

Passing The Torch

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Passing The Torch

by [Gibraltar](#)

Summary

A cadet cruise reunites a previously close-knit group of officers as they shepherd a class of young Starfleet trainees on a five-week training excursion. A simulated mission suddenly becomes active duty as a real crisis arises, and both teachers and students find themselves caught in a genuine no-win-scenario.

Chapter 1

Amsterdam Orbital Shipyard, Earth – December 18, 2351

“Sagan to Shuttle-pod One, you are cleared to approach port-side for docking. Welcome aboard, Captain.”

“We copy, Sagan, thank you. We’ll see you shortly.”

The shuttle-pod that approached along the port beam of the Constellation-class starship, registry NCC-9417, contained four old comrades, the captain and three senior officers formerly of the starship *Prokofiev*. They were all somewhat the worse for wear, having stayed up far too long the previous night and having imbibed far too much alcohol as they raucously reminisced about their times together, good and bad.

Captain Abidemi Tinubu set her hand on the shoulder of Commander th’Skaar as she squinted against the hangover-aggravating glare of the drydock’s enormous lighting arrays. “I’m glad you agreed to this, Scar. Trusting middies at the helm always gives me indigestion, no matter how reliable the safety overrides.”

She was a smaller woman, a human of West African descent, with a smoothly shaved head, small mouth, and expressive eyes. She wore Starfleet’s new and distinctly uncomfortable one-piece jumpsuit uniform in command red, the four pips of her captaincy prominently displayed on the neckline.

Th’Skaar, the tall Andorian, grinned as his antenna waved in amusement. He had closely cropped white hair, a prominent nose and widely set eyes which seemed to track anyone and everything in his presence. His uniform was red also, indicative of both his helm and command responsibilities. “I only signed on to this hitch because you agreed to buy the good stuff, Captain. ‘Will work for Aldeberran whiskey,’ that’s my motto.”

This elicited a groan from Captain Evgeni Morozov, Tinubu’s former first officer and now a semi-retired academy instructor in interstellar diplomacy. The diminutive Russian held a hand to his mouth and shook his head theatrically. “Don’t mention the whiskey. I should have stuck to tequila.” Morozov was of slight stature, with mid-length sandy blonde hair, striking blue eyes, and a mouth which seemed to bear a perpetual good-natured grin.

“I still can’t believe you don’t drink vodka,” Doctor Carol Cavanaugh offered, fiddling with a hypo-spray she’d pulled from her medical satchel. “That seems so wrong somehow.”

Cavanaugh was a willowy brunette, a strikingly handsome woman with dark hair worn to below her shoulders, high-cheekbones and hazel eyes that could turn an icy green when she was provoked. She was clad in a blue medical variation of the jumpsuit, but elected not to wear the accompanying physician’s coat.

“*Kak ty smeyesh?*” Morozov snapped in feigned insult, having successfully fought back a wave of nausea. “That’s a stereotype, Doc,” he continued. “Fermented potato juice made by Russian peasants will never come close to the blissful nectar of the blue agave.”

Cavanaugh laughed lightly and moved to press the hypo to Morozov’s neck with a quiet hiss. “Scar seems fine, but you and Adi are definitely going to need this if you want to look presentable for the kids.”

Morozov grunted sourly as his hangover began to abate. “Cadets and all that raw *enthusiasm*. Deities preserve us.”

“Careful now, Evgeni Vladimirovich, once upon a time that was us,” Tinubu chided, taking her turn at the receiving end of Cavanaugh’s hypo-spray. “Besides, we survived five years in the Tyresian Expanse, I think we can handle a little training cruise.”

“But of course, Captain. Though, shouldn’t Clarden have thrashed them all into shape by now?” th’Skaar inquired, tongue firmly in-cheek.

This produced a genuine smile from Tinubu. “I’m sure the senior chief has them spit-polishing the plasma relays as we speak.”

“Here we go,” the Andorian observed suddenly, slewing the shuttle-pod into an abrupt approach to Sagan’s airlock. He initiated the retro-thrusters at the last possible second so that the pod’s aft end gently kissed the magnetic clamps, turning what had looked like impending disaster into a textbook docking approach.

The other three officers, caught unawares, had sprawled awkwardly throughout the pod’s interior.

“Ass!” huffed Morozov as he moved to disentangle himself from Cavanaugh. “Sorry, doc.”

Cavanaugh resisted being moved off of him for a long moment, holding eye contact. “You weren’t complaining last night.” With that she ducked in for a brief kiss that while being unexpected was most certainly welcome.

Tinubu and th’Skaar shared a disbelieving look as they clambered to their feet.

“What the hell?” Tinubu blurted. “When did this happen?”

