to cover potential holes in their line of sight. With the two kids chattering and pulling at their clothing, Wells and Ravas had developed blind spots.

Shantok concluded her report in time to see what appeared on the surface as an innocent encounter.

Adol answered her silent question. “Some of the kids that live here. They beg and work odd jobs to survive, sometimes selling themselves willingly to anyone that has resources.”

Shantok observed them quietly. “I wonder how it is they came to be here.”

“Usually abandoned by kidnapers or left behind after their parents get themselves killed in various criminal operations. Some are the unwanted offspring of prostitutes too drugged up to bother with birth control.”

She raised an eyebrow at him. “You seem to know a great deal about this region.”

He shrugged. "I do my research."

Both their earpieces came to life. "Quella to Adol."

"Go ahead," he replied after tapping his sleeve. Lt. Quella was positioned furthest out. The seasoned security officer was known for an inhuman attention to detail.

"Sir, the group of Velk across from us at that shop."

He looked across the avenue. "What about them?"

Quella's voice was tight. "Their numbers have doubled sir."

The Andorian and Vulcan exchanged looks. It was true. There were no longer just four Velk, there were at least eight now. Somehow, in the short time that the children had arrived, the cluster had added bodies to their ranks. They had managed to do so stealthily, concealing their comrades behind each other to make their true numbers misleading. What was more, they were no longer milling about in a disorganized jumble. The group was staring fiercely at the away team, as if poised.

Adol moved into action at once. "Ravas, Wells, lose the kids now! Quella, can you verify weapons with your scanner?"

The Velk suddenly exclaimed as a commotion swept the group. There was a loud crashing noise from the shop behind them. And then, to everyone's utter astonishment, none other than special envoy Jivin Sharm himself barreled through the crowd and sprinted into the middle of the large walkway, shoving bystanders aside in the process. He stood for a moment, looking dazed and panicked. He shot terrified looks in every direction before settling his wild eyes on the away team.

Waiving his arms like a madman, Sharm raced across the avenue, bellowing incoherent shouts at the Starfleet crew.

The situation fell apart with frightening speed.

"Jivin Sharm stop!" One of the Velk yelled after him. "You are in our custody as an enemy of the state!" But oddly, none of them attempted pursuit. They just kept yelling threats that sounded to Adol's ear like badly written dialogue from a holonovel.

Wells and Ravas grabbed Sharm before he made it any further. "Help me! Help me! You're Starfleet, aren't you? Don't let them get me!" he babbled.

The away team produced phasers while Shantok padded over to Sharm. Before she could reach him, the Velk became animated. They drew an assortment of weapons from beneath cloaks and baggy clothing. Shantok could hear the distinct whine of disruptors powering up.

Snarling out threats, they began to advance across the walkway, rudely pushing people out of their path.

"Move out!" She ordered.

Weapons fire roared across the avenue, echoing throughout the complex. The officers ran towards several columns, pulling Sharm and the children with them as they returned fire. But the crowded thoroughfare made only a few shots possible.

The promenade fell into chaos. People scattered, screaming in fear and surprise. It became obvious that the mercenaries were not professionals. Most of their shots went wild, ripping holes in the walls, blowing out signs or vaporizing furniture. Flaming debris fell over running bystanders as rafters tumbled from above. Four civilians were killed at once in the crossfire. An older man who reached safety made the mistake of going back to protect his shop, only to be cut into three separate pieces by random disruptor beams.

Ensign Wells shoved Jivin Sharm behind a pillar for protection. That action cost him his life. Just as he completed his task he was incinerated, flashing into a cloud of ash.

"Shantok to *Intrepid*! We're under attack. Requesting emergency beam out for everyone within ten meters of our location. I repeat, we are under attack and have casualties." A low hiss came over her earpiece.

"Some kind of jamming field just went up," Adol whispered from behind his nearby column. He read his small tricorder with one eye while keeping an intense watch upon their attackers with the other. "It could also be inhibiting transport. We might be on our own."

"They outnumber us two to one. We need a defensible position," she stated as the aggressors began to scatter and progress forward. She narrowed her eyes at the children who were cowering behind a column with a security officer, their arms and legs sticking out from the edge no matter how hard they tried to shrink their bodies. "They're outflanking us, and we now have civilians to protect."

Adol nodded gravely. The kids weren't targets per se, but these people cared nothing for the welfare of innocents----and more than likely they had been used as a diversion and were considered expendable right from the start. It seemed that their enemies were bloodthirsty amateurs that would slaughter anyone in their path.

Shantok appealed to what was usually a universal respect for the wellbeing of the young. "We have children among us!" She yelled out. "They are not involved! We ask that you let them exit safely!"

The hostile group gave no response. They continued to spread out, trying to move around the pillars to get a clear shot. There was no call for

surrender, no taunts. They were silent prowlers, driven by a single intent.

Adol tilted his head just far enough over to confirm what he remembered seeing. "Commander, I think I found a defensible position." He gestured with his eyes, indicating a large circular entrance. "That portal over there. It leads to a docking arm. We could fortify our position in there until we can be extracted. Or until help arrives."

She looked off to her right. "The airlock is half closed. And I believe that sign says the structure is off limits pending maintenance."

The Andorian hunched low, preparing to sprint. "'Any port in a storm', as our human friends say."

"Agreed. I'll create a diversion, then you and I will lay down covering fire for Ravas and Quella to get Sharm and the children inside safely. Lt. Koslovich will follow, then you, while I protect our flank. Understood?"

Adol would have preferred to bring up the rear himself, but there was no time to argue. The hostiles would have clear shots at any moment. He quickly gave orders to the group via communicator.