The green light next to the hatch lit up, and the four of them came scrambling awkwardly to a semblance of order as the hatch doors hissed open to reveal a welcoming party comprised of two rows of cadets flanking the airlock.

A bosun's whistle trilled and Tinubu, her head now spinning with revelations rather than dehydration, stepped forward.

"Company, *atten-shun!*" barked Senior Chief Desmond Clarden.

Fifty cadets, twenty-five to each side, snapped smartly to attention as Tinubu crossed the threshold. "Permission to come aboard?" she asked by rote.

"Permission granted, sir," Clarden offered the traditional reply.

She approached Clarden and extended a hand, smiling warmly at *Prokofiev's* former senior enlisted man. "Senior Chief, how good to see you again."

"And you, Captain Tinubu," Clarden replied, shaking her offered hand.

"Of course you remember Captain Morozov, Dr. Cavanaugh, and Commander th'Skaar."

"Indeed I do, sir. A pleasure to see all of you again."

Tinubu stepped past the chief, seeming to notice the assembled cadets for the first time. She walked down the line, noting the faces and bearings of the midshipmen selected for the five-week training cruise that would cap their plebe year at Starfleet Academy. More senior cadets on the command track would serve as supervising officers and department heads as the experienced academy instructors kept careful watch over the lot of them.

"I know that you're all eager to begin this assignment, but it's important to remember that for most of you this will be your first real taste of shipboard life. The classroom is one thing, but as important as it is, nothing can match the experience of being only meters away from naked vacuum. This is where you'll learn that you will have to rely on the people standing across from and on either side of you to keep you alive, just as they're depending on you for the same. I and your other instructors will be here to guide, observe, and mold you as you take these first steps into this new paradigm."

Tinubu paused to inspect one particular cadet, a young man standing ramrod straight, eyes focused like lasers, expression taut with anticipation. There was always at least one. The young person wound so tightly that you could shove a stellar-mass up their backside and within an hour they'd produce neutronium.

"And you are?" she inquired coolly.

"Midshipman Fourth Class Donald Sandhurst, engineer's mate, sir." He almost kept his voice from cracking when he replied. Almost.

"First training cruise, Mister Sandhurst?"

"Yes, sir!"

Tinubu nodded soberly, only her decades of experience enabling her to keep a straight face. "I see." She leaned in and whispered, "You might want to ease up just a bit before you strain something."

It seemed to take a determined effort on Sandhurst's part to relax ever so slightly while remaining at attention.

Tinubu turned back to Clarden. "Have our personal effects been beamed over, Senior Chief?"

"They have, sir."

"Then let us begin the pre-flight inspection."

"Company, at ease and *dis-missed!*" Clarden barked, freeing the cadets to resume their previous duty posts. The senior chief joined the officers as they made their way towards main engineering.

The cadets scattered in all directions and as Sandhurst moved towards the nearest corridor, a hand on his shoulder stopped him.

"Sandy," called Midshipman Second Class Bartolo, using his hated nickname. The larger man towered over Sandhurst, all muscle and swagger, his hair shaved high-and-tight in the tradition of those cadets pursuing the security/tactical track.

Sandhurst swallowed the acid reply on the end of his tongue and resumed his at-attention stance. "Sir?"

"That was just downright adorable, Sandy. I think you've made an *excellent* first impression with the captain, don't you?" Bartolo sneered.

"I wouldn't presume to know, sir," Sandhurst replied stolidly.

"Riiiiight," Bartolo drawled. "Just a housekeeping note, Mister Sandhurst. I've made some adjustments to the cabin assignments on deck six. I'll be bunking with Votor, and I'm assigning the non-trad to bunk with you."

Sandhurst had winced before he realized he was doing it, giving Bartolo exactly the response he'd been hunting for. "May I inquire why the change, sir?"

“As a matter of fact, yes, you may. To be blunt, he gives me the creeps and I’d rather not have to cohabit with him for five weeks.”

It was uncharacteristic of Bartolo to be so forthcoming, but he was apparently feeling generous as he’d just found out that on this cruise he would be the de-facto chief security officer aboard.

“Understood, sir,” Sandhurst replied dutifully. In truth, he was furious. Non-traditional cadets were those who joined Starfleet later in life, bringing a variety of life-experiences with them that the typical eighteen-to-twenty-two-year-old cadets often lacked. However, this usually meant the non-trads felt the need to share their accumulated wisdom with their younger comrades, whether it had been asked for or not. They were generally seen by more mainstream midshipmen as being smarmy know-it-all’s who brown-nosed the instructors and tried to dominate their younger fellows with varying degrees of success.