Shantok fired a sweeping beam at the remaining overhead rafters. Three of the decorative modules blew apart and plunged to the deck just behind the band of mercenaries. The metal rafters impacted with a loud bang and clatter. The group bellowed in surprise, shooting wildly into the air behind them.

The plan would never have worked had the attackers been seasoned professionals. But the simple ruse took them off guard, and the Starfleet officers were fleet of foot. In less than sixty seconds they had jumped through the half open airlock and closed it behind them. Moments later, they had two emergency doors between them and their pursuers.

They ran down the wide complex, as Quella and Ravas carried their whimpering packages in both arms, grateful for their lightweight bodies. Thankfully, Sharm ran fast for such a stout humanoid.

They stopped at the end of the tube-shaped complex, where large windows were set flush into the walls for passengers to view the different spacecraft that visited.

But now the spacious terminal was deserted-----all dark shadows and empty chairs. The air was icy, since only minimal power was left on for the periodic arrival of maintenance workers. The torn out wall panels and garbage that carpeted the floor spoke to their apathy.

"You've got to get us to your ship," Sharm panted. "Beam us out of here!" He looked terrified-----and this time he was not putting on a performance. The mercenaries that had been hired to play his kidnappers were going too far. They were so immersed in their bloodlust, they could easily kill him along with the Starfleet rabble.

"There's an inhibitor at work, no doubt generated by your friends." Ensign Ravas responded, her breath illustrated by white puffs.

An inhibitor! Sharm raged silently. That had not been part of the plan. It was becoming all too apparent that his life was in very real danger.

Ravas sat the alien girl on her feet, then hunched down to her level. "I need you and your friend to get behind those lounge chairs by that wall, ok?"

The girl wiggled her ears, which might have equated to a nod of the head, then grabbed her companion by the hand, leading him off to the collection of sofas.

It was Lt. Quella who noticed it first. "Ma'am!" He shouted at Shantok. "I show a window in the jamming field!"

She hit her combadge at once. "Shantok to *Intrepid*, we have Jivin Sharm, I repeat, we have Jivin Sharm and are attempting to protect him. We-----"

A loud hiss interrupted her. She looked at Quella, already knowing the answer.

"The window's already gone." He reported sullenly.

Adol walked over, checking the settings of his own tricorder. "Not surprising. The field is probably being projected from the outpost. We might be near the threshold of its range. Too bad we can't go out any further."

Ravas looked at the ceiling, her dark face beaded in sweat. "Do you think the ship heard us?"

A grinding rumble came from somewhere behind the sealed door. Quella checked his tricorder, and then blew air through his teeth as he remembered the jamming field. "I think the first door's open. It sounds like they're overriding the lockouts." He looked at his comrades. "Makes sense since they know this place better than we do and it has no real failsafe mechanisms. It's only a matter of time, maybe minutes, before they override our airlock as well."

No instructions were necessary. The group moved into tactical positions, using the sofas and chairs for what little cover they offered. One guard put himself between the door and the children, another in front of Sharm, who was ordered to lie out of sight. The wait was not a long one. Shouts could soon be heard through the large airlock, meaning that the mercenaries were now only meters away. There was a metallic clink on the other side of the door, signifying the placement of an override unit.

“Ready.” Shantok said, aiming her phaser at the entrance.

“Oohh...how pretty.” The alien girl purred from behind them.

Happy for any type of diversion, Sharm glanced in the girl’s direction.

“Who are they?” Asked the boy.

When Sharm realized they were staring out a side window, he crawled over on his hands and knees to see what had their attention.

Craning his neck upward, he just made out a massive saucer moving into view. He slapped his hands in desperation against the transparency, like a prisoner yearning for unattainable freedom beyond his cell. “They’re here!” He yelled. “They’re here!”

Before anyone could react, the entire docking arm began to shake violently. The lights faded to a dim gray. It sounded like a thunderstorm was now raging throughout the complex.

Sharm pressed his face against the window port, aghast at what he was witnessing. “By the Great Raptor! What are they *doing*?” He gasped. “There’s a plasma artery that runs through here! Are they *insane*?”

Adol staggered across the bucking floor to see what Sharm was going on about. He took one look out the window and immediately grabbed the reptilian by the scruff of his jacket, shoving him away and towards the middle of the room. His hands snatched out and the children went down next to him. “Don’t move!” He threw his own body atop the civilians as best he could for extra protection.

Intrepid’s phaser beam sliced into the docking arm like a scalpel, cutting through the structure’s width, pulverizing layers of material as it swept onward. Clouds of gas erupted through the incision as compartments blew out in a series of violent decompressions.

Just before it touched the main power conduit that ran the structure’s length, the beam snapped off, leaving the docking arm connected by only half the mass that had once tethered it to the outpost.

Blue light embraced the battered extension. As the tractor beam began its relentless pull against the docking arm, the structure’s outer skin shriveled under the onslaught of the graviton field. At first, the outpost seemed to resist the dismemberment, stubbornly holding its appendage to the last. But finally it gave up the struggle and the docking arm ripped free in an explosion of glittering metal and plasma flashes.

Intrepid moved away, the docking structure dragging in the wake of her tractor beam as though she were parading a morbid trophy.

“We have the docking arm,” Pal called out from OPS. He shot a look of concern over his shoulder. “But life support is gone and structural integrity is failing. I was afraid of this.”

“Mr. Rodriguez, are we out of range of the scattering field yet?”

The young Latin officer clenched a fist against the tactical panel. “Another three or four minutes, sir.”

“Incoming vessel!” Pal yelled. “Closing fast!”

Aubrey wondered if the Velk warship had somehow resurrected itself faster than he had anticipated-----then he realized that it was a new opponent they now faced.

“I have an ID,” Rodriguez exclaimed. “Tellarite ship. Looks like a freighter refitted for combat. About twenty percent of our armament, forty percent our mass.”

“Send friendly greetings.”

“Receiving text only.” The tactical officer reported promptly. “They’re demanding that we abandon the structure immediately or we’ll be fired upon.”

“They think we’re guarding something valuable.” Ensign Sorna speculated absently.

“We are.” Aubrey drummed his fingers lightly against his armrest, feeling inspiration strike. “Respond that we’re disposing of a deadly contaminate. Warn them to stay back for their own protection.”

Rodriguez grinned as he transmitted the message. But his good spirits didn’t last. “No response.” He declared somberly.

Plan B, the captain thought. “Tactical, cut tractor beam and raise shields. We’ll let the structure continue on inertia. Helm, match arm’s velocity and come smartly fifteen degrees starboard rotation. Keep us between the arm and our opponent.”

The *Excelsior* ship rolled onto her side, assuming a parallel course with the arm’s central axis, interposing her body to protect the structure. She was peppered with disruptor cannons the instant she completed the maneuver. Her shields lit up as they absorbed the punishment.

An onslaught of phasers blasted from *Intrepid’s* upper saucer module and secondary hull. After a few broadsides the Tellarite ship veered

away.

“We’ve lost another fifteen percent on the upper shields. Minor scarring to ablative armor portside aft.” Rodriguez reported. “No additional damage.”

“Captain, the docking arm! It’s crumbling!” Pal gripped the edges of his console as though it might fly away from him. “If we don’t get our people out now-----“

Looking amazingly calm, Aubrey turned his chair to face the tactical podium behind him. “Do we have any kind of signal to lock onto in there?”

Searching his data with desperation, Rodriguez’s face suddenly lit up. “The field’s dissipated enough for us to beam through, Captain! But we can’t pinpoint individual-----“

“Drop ventral shields and initiate a blanket transport. Zulu-two security measure.”

Rodriguez acknowledged the order. His hands were almost a blur as they worked his board.

Rather than precision targeting, the transporter instead reached out blindly, groping for anything that felt remotely humanoid.

Within the dying structure, the group of humanoids in question tried desperately to take cover as the docking arm ripped itself to pieces around them. The Starfleet officers were huddled over Sharm and the children in a pointless gesture of protection. Their frail bodies would certainly not ward off death. But perhaps they wanted their charges to feel a last ephemeral contact with warm flesh before the end.

The compartment writhed in its death throes. Ancient metal screamed. The walls twisted and then shattered as though the whole assembly had been nothing more than glass.

And then it was no more. Cold vacuum arrived to snuff out the small creatures like candle flames.

But the Reaper had appeared a second too late-----because all that remained of the occupants were shimmering after images.

Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

Chapter by Gibraltar

Pell glanced in Sandhurst's direction from the command chair, careful to keep her expression neutral. She wondered idly if his placing her in the center seat while he and Shanthi worked some problem at the Science station was another turn of the knife he had left buried in her back when he launched this attack against her counsel.

The rescue mission had begun only moments earlier, and Pell had just acknowledged Ramirez's report that the assault team was proceeding down into the bunker complex. Sandhurst had brought the ship to red alert just prior to launching the shuttles, and now he sat conferring quietly but animatedly with Shanthi on some manner of strategy.

"Ashok to bridge."

Pell fielded the call. "Go ahead, Lieutenant."

"Sir, we've finished retuning the aft/ventral phaser bank for sub-surface drilling. Did you want my team to repeat this procedure with any of the other emitters?"

"I thought we'd nixed that plan, Ashok." Pell was confused.

"Lar'ragos came back and approved it as a potential back-up measure, sir, with the captain's go ahead."

She cocked her head. "Yeah, that sounds like Pava, paranoid by profession. Okay, let's leave the other phaser banks alone, Lieutenant. It's doubtful we'll even need to employ that one; no sense in making more busy work for your people."

Sounding relieved, the Bolian replied, *"Thank you, sir."*

"How are the shields coming?" she asked.

"We're back up to fifty-four percent shield strength and climbing, sir."

"Getting better," she acknowledged. "Okay, Mister Ashok, I appreciate the update. Back to work with you." Pell closed the commlink just as Chief Ziang at Ops turned towards her.

"We're fielding multiple comms inquiries from Velk factions as well as their news media, Commander. Everyone down there wants to know what we're up to."

The Bajoran considered that for a moment. "Tell them... tell them we're acting to detain a group identified as posing a threat to our ongoing medical and recovery operations on the surface."

Ziang appeared dubious, but nonetheless turned back to his station and complied.

At the Science station and the auxiliary console next to it, Shanthi and Sandhurst spoke in hushed tones while their hands flitted across their interface panels as the two assembled a complex computational algorithm.

Warning tell-tales flashed on Shanthi's board, causing the young man to pause. "Captain, I'm reading a jump in encrypted Velk transmissions on military frequencies throughout the system... and it appears they're relaying new orders to the weapons satellites in their orbital defense grid."

Sandhurst bobbed his head in an expectant gesture as he looked to the scrolling field of mathematical equations and computer code. "It looks like we'll be putting this to the test sooner than expected."

The fortunes of war had turned against Lar'ragos and his assault team, just as he knew they eventually would. Their steady advance into the lower levels of the facility had stalled as the group had been delayed by an increasing number of intense firefights, booby-traps, and physical barriers erected to thwart their progress.