In this case, the non-trad wasn’t an over-sharing kiss ass. On the contrary, he was quiet and kept mostly to himself. It was simply the way the man looked at you, as though he could see right through you. Like he was studying an insect in a microscope.

Bartolo snapped his fingers and waved over the other cadet. “You... what’s your name? Lagos?”

The other cadet was smaller than Sandhurst, and his uniform bore the blue highlights of the science division. He had closely cropped wavy black hair and appeared to be in his early thirties.

“No, sir,” he corrected as he stepped forward and came to attention in front of Bartolo. “Lagos is a city on Earth. My name is Lar’ragos.”

“You being smart with me, Lar’ragos?” Bartolo snapped.

“I would hope so, sir,” Lar’ragos replied without hesitation. “Being a Starfleet cadet, I doubt I’d be here if I were deficient in that regard.”

The man’s expression was carefully neutral, and Bartolo continued to stare at him, trying to divine whether he was being subjected to insubordination.

Sandhurst struggled to maintain a straight face, gratified to see someone giving back to Bartolo what he was legendary for dishing out.

“Fine, whatever,” Bartolo said. “This is Sandy, your new bunk-mate. I’m sure you two will get on famously.” With that, Bartolo strode out of the compartment, undoubtedly set on spreading hate and discontent elsewhere.

Lar’ragos gave Sandhurst that bug-under-the-microscope stare as he extended a hand. “Call me Pava, roomie.”

* * *

Chapter 2

The streaking star-field fell behind them as *Sagan* made her way at a stately Warp six towards sector 21502. Tinubu turned in her chair, drawn from her reverie as Dr. Cavanaugh arrived early for their first senior staff meeting.

The physician gave the compartment an approving nod as she assumed roughly the same seat at the conference table she had back aboard *Prokofiev* half a decade earlier. “Nice digs,” she assessed. “Beats our ratty old conference room all to hell.”

Tinubu mock glowered. “You’re casting aspersions upon my former command, Doctor. She wasn’t pretty, and she wasn’t fast, but *Prokofiev* was *ours*.”

Cavanaugh shrugged. “Maybe so, but I certainly don’t miss the old girl’s Sickbay. Five years of fiddling and Dewaro’s upgrades and it still wasn’t to my liking when we debarked.”

The captain’s answering shrug was her only response.

“So...” Tinubu changed the subject, “...you and Evgeni? How long has that been going on for?”

Cavanaugh actually blushed, covering her face with one hand as she collected her thoughts. “A couple of months now. We’d been so good at keeping it under wraps, and then I go and mess everything up!”

Tinubu shook her head, smirking. “Not at all, Carol. It just took us by surprise. The two of you are actually rather a lovely couple.”

Cavanaugh peeked out between her fingers. “You’re not mad?”

“We’re all adults,” Tinubu said with a laugh. “I’d just never seen any sparks between the two of you in ten years.”

“We ran into each other at a conference on Alcent,” Cavanaugh revealed, happy to be able to talk about it with someone finally. “We went out for dinner, just two old friends, and that led to drinks... which eventually led to him telling me that he’d had feelings for me ever since we served together. Obviously, he’d kept that to himself because of my being married at the time, but now I’m long divorced and... well...”

“Sparks,” Tinubu provided with a smile.

“Yeah,” Cavanaugh agreed with a sigh. “And how.”

The doors parted to admit the rest of *Sagan*’s actual senior staff, including her executive officer Evgeni Morozov, now wearing the three pips of a commander after a temporary reduction in rank for the duration of the assignment. These were the real department heads, proctors, and instructors who would teach and monitor the progress of the crew of cadets and non-commissioned recruits during the cruise. The senior cadets acting as department heads would have their meeting with the captain later in the shift.

Tinubu listened to their readiness reports and updates on lesson-plans and simulated emergencies that would test the cadets’ systems knowledge as well as their level of stress-inoculation. It would be another week and a half until *Sagan* reached the planet they’d been assigned to survey. Until that time, they would run the crew through their paces.

She kept the meeting short, which was her habit, and returned the assembled officers to their duties. Morozov remained behind, looking somewhat sheepishly at Tinubu as Cavanaugh exited the compartment at the tail end of the exodus.

“How’s your head?” she inquired.

“Better, thank you. As my body is constantly reminding me, I’m no longer a young man.” He gestured towards the doors, “Captain, I wanted to expl—”

Tinubu waved him off. “Evgeni, I just had that conversation with Carol. I’m happy for the both of you, and you two are adorable together.”

He smiled, still embarrassed but visibly more at ease. “Thank you for saying so, sir.”

She leaned back in her chair. “I do have questions, but not about that.”

Morozov looked curious and spread his hands in a gesture of candor. “By all means.”