Speed and violence were an attacker's greatest allies in this sort of operation; taking full advantage of an opponent's initial shock and indecision. Hitting them hard while they were still confused and off balance was crucial. The assault team had exhausted that advantage some time ago.

Tark saw the power readings spike on his wrist display, prompting him to reach out around the pock-marked corner of the passageway and

grab at Lar'ragos' barely visible profile. Tark pulled him forcibly backwards just as the team's shield barrier collapsed with a brief flash of deionization. The generator drones sparked and shot off on random trajectories, caroming off the walls of the narrow passageway like berserk billiard balls.

As Lar'ragos fell back, a flurry of disruptor pulses stitched across the wall that he had been braced against only an instant earlier. Lar'ragos uttered a litany of colorful curses before breathing a heavy sigh of relief. "Thanks, Master Chief. Close... too damn close."

Tark flipped up his helmet's faceplate, his grim smile barely visible through stringy clumps of damp hair pasted to his pugnacious face by rivulets of sweat. "We good now, Sunshine?"

"Oh yeah," Lar'ragos acknowledged readily. "I'll name my firstborn in your honor. Granted, I'm not crazy about your people's fetish for monosyllabic--"

A blistering volley from a crew-served plasma cannon cut short his acerbic reply. One of the sizzling bolts caught Specialist Freely's right arm as the young security rating leaned out to trigger a phaser beam towards the enemy. The energy absorbent ceramics in Freely's armor could only dissipate so much of the pulse; the rest translated into heat and kinetic energy that exploded everything below the young man's shoulder.

Freely collapsed, screaming in agony. Sharpe and Valmak pulled the wounded specialist further back down the adjoining corridor.

Stins, the team medic, darted across the hall, braving the withering fire pouring up the passageway from the Velk defenders at the next intersection.

Pava's internal commset crackled, *"Haftan to Lar'ragos, we've got another team of defenders forming up just south of corridor intersection Seven-Baker. They just took out the last of our tactical drones, and they've started using some kind of refractive panels that are neutralizing the effect of our stun grenades. Without reinforcements there's no way we're going to be able to push any farther in this direction, sir."*

Lar'ragos acknowledged the report and ordered Haftan to fall back as the lieutenant and Tark crouched together to confer. The Tellarite assessed gravely, "If we're going to break out of this pocket, the captain's going to have to authorize our using lethal force. We can't keep playing patty-cake with these guys."

As he referenced the schematic of the facility overlaid with the positions of the assault teams, Lar'ragos noted, "Well, the good news is that while we're taking all the heat here, Ramirez's team has been largely unopposed. Hopefully, that means once we reach our objective, we can beam the hell out of here."

"True," Tark replied, "but if we don't start moving again and soon, there'll be nothing left of us to beam out."

Lar'ragos nodded as he triggered a communication channel to open. "Lar'ragos to *Gibraltar*, priority comm for Captain Sandhurst."

A moment later, he heard Donald's voice over the net. *"Go ahead, Pava."*

"Things are getting ugly down here, sir. I've got two wounded so far; one of them seriously. We've bogged down one floor above the holding cells, and the Velk are closing in our position from all sides. In another few minutes, we'll be in a totally defensive posture and completely surrounded." Lar'ragos looked over at where Stins was working feverishly to treat Freely as the youth keened and flailed. "I need authorization to employ deadly force, Captain. We can't keep pulling our punches like we have been and expect to get out of here intact."

Sandhurst sounded torn. *"Look, the last thing I wanted was a body count down there. If we can get in and out without hurting anyone, that will go a long way to towards mitigating any fallout from this incursion."*

He gritted his teeth as a nearby explosion peppered his helmet with bits of cement debris. Lar'ragos replied with an unnatural calm, "Okay, Captain, allow me to rephrase. In about thirty seconds, my team and I are going to start blasting our way out of here. You can either back my decision or throw my ass in the brig when I get back, provided I'm fortunate enough to live through this fiasco. Do you copy?"

There was a brief delay, and Lar'ragos found himself holding his breath. *'He won't leave us hanging. He can't.'*

Then Sandhurst's voice replied icily, *"Acknowledged, Lieutenant. Lethal force is authorized."* It was obvious Lar'ragos had struck a nerve with the captain, but under the circumstances, Pava didn't care overly much.

Lar'ragos announced to the teams, "Sandhurst has okayed the use of deadly force if necessary to achieve our objectives. Team One, prepare to lay down suppressive fire and break through resistance straight up corridor Two-Alpha to the stairwell. Stins, is Freely stabilized for transport?"

"He's as stable as he's going to get down here, sir."

"Alright, you and Valmak carry him while Haftan escorts. Sharpe, you provide rear-guard cover. Tark and I will take point."

Confirmations echoed in his helmet as Lar'ragos hoisted his rifle and adjusted its power setting well into the lethal range. He motioned to Tark and the two activated their mimetic armor, becoming occluded shadows, darting wraiths who played hell with their enemy's targeting scanners. The two men pivoted sharply around the corner, Lar'ragos high and Tark low as their weapons bathed the corridor in a ferocious wave of destructive energy. "Go! Go! Go!"

Ramirez led her team down the hallway, their armor distorting the edges of their silhouettes, leaving them ghostly apparitions that appeared like some kind of exotic disruption of air or trick of light.

A Velk guard heard something and turned and brought his rifle up, frowning at the momentarily confusing rush of shadows coming towards him. Ramirez reached out with a neural stunner and touched it to the reptilian's neck, which caused the guard to crumple. She eased him to the floor and applied a tranquilizer dermal patch to keep him unconscious for the next several hours.

'Lar'ragos and his people may have had to cut their way through the Velk,' she reflected, 'but I'm not quite that desperate yet.'

She motioned for the rest of her team to erect their portable shield wall behind them to cover their backs as she eased a tactical drone around the corner to observe what awaited them. Her eyes narrowed as her helmet viewer displayed something that was most definitely *not* on their schematics of the subterranean complex. "What the hell is *that*?"

The curving force wall exuded a faint pinkish glow, through which could be seen the transport inhibitor mechanism and its support equipment. Ramirez stepped forward slowly, scanning the energy field with the tricorder imbedded in her gloved hand. "Whatever this is, it isn't Velk technology."

Following behind her, Petty Officer Herschal sighed over their shared com-net. "Damn. I recognize it, Commander. I've seen one of these before, at a Dominion listening post on Krav'st during the war." The non-com stepped up to the forcefield. "It took the Corps of Engineers *days* to penetrate it using portable phaser emplacements."

"That's not what I wanted to hear," she replied grimly.

"Now reading multiple Velk warships on approach, Captain. Two have just departed the primary Velk orbital shipyard, and another three are emerging from the far side of the planet's second moon."

Sandhurst stood from the auxiliary console and moved to resume his seat in the command chair as Pell vacated the post. She delivered a cutting look meant only for him before moving to her regular position in the lower well.

He returned her expression with an irony-tinged smile as he settled in to the chair. "You see, Commander, we may unite the Velk people yet."

From Ops, Ziang noted, "Orbital defense platforms are realigning to target the ship, sir."

Sandhurst turned the chair to face the Science station and appraised the young lieutenant. "Mister Shanthi?"

"Almost there, sir." A sheen of perspiration had emerged on Shanthi's forehead as his hands danced across his console.

The captain toggled the comm to Engineering. "Lieutenant Ashok, you might want to start working a little faster on those shields. We're going to have company, and soon."

"We're working as fast as we can, Captain," Ashok replied tersely. The tension in his voice was unmistakable.

A warbling alarm at the Ops board garnered Ziang's attention. A text message began scrolling across his display, causing the chief to look back at Sandhurst. "Incoming message from a long-range comms probe, sir. Confirmed as an encrypted priority transmission from Command. Starfleet is ordering us to break off our present mission immediately and return to DS9."

All eyes were suddenly directed towards the captain.

Sandhurst stared at the man, dumbfounded. After a long moment, he shook his head slightly as if to clear it, and sat back in his chair. "That's not going to happen until this tactical mission is complete. Besides, it's a good bet that *Intrepid* hasn't yet received word of this recall. They've not only got the outbound disruption wave to contend with, but the background interference from the Bog." He frowned, "I'm not leaving *Intrepid* out here without backup."

Pell stood. "Be that as it may, sir, our orders clearly state--"

"Thank you, Commander," Sandhurst snapped, cutting her off. "I'm well aware of our orders. *I* will decide when and how we implement them."

Ziang broke the awkward silence that followed with an abortive report. "Sir, an orbital platform is firing phas--"

The bridge lights flickered as the phaser beam hammered *Gibraltar's* port shields. Sandhurst spun out of the command chair and toppled to the deck.

Haftan initiated the breaching charge, causing the heavy monotonium door to crumple inward. Tark and Lar'ragos lobbed stun grenades into the outer office of the Velk security confinement block. Seconds after the twin detonations sounded, the lieutenant and master chief led the assault team into the room. A figure appeared out of the dust kicked up by the entry charge, looming large in front of the team. Tark

recognized the specter from painful experience and fired first, riddling the silhouette with phaser pulses at almost point-blank range. The body of a *kar'takin*-wielding Jem'Hadar soldier collapsed on top of the Tellarite, who shouldered the now lifeless hulk off him and onto the floor.

"This changes things," Tark observed.

"Yes, indeed," Lar'ragos replied. He took a second to muse soberly, "Glad we weren't set to stun."

Tark nodded wordlessly as the team approached the next sealed doorway. Through their helmets' auditory filters, the team could make out the sounds of screams echoing from the chamber within.

Behind them, Stins eased Specialist Freely down onto the ground and set to work on staunching the arterial bleeding from the young man's wounds. Lar'ragos ordered Valmak and Sharpe to cover the main entrance while he, Tark, and Haftan assaulted the next room.

Lar'ragos count down from three on his fingers before Tark blasted the door's hinges. The El- Aurian delivered a solid kick that sent the hatch clanging noisily into the interior room. The pair eased around the corners of the doorway, discovering a ghoulish sight within.

Three Velk languished in four-point restraints, lashed to downward angled far wall. One of them had been splayed open like a laboratory specimen, his internal organs laid bare as a pool of blood and other bodily fluids coagulated on the floor beneath him.

Two Velk soldiers knelt on the floor, facing the doorway, hands atop their heads in apparent surrender to the attacking Starfleeters. Lar'ragos covered the two with his phaser rifle and motioned for Tark and Haftan to restrain them.

The security men quickly placed both Velk soldiers into wrist manacles as they took note of the yellow blood slicking both their hands.

Lar'ragos stepped forward, his voice emerging from his helmet with a distant, digitized quality as he bluntly asked, "Who is responsible for the attack on the Federation task force?"

"I am," chortled one of the manacled Velk soldiers. His countenance was marred by discolored splotches and peeling skin. "I had help, of course, but it was ultimately my will that doomed your comrades."

Lar'ragos studied the man. A nagging voice clawed at Pava's subconscious, calling out that there was something seriously wrong here. The lieutenant took a step forward and raised his rifle slightly. "Who are you?"