“What I really want to know is what happened on the *T’Pol*? I pulled a lot of strings to help get you that command, and you were barely there a year before you jumped ship for a teaching billet at the academy.”

He winced, nodding his head fractionally. “Yes, I’m sorry. I realize you stuck your neck out for me, and my giving up *T’Pol* must have seemed a betrayal of that effort.”

“No, never a betrayal. I just wanted to make sure you were okay. I tried to reach you in San Francisco, but your replies to my messages were always brief and matter-of-fact. I got the distinct impression you didn’t want to talk about it. That’s why I was so surprised when you called me out of the blue and offered to serve as my exec on this cruise.”

He offered her a wan smile that did little to mask the discomfort in his eyes. "It just wasn't the same, Adi. I thought I could create that same atmosphere that you forged on *Prokofiev*, that same sense of belonging... of *family*." He issued a resigned sigh. "I don't know if it was me, or them, or both. Perhaps we just didn't have the right collective chemistry. Despite my best efforts I couldn't build that bond with them. We had our successes, our high points, but regardless of what we accomplished professionally, I'd never felt so completely alone and isolated."

"I'm so sorry, Evgeni. I'd have moved heaven and earth to help if only I'd known."

"I should have called. I almost did a dozen times over, but I always stopped myself. It was my own ego, of course, that conceit that I could somehow fix it myself. Calling you for help would have seemed like I couldn't stand on my own two feet."

She nodded slowly, her expression conveying sympathy. "I understand. That damned fourth pip adds more weight and responsibility than most ever realize. But I'll tell you a secret. Sometimes, that magic formula doesn't exist. I've served with senior officers that never gelled into a functional team. What we had aboard *Prokofiev* was very special, and I've not experienced the same before or since."

He gave a small, long-suffering chuckle. "You see? Just knowing that right there might have helped."

"There are other commands," she noted. "You still have decades ahead of you, should you choose."

Morozov sounded a confessional note, "I honestly don't think so. I've loved my time at the academy. I feel like I'm contributing, making a difference in the lives of these youngsters. It's not what we had, but it's the closest thing to it that I've found. Perhaps I'm just not cut out for the center seat?"

"We all bear our own truths," she replied.

* * *

Lar'ragos looked on from his bunk as Sandhurst painstakingly arranged a series of baubles and curios on the shelving above his own bunk.

He struggled to repress a grin as he asked, "Did you bring *everything* from your academy dorm room for a five week training cruise?"

"Not everything, no," Sandhurst replied, situating a small replica of Johannesburg's New Hillbrow Tower amid the other collectables. "Just the important things."

Arms behind his head, Lar'ragos shrugged, the gesture lost to Sandhurst's back. "So, you're specializing in Ops?"

"Engineering," came the laconic reply. More fiddling with knickknacks. "You a medic?"

"Science," Lar'ragos corrected. "Xenobiology is my major, or it will be after I complete all these damn prerequisites. I'm still trying to figure out what the relevance is of my knowing the finer points of ancient Terran Greek philosophy."

"Probably it's similarity to Tellurian First Dynasty metaphysics or Denobulan existentialism; the idea being that most sentient life is relatable, regardless of planet of origin."

This prompted an appraising look from Lar'ragos at the much younger man as Sandhurst continued turning and moving the various items until he was satisfied with their placement.

"I suppose," Lar'ragos mused. "It's just been a long while since I studied philosophy."

"It wasn't a required subject where you grew up?" Sandhurst cast a curious glance over his shoulder at Lar'ragos as he began unpacking civilian clothes into the drawers under his bunk. He sounded surprised, "That was basic curriculum in my province back home."

"Oh, it was. In fact, art, philosophy, poetry, what on Earth used to be called 'the humanities' was almost exclusively my education from the time I could walk."

Now it was Sandhurst's turn to cast an appraising eye towards Lar'ragos. "And you've already forgotten all that? You're only what... thirty? Thirty-two?"

The El-Aurian gave him a saccharine smile. "I look young for my age."

"Thirty-five?"

"Sure. Something like that," Lar'ragos lied.

"Well, if you can bear to muddle through the more tedious classes, you'll eventually get to sink your teeth into your major. That's why I'm glad that engineering has some of the fewest of the 'soft science' requirements. Give me a spanner and a torch and I'm happy."

"A tinkerer, eh?" Lar'ragos laughed. "I've known a few of those in my day. Your type comes in handy in a pinch."

Sandhurst offered the first smile from him Lar'ragos had witnessed. "We're miracle workers."

“All hands, now hear this,” blared the all-call. “Beta shift, report to your duty posts. Alpha shift, when relieved from post, report for classroom instruction. Gamma shift is off duty until 1400 hours.”