"Allow me to introduce myself," the Velk sneered. Without warning, a spike protruded from the back of the kneeling man's head. It lanced up and into Tark's neck and lower jaw, shearing through the master chief's armored helmet and extending through the back of the headgear with a wet crack. The grizzled Tellarite went slack, his rifle clattering to the floor as the Velk's body began to shift and liquefy.

"Changeling!" Lar'ragos cried out as he rushed forward, his rifle blazing.

Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

Chapter by Gibraltar

An undulating tendril from the morphing Changeling slammed into Lar'ragos as he advanced and catapulted him into the wall. Only the kinetic absorption matrix in his armor saved him from a severe concussion and spinal injuries.

Haftan was not as fortunate. The Founder snaked out a tentacle that engulfed the security man's head. It yanked him off his feet, snapped back sharply and decapitated the Tiburonian in a lightning-quick flash of savagery.

Lar'ragos struggled to clear his head. He realized dimly that his phaser blasts should have killed the creature. He spared a quick glance at Tark's motionless body but didn't allow himself to mourn or thirst for revenge. Lar'ragos knew he would have to keep his mind clear to survive the next few minutes. There would be time for grief and anger later.

He grasped a compact shield coil from his belt and tossed it into the doorway. A forcefield snapped into place that sealed Lar'ragos in with the murderous Changeling. He issued terse orders to his team and instructed them to remain outside.

The Founder undulated and oozed free of its shackles before it solidified back into the shape of the Velk military officer. It appeared momentarily pained, and it seemed to take a great deal of effort for the Changeling to complete the metamorphosis. The reconstituted simulacrum turned to face Lar'ragos. "Free my man."

"Piss off," the El-Aurian replied flatly. To underscore his point, he tapped a forearm control and sent a stun charge through the bound Velk's restraints. The man moaned, went rigid, and pitched face-forward onto the floor. Behind his faceplate, Lar'ragos smiled. "Just the two of us."

The Changeling cocked its head as it examined him. "You don't fear me."

"I wouldn't go that far," Lar'ragos allowed. "Fear and I are old friends, though."

It moved forward as it formed a sneer with its Velk features. "I'm going to kill you, you know."

Lar'ragos would have shrugged if his armor allowed it. "And my men in the next room will kill you back." He raised a leaden arm and gestured to the Changeling's midsection. "You're injured," he observed.

It looked down at where its torso wavered and clung to solidity. The Changeling nodded, "Yes, wounded." It glanced up and scrutinized the lines of Lar'ragos' helmet. "But not by you. The Affliction was visited upon us some time ago, solid."

Pava reached up and opened his faceplate, a figurative roll of the dice. He was already riding the crest of the worst-case scenario, and his fear of death was trounced by a potent dose of curiosity and his own conceit. Lar'ragos had no idea whether the Changelings were vulnerable to his talents, but it seemed an ideal opportunity to find out.

"Tell me the story," he said conversationally, as if an exchange of personal histories in this venue was the most natural thing in the world. Lar'ragos saturated his voice with competing levels of empathy and interest as he inquired, "How did this happen to you?"

The Changeling continued to inspect him for a long moment before finally speaking. "Your Federation infected the Great Link with a morphogenic virus during the war."

"Really?" Lar'ragos was genuinely surprised by the accusation. "Doesn't seem our style. Dirty cricket and all that..."

It emitted a shrill, keening laugh and its face contorted into a grotesquely large smile. "Doesn't it, though? Regardless, it's true." The shapeshifter extended an elongated arm and began idly batting Haftan's helmet-clad head around the room. "I was returning home to the promise of a cure when my ship was caught in a freak subspace shear. I was rescued by the Gambis, the inhabitants of a local star system. They proved merciful and attempted to cure me themselves."

The creature's arm suddenly liquefied and splattered to the floor in gelatinous clumps that struggled to reintegrate as Lar'ragos and the Changeling looked on. "Their cure was, in many ways, worse than the disease." It continued to watch its tissues squirm helplessly on the floor with a kind of detached amusement.

"The Founders won't help you?" Lar'ragos asked, his curiosity piqued.

"No," it croaked. It finally stooped to absorb its wayward mass. "My genetic structure has been significantly altered. I can never return home, never again join in the Great Link for fear of infecting my whole race with these... *revisions*." It spat the last word like a curse.

"Alone and apart from your people," Lar'ragos noted, a hint of genuine sadness in his voice. "I can empathize."

"I doubt that," it hissed, its anger suddenly palpable. It advanced on him. "The Gambis tried to send me back to the Dominion by transporting me to Velkohn, but our forces had already left this insignificant sphere. I was marooned with a handful of my Jem'Hadar who became increasingly difficult to control, as the Gambis had freed them from their dependence on the white."

"So what's the point of all this, then?" Lar'ragos focused his concentration like a laser on the Changeling but proved unable to decipher the responses he received.

"If I can no longer share in the order imposed on this part of the galaxy by the Great Link, than I shall levy my own."

Lar'ragos fought back an ironic smirk. "Your people are nothing if not persistent."

The Changeling lurched closer to him. "The Gambis' ministrations did leave me with one significant advantage, however. Even if your friends manage to destroy me, a little piece of me will live on... in you."

Lar'ragos slammed his faceplate shut. "I'm going to have to pass on that, but thanks." He keyed his comms, "Now!"

Twin beams of polaric energy pierced the hatchway's forcefield and slammed into the Founder. It howled in response and became a twisting, undulating mass of flailing pseudo-pods and thrashing appendages.

Lar'ragos scrambled to recover his rifle and added his fire to the maelstrom until the Changeling had been reduced to a quivering mass of protoplasm on the floor. "Cease fire," he ordered tiredly as he clambered to his feet. He deactivated the portable field blocking the doorway and made sure to keep his distance from the innocuous looking puddle. "Somebody get me a bucket."