Lar’ragos sat up, stood, and straightened his uniform. “Back to the salt mines.”

Sandhurst frowned at him, confused. “The what?”

* * *

Chapter 3

"It's the EPS waveguide modulator," Sandhurst explained, his arms elbow deep inside a service hatch within *Sagan's* xenobiology lab.

Midshipman Lar'ragos stood by with his arms folded across his chest, looking distinctly unamused. "This is the third systems failure to take this lab offline in the past four days. Did the academy liberate this ship from the scrap yards?"

Sandhurst snorted with stifled laughter as he briefly scanned an isolar chip before replacing it into its housing. "No. These are simulated systems failures designed to give my fellow engineers and I something to do."

"You're kidding? I have to stand here twiddling my thumbs while you make repairs to imaginary systems outages?"

"Looks like," Sandhurst replied dryly.

"Well," came Lar'ragos' acid retort, "at least I get to take a break from my cellular analysis of decades-old tissue samples from exhaustively documented species. Nothing like re-inventing the wheel for the millionth time to make you appreciate the scientific process."

"Do you know what I like so much about machines?" Sandhurst asked innocently.

"No," Lar'ragos fumed. "And I'm guessing that whatever I say at this juncture, you're goin—"

"They so rarely ever complain," Sandhurst finished, slotting the last of the replacement iso-chips and closing the access hatch with an exaggerated bang. He turned, picked up his tool kit, and gave Lar'ragos his best approximation of the man's own most disingenuous smile.

The El-Aurian wagged a finger at him in response. "I see what you did there. Don't think that I didn't."

"Is there anything further I might assist you with, Mister Lar'ragos?"

"Not until the next simulated systems glitch, no."

The smile grew fractionally wider. "Then I'll be on my way."

* * *

Commander th'Skaar found Tinubu in the conference room, staring intently at a map of the Federation's closest border sectors.

"You've got your serious face on, Captain," he noted.

She grunted quietly, running a hand over her shaved head in a gesture he'd long since come to recognize as one of concern. "Captain Anson just sent me a copy of Intel's latest activity report for the border region. Our Cardassian friends are making noises about our settlements in the Pleiades Cluster."

"Again?" he sighed as he took a seat across from her. His antennae twitched with irritation. "It's only been what... eighteen months since we signed the treaty with them? I thought that was supposed to have put an end to all this knife waving."

"Saber rattling," she corrected. "And yes, it was supposed to. However, it appears Cardassian politics are somewhat mercurial. A significant power block in their Detapa Council is now pressuring the Central Command to demand more concessions from the Federation, to include a half-dozen settled star systems."

Th'Skaar gave the Andorian equivalent of a shrug. "Let them complain. They know better than to pick a fight with us. As far as I know, they've yet to win a skirmish with one of our ships one-on-one."

"I'm less concerned with a stand-up fight than I am with the possibility of them attacking our lightly defended colonies along the border. The Federation Council appears to be of the opinion that a mere piece of paper is going to safeguard tens of thousands of settlers."

"Starfleet wouldn't allow that to happen," he announced confidently.

Her answering look was withering as she gestured towards the viewer. "Would you care to wager on that, Commander?"

He reached out a hand to toggle a tactical overlay onto the existing sector display. "Who else is out here if something pops off?"

A list of starships and Border Service patrol vessels appeared on the screen, but their numbers were distressingly meager. "*Oberon*, *Stargazer*, *Thevid*, and a handful of border cutters." He shot her a wary look. "That's it?"

Her mouth was drawn into a hard line. "Obviously, a treaty is better than an orbital defense grid or a robust patrol schedule."

"Should we turn around and find another planet for the kids to survey?"

Tinubu blew out a long breath. “No. If things go wrong, they’ll need every ship they can get out there.”

“I’m not excited about the possibility of taking a boat-load of kids into battle.”

“Nor am I. However, these cadets chose to serve and they’re sworn to the same oath we are. Those colonists out there have no one else to protect them.”

He nodded slowly, already spinning plans within plans.

“If a shooting war does start, Scar, I’ll be grateful to have your steady hand on the trigger.”

He gave her a toothy smile. “My blue blood burns for battle, sir.”

Despite the circumstances, Tinubu laughed at his martial alliteration.

* * *

“What economic forces generated the growing militancy of the Cardassian state?” Lieutenant Jarad Petrich queried the cadet class.

Votor raised his hand, as was his wont. The Vulcan was relentless. He raised his hand for every question asked, regardless of subject.

Petrich had learned quickly to ignore him. The young Vulcan was absolutely without any social awareness whatsoever, completely oblivious that his effusive display of his own genius had alienated all of his classmates.

The lieutenant scanned the midshipmen’s faces. Some were earnestly interested, others assiduously bored, while still others like the young man in his sights were struggling to stay awake.

“Mister Sandhurst, if you please?”

Donald jerked from a half-dozing state to panicked alertness, eyes darting. “I... uh—what?” He caught himself. “Could— could you repeat the question, sir?”

“The Cardassians,” Petrich said again. “What social and economic forces transformed a largely spiritual, agrarian society into a near-monolithic expansionist military state?”

“I—uh... poverty... sir? They had an... uh... economic collapse.”

“An ‘economic collapse’ suggests a limited upheaval in an otherwise stable resource-scarcity driven paradigm,” Petrich replied. “The catastrophic socio-political breakdown of the Hebitian civilization was far more complex.”

He quizzed a few of the others, finding some correct responses. However, it was evident that the cadets had studied a variety of other local space-faring species that they’d thought more likely to be encountered during this cruise.

He targeted an equally uninterested looking cadet who’d situated himself in the back row of the class. “Mister... Lar’ragos, isn’t it? Can you explain the rampant militancy that followed the collapse we’ve identified? In a beans-or-bullets equation, what draws the average citizen into the arms of a police-state?”

The older man sat up, his eyes narrowing as he gave the question due consideration. “When you’re starving, you’ll sacrifice everything for a crust of bread and a warm place to sleep for the night.”

Petrich paused, the unexpected phrasing of the man’s answer piquing his curiosity. “You’re saying the people surrendered their civic freedoms in favor of the state’s largess?”

Lar’ragos pursed his lips, his expression conveying distaste. “No, sir. I’m saying that when you’re starving to death, when you’re watching your children starve, you have no time for the luxury of political ideals. The people with the guns control the resources, and you’ll salute their flag and mutter their oaths of allegiance if it means living to see another sunrise. In this situation, the Cardassian military used food, energy, and shelter as tools to control the population in a planetary crisis. Those who would not kneel either starved to death or met their end at the barrel of a gun. Worship of religious icons were discarded for worship at the altar of the state.”

“You sound like you were there,” Petrich remarked.

“No, sir, but I’ve seen it played out in other places.”

“Have you now?” Petrich smirked. “Was this a failed colony, like Turkana IV?”

“No, sir. I’ve only recently been granted Federation citizenship.”

Petrich sat back on the edge of the lectern. “And you’ve seen such circumstances first-hand?”

“I have, sir,” Lar’ragos answered simply.

Petrich waved a hand to encompass the class. "Please, enlighten us, then."

"Respectfully, sir, no thank you."

"And why not, Mister Lar'ragos?" Petrich's patient smile faltered. "You profess to have observed just the kind of social and political chaos that we're discussing. Perhaps your experiences can enrich all of our understanding?"

Lar'ragos paused, struggling to formulate an answer that wouldn't see him cashiered out of the academy. "Permission to speak candidly, Lieutenant?"

"By all means."

"With respect, sir, for me this isn't an interesting intellectual exercise. I've *lived* this. I'm a refugee from this type of horror, and I'm not the only one." He glanced over at the class, knowing with his special insight that there were others among them with similar experiences. "I find it... discourteous to be lectured to about this subject by someone who's never gone to bed hungry in his life."

Petrich blushed fiercely. "That's a bold assumption you're making about me, Mister Lar'ragos."

"My apologies, Lieutenant. I neglected to take into account that one time when you were twelve and you stole your friend's antique pocket watch and your mother sent you to bed without supper."

Now the color promptly vanished from Petrich's features. "Clear the deck," he said quietly, as though from a distance.

The other cadets got while the getting was good, with Sandhurst throwing a last glance in Pava's direction as he egressed the compartment.

"Would you care to explain just how you know that little detail, Mister Lar'ragos?" Petrich frowned as he appeared to examine the cadet. "I don't remember having a Betazoid aboard."

Lar'ragos sighed. "I'm not a telepath, if that's what you're worried about, sir. I get... flashes, images from people's past, mostly when I'm talking to them. My people are renown as 'listeners.' That's our cheat. When people are talking to us, we get all kinds of little tidbits from them." He took a deep breath. "I apologize if I embarrassed you, sir."

Petrich's hard expression softened after a moment's consideration. "Okay, fair enough. I owe you an apology as well. I was being flippant about your experiences. I thought you were having me on. You're correct in that I assumed that you were just a run of the mill non-trad cadet trying to blow smoke up my backside."

"No, sir. I'm a distinctly non-traditional cadet who needs to learn when to keep his mouth shut."

Petrich smiled ever so slightly at that. "I'm sorry for making light of your suffering."