Ramirez had rigged the team's phaser rifles in a semi-circle tracing the curve of the shield-wall's geometry. Balanced on barrel-mounted bipods, the weapons were slaved to Ramirez's tactical forearm padd. The rest of the team stood by, now armed with their secondary hand phasers as the commander spoke quietly with Petty Officer Herschal.

"So this is the configuration the SCE techs used to breach the barrier wall on Krav'st?"

"Near as I can remember, sir," the non-com hesitated. "It *has* been a while."

Ramirez nodded. "It'll have to do. Thank you, Mister Herschal."

She activated the phasers in concert. The rifles each emitted a beam or pulse at a specific energy frequency that was designed to harmonize in such a way as to create a growing instability in the shield wall.

The problem was that Ramirez had no idea if the frequency variances were correct, and if they were, she didn't know how long the process might take. She looked to another of her team, "Any sign of hostiles?"

"No, sir. We haven't seen any more Velk since we stormed this area, but I'm not sure how often the guards down here were required to check in."

"Right," she acknowledged. "A response could arrive at any time. Make sure we've got our firing positions pre-established so we can fight our way out of here if need be."

No sooner had she given the order when the comm-net came to life. "*Team One to Team Two, we are under attack! Repeat, we are pinned down in the prison block and have encountered a Changeling. Tark and Haftan are dead, and Lieutenant Lar'ragos has sealed himself in with a shapshifter.*"

Ramirez glanced at the bank of pulsing, whining phasers, and cursed the fates. Someone would have to remain behind to monitor the breach of the force wall, and loathe as she was to admit it, Ramirez was the best choice for the job.

"Herschal, you stay and cover me. Davikk, you take the rest of the team and fight your way to Team One's position and affect a rescue of Lar'ragos and his people." As the group mustered to carry out her orders, Ramirez added, "Keep your six clear and fall back here once you've extricated our people. Hopefully, I'll have this shield down by then."

"Emergency power to shields!" Sandhurst called out through split lips and chipped teeth as he clawed his way back into the command chair. "Release countermeasures," he added as he engaged the chair's restraint harness.

"We're now being targeted by three defense platforms!" Pell called out above the din of shrill klaxons.

Sandhurst wiped a forearm across his mouth that smeared a bloody trail across his lower face. "Lieutenant Shanthi, if we can't take control of their weapons grid in the next thirty seconds we'll have to break orbit! I'm *not* stranding our people down there. Give me another option."

Ashok's voice cut in on the intercom, an uncharacteristic tinge of fear in his voice. "*Captain, we're not going to last five minutes under fire like this!*"

Sandhurst's response was to mute the comm-link.

Intent on his Science board, Shanthi's reply was nearly drowned out by the groan of fatigued metals as *Gibraltar* strained through a series of high-g evasive maneuvers. "I'm not sure what we have will be enough to breach their security lockouts, sir."

"No time like the present to find out," Sandhurst answered as he watched the weapons platforms bracket his ship with goutts of blazing phaser fire.

Shanthi activated the transmitter and bathed the Velk global defense network in an invasive cyber-pathogen. It was designed to compromise the command and control of orbital weapons grid and give *Gibraltar* control of the net.

From Ops, Ziang reported, "The platforms are beginning to shut down, sir. Reading weapons systems going offline in a cascade progression."

"I don't know how long that's going to last, Captain," Shanthi urged from his station. "If we're going to get our people out, we need to do it now."

Sandhurst released the restraints on his chair and moved shakily to the Science panel. "Kuenre, is that transport scrambler still functioning down there?"

"Yes, sir. We're still unable to beam the team back."

The captain engaged the comms. "Ramirez, report. What's happening down there?"

Lar'ragos scooped the last of the Changeling's viscous form into the carryall with a makeshift trowel. He scanned the area briefly. "That looks like all of him..." he corrected, "it... whatever." The El-Aurian dropped the scanning wand from a medical tricorder into the hard-shell duffle as well, coupled to the stun circuit from a pair of handcuffs.

Yet another contingent of Velk soldiers had rallied from an earlier defeat and returned to try and pin the Starfleet personnel down in the prison block. Sharpe and Valmak lunged into the doorway at random intervals and exchanged fire with their attackers.

"The commander is still working on dropping the shield protecting the transport inhibitor, sir," Sharpe updated him. "Ramirez is sending the rest of her team to assist. They're maneuvering to come in right behind these guys," he gestured towards the Velk fire-team opposing them.

Valmak triggered a volley of phaser fire down the corridor and then gave Lar'ragos a questioning look as the lieutenant sealed the carryall.

"If the med sensor detects movement, it triggers a stun charge," Lar'ragos answered the unasked question as he hefted the duffle. It was heavier than he had anticipated.

"Will that work?" Valmak sounded dubious.

"I have no idea," Lar'ragos admitted.

Specialist Sharpe gestured to the bodies of Tark and Haftan. "Do we leave them behind, sir?"

"We have to," Lar'ragos replied heavily. "We've got to carry Freely and the two surviving Velk rebels out of here with us. Once we're back aboard the ship we'll find a way to recover them." His voice grew icy with controlled rage. "Even if I have to shoot my way back in here to do it."

"What about our friends out there?"

Lar'ragos took his last grenade in hand and primed it. "Remember, we're done playing nice." He approached the doorway and was on the cusp of lobbing the device towards the enemy when the sound of Federation weapons reached his ears. The incoming fire from the Velk slackened and then ceased.

Lar'ragos heard Davikk's voice, "The cavalry has arrived, sir! Courtesy of the XO."