"Thank you for saying so, sir."

What Lar'ragos neglected to add is that he hadn't suffered so terribly in those particular circumstances, seeing as he'd been the one holding the gun.

* * *

Chapter 4

“Helm, come to bearing three-three-seven, mark one-five-nine. Accelerate to point-seven impulse. Tactical, ready photon torpedoes for a barrage salvo. Reserve phasers for anti-missile point defense.” Morozov’s instructions were given quickly, the clipped cadence of a starship commander in the heat of battle.

The response, executed by the cadets, was sluggish in comparison to a seasoned crew. Morozov fought the urge to criticize too harshly. After all, they weren’t the ones who’d chosen to enter what may well become a combat zone in the next few days.

“Target... target acquired!” announced the Midshipman Bartolo at the weapons console as he struggled to lock the targeting sensors on one of the multiple aggressor ships.

The bridge simulator was an exact replica of *Sagan’s* command center and was equipped with a complex gimbal system to allow the simulator to shake with the impact of weapons fire. A dedicated gravitational system had been installed that mimicked the minute delays in inertial dampening when the sim-*Sagan* executed evasive maneuvers.

“Helm, hard over to port, get us a firing angle.”

The viewscreen image slewed as the ship swung about, and suddenly the enemy ship was directly ahead.

“Fire torpedo spread, maximum yield.”

At the Engineering station, Sandhurst couldn’t help but feel somewhat disappointed. In all the holo-dramas from his youth the order to fire by a Starfleet captain was something shouted on a burning bridge, the captain’s fist clenched defiantly in the air. It was supposed to be dramatic and inspiring. Morozov had given the order in the same calm voice as he used to ask for a routine status report.

“Multiple impacts,” Lar’ragos reported from the Science station. “Significant damage to their engines and power distribution systems. Detecting some residual debris.” He glanced towards Morozov. “They’re losing power to weapons and shields, sir.”

“That one’s out of the fight,” th’Skaar noted from the Helm station.

“From Ops, Cadet Triadi called out, “The other vessel is firin—”

The bridge lurched as the torpedo impacted and the LCARS display at an auxiliary console fizzled and died.

That’s more like it! Sandhurst thought.

“Bartolo, I told you to fire on any incoming ordinance!” Morozov barked.

“Yes, sir!” Bartolo blanched, “Sorry sir. It just happened so fast—”

“They’re coming around again,” Lar’ragos observed. “Threat vessel is initiating a high-resolution scan of our starboard shield generators.”

“Route auxiliary power to the starboard shields and structural integrity field,” Morozov instructed.

“Aye, sir,” Sandhurst acknowledged from the Engineering station. “Shields at one-hundred-sixteen percent of rated output for the next thirty seconds.”

“Let’s draw them in, Mister Bartolo. Hold fire until I give the command. Mister Sandhurst, prepare to cut ancillary power to the starboard sections after they fire, but leave the shields up.”

A chorus of acknowledgements greeted his commands.

The attacking ship leapt forward at maximum impulse, disgorging a torpedo spread that slammed into their starboard grid. Even with the additional power to shields and the SIF, *Sagan’s* simulated EPS network was overwhelmed with bleed-over energy. Consoles sparked and Sandhurst’s engineering console sent a few hundred volts into his hands and arms, throwing him out of his chair second before the workstation exploded.

As the enemy vessel flashed past, it’s disruptors and aft torpedoes savaged *Sagan’s* port side, causing the bridge to buck and yaw wildly. Cadets went sprawling, crying out and scrambling to retake their posts as main power died and the bridge was illuminated by blood-red emergency lights.

“Report!” Morozov called.

Sandhurst would have thought this turn of events was more like the holo-dramas of his youth, if he hadn’t been curled up on the deck clutching his singed arms to his chest.

Bartolo was desperately trying to acquire a target lock on the last threat ship as Lar’ragos abandoned the Science station and moved to reconfigure an auxiliary console for engineering. “Multiple hull breaches along our port quarter, Captain. Our shields there were only at fifty

percent. Warp power has failed and auxiliary power is just barely holding.”

“Helm, turn us into them. I want our forward shields towards the enemy ship until we can get main power bac—”

There was another powerful blow that shook the assembled crew and then the lights reset and the darkened workstations came back to life. The main viewscreen bore the unwelcome assessment: SIMULATION FAILURE. SHIP DESTROYED BY ENEMY WEAPONS. BRIDGE CREW PERFORMANCE ASSESSED AT 47%.

Th’Skaar turned a mock accusatory glance at Morozov. “I come out of retirement for this, and you get me killed?”