"Get in here and give us a hand with our injured," Lar'ragos ordered, not daring to hope that their luck might be changing.

"Pava," Ramirez's voice sounded tight with worry. "I know you'll want to fall back to this position, but we've got to get those prisoners to the surface as quickly as possible. Herschal and I will stay here and keep trying to drop this shield. I'm ordering you to take your team topside immediately."

He wanted to ignore her directive and descend to the shield room, but every soldierly instinct Lar'ragos possessed agreed with her assessment of the situation. Liana's tactical acumen was considerable, and she had obviously weighed their options carefully. Pava cursed himself as he rallied the security team to move to the surface.

Saihra Dunleavy's flurry of photon grenades left the Velk hovertank smoldering. The vehicle lay disabled and nose-down in a stream bed as

she rocketed past on her SWIFT. Thus far only a handful of Velk military units had tried to break through the Starfleet cordon around the underground facility, and all had suffered a similar fate. If Lightner didn't hit the advancing enemy units with his shuttle's weaponry, Dunleavy and her cycle-borne team made short work of them on the ground.

A platoon of Velk infantry spilled frantically from a stricken personnel carrier. They assembled a hasty skirmish line and trained their weapons on the low-visibility blur that was Dunleavy's hovercycle. Three anti-aircraft missiles flashed up from their firing line and corkscrewed towards her. Saihra blasted one with her phasers and accelerated, causing another of the missiles to detonate well behind her. The third, however, exploded only meters from her SWIFT.

Though heavily shielded, the concussion threw the cycle off course and overwhelmed the craft's stabilizers. It plowed into the ground at close to two-hundred kilometers per hour. A rooster-tail of soil and debris arced skyward behind the hovercycle as it sliced into the earth.

Lar'ragos and his team had made it exactly ten meters up the stairwell when the Velk ambushed them. A withering wall of fire had driven the team members back down to the next landing, where Sharpe struggled to erect a shield wall to protect against the grenades that bounced down the stairs and detonated only meters from their position.

With enemy closing from above and below, the hunters had become the hunted. They were caught in a deadly pincer that was certain to grind them up in a matter of minutes. Lar'ragos recognized that something had to be done to break the momentum of the enemy's advance.

He dropped the carryall and scrambled wildly up the staircase. Lar'ragos ignored the grenade that clattered off his armored back and exploded just behind him. However, the force of the blast threw him forwards and up, where he landed sans rifle amidst a contingent of Velk soldiers. They appeared momentarily stunned by his unexpected arrival.

He activated his external speakers, emitting a piercing howl as he drew his combat knife and lunged into the mass of reptilians. The lieutenant punched, slashed and stabbed as he surrendered his mind to his base impulses and became a mere conduit for his instincts and prescient insight.

As he waded into them, Lar'ragos knew he had only moments remaining, but perhaps those moments might buy some precious time for his people.

Ramirez inserted the power feed cable into the phaser rifle's power tap delicately. She forced herself to be calm under circumstances that demanded the adrenaline surge of a fight-or-flight confrontation. Ramirez secured the final energy cable to the last of the rifles which linked them to a portable generator, a more sustained source of power than their quickly diminishing magazines.

She glanced towards Herschal, who guarded the doorway to the corridor outside. "How goes it?"

"Still no signs of any Velk," he replied.

The audio receivers in their helmets emitted a piercing squeal that was mercifully squelched by safety filters. Petty Officer Davikk's panicked voice cut in, *"...to Commander Ramirez, we're pinned down between levels five and six and are taking heavy fire. I've lost contact with Lieutenant Lar'ragos. We need immediate assistance!"*

Ramirez looked down to check her phaser's charge and glimpsed the telltales on her forearm display register a growing disruption in the shield wall. Fifteen percent and rising. It wasn't much, but it was the first positive sign she'd witnessed since beginning this desperate gamble. She tapped at the interface and attenuated the beams' frequency even further. The disruption jumped another three percent.

'Two bodies won't make much difference in a pitched firefight,' she thought, 'but I could make all the difference if I can drop this damned energy screen.'

She hoped it was the right decision; an impulsive voice in her head clamored for her to rush headlong to her comrades' aid. "Herschal..." she began numbly, "I want you to head up there and try and take some heat off the team."

The man raised his faceplate and gave Ramirez a disbelieving look. "Just me? Doesn't that seem a bit suicidal, sir?"

"Don't put yourself in any unnecessary danger," she cautioned. "Just throw some beams downrange and see if you can't get the Velk attacking from beneath the team to shift formation and realign to defend against you." She handed Herschal the last of her photon grenades.

He met her eyes unflinchingly. "And you, sir?"

She gestured to the crescent of firing rifles. "I'm afraid this may be the only way any of us are getting out of here." Ramirez cuffed him on the shoulder. "Now go."

Herschal slammed closed his faceplate, gripped his phaser pistol tightly and moved into the corridor beyond.

"Saihra!"

Ensign Lightner threw the shuttle into a nosedive and rocketed towards the surface at many times the speed of sound. As he approached the last known location of the petty officer's SWIFT, Lightner unleashed the shuttle's arsenal and rained micro-torpedoes and phaser fire down on the handful of remaining Velk formations.

He evidenced no hesitation, no thought to disabling the reptilians' ground vehicles. Lightner simply annihilated every enemy target within sensor range of his small craft.

Few among the crew knew of he and Dunleavy's relationship. It was a new, tentative, and delicate experiment for the both of them. The thought of losing her was more than he could bear, and though *Gibraltar's* Ops officer repeatedly demanded that he return to his overwatch position, Lightner continued his descent.

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