Morozov’s expression was emphatically unamused. He turned to where Sandhurst was now sitting up, rubbing his forearms. “Cadet, what happened to our port shields?”

Sandhurst appeared perplexed as if he didn’t quite understand the question. He turned his hands over, expecting to find serious burns, but instead found them untouched. *Neural induction*, he realized. *Tricked my pain receptors into thinking I’d been burned*. He clambered to his feet, coming to a semblance of attention. “I rerouted shield power from the port grid to bolster the starboard shields, just like you asked, sir.”

“Auxiliary power, cadet. I ordered auxiliary power to be used to increase the starboard shields and structural integrity. That means any spare energy from our secondary fusion reactors, life-support systems, tertiary backup battery sources. *Not* any of our other shields.”

“All our auxiliary power was already allocated to other critical systems, sir,” Sandhurst explained. “So I took it from the port shields. I thought that was what you’d meant.”

“You *assumed*, Mister Sandhurst. The old expression is ‘you robbed Peter to pay Paul.’ Meaning that you stole from one grid to give it to another, without considering that in dynamic, close-quarters ship-to-ship combat, the enemy can and will attack any section of the ship at any given moment.”

The young man blanched. “I’m sorry, sir. I didn’t realize that.”

This had been the fifth battle simulation of the shift, and Morozov was tired. A smoldering starship bridge buffeted by repeated weapons impacts dredged up too many bad memories of the real thing. Too many friends and comrades killed and wounded in the line of duty.

“Okay, that’s enough for now. Commander th’Skaar, please see to the cadets’ post-sim briefing and performance review.”

As the cadets abandoned their posts and began to filter towards the exit, Bartolo waited at the hatch for Sandhurst. He stopped the younger cadet with a hand on his upper arm. Sandhurst looked up at him, clearly crestfallen at his failure.

Lar’ragos, too, had hung back, wanting to have an encouraging word for his roommate. However, Bartolo jerked a thumb towards the exit. “Give us the room, Mister Lar’ragos.”

The El-Aurian hesitated, but then nodded and followed the senior midshipman’s order.

“For the record,” Bartolo said in a quiet voice once he was gone, “this is my third year participating in these sims. You are probably the fifth engineering cadet I’ve seen make that error. My first time, I screwed up the targeting programming on one of our torpedoes and hit our own ship with it.”

Now Sandhurst appeared even more confused. “Why are you telling me this?”

“I’m simply suggesting you don’t beat yourself up too badly over your mistake, Donald. We all make them. That’s precisely why we’re here.”

Sandhurst nodded, still awaiting the other shoe to drop, or an insult to be offered. However, Bartolo merely turned and strode out.

Out in the corridor, Bartolo found Lar’ragos leaning casually against the bulkhead, still awaiting Sandhurst.

“Don’t worry,” the security cadet called. “I didn’t bite Sandy’s head off. That’s the commander’s job.”

Sandhurst exited after Bartolo, giving the two men a guilty glance before scampering off in search of the rest of the group.

Bartolo sized up the smaller man. “Awfully protective of someone you just met, Mister Lar’ragos.”

“I don’t like bullies,” was Lar’ragos’ retort.

“And I don’t like underclassmen who don’t know their place,” Bartolo shot back.

“Oh, I know my place, and I know yours,” Lar’ragos answered softly.

Bartolo took a step towards Lar’ragos, glowering down at him. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means that I can walk away from the academy any time I want, with no repercussions. There are literally hundreds of other things I could do instead. You, on the other hand, are third generation Starfleet. You’ve got a metric ton of family obligation and expectations riding on your shoulders.”

Bartolo squinted at him. "Where are you going with this?"

"Go easy on Sandhurst, and you won't have to find out."

"Is that a threat?" Bartolo sneered.

Lar'ragos' face brightened. "See, you *are* smarter than you look!" He patted Bartolo on the arm and walked away in search of their de-brief.

* * *

Chapter 5

USS *Pétain*

Lieutenant Sonel made sure to play the transmission back a second time to make certain he'd heard it correctly. He knew his report would set in motion a great many things, most of them quite serious, and the fastidious Vulcan needed to be assured he was on firm footing.

Once Sonel was certain of his facts, he touched a hand to his combadge, summoning the scout ship's commanding officer, Lt. Commander Gioele Raffaele.

Raffaele's response was unsurprisingly disjointed. "*Wha— what the hell, Sonel,*" he groaned. "*It's not even 0600 hours.*"

Raffaele was nursing a hangover. That in and of itself was not unusual, seeing as Raffaele was a functioning alcoholic. The degree to which he was functional, however, depended on the day in question.

Ever the pragmatist, Sonel merely said, "I regret that the interruption is unavoidable under the circumstances, Captain. We've received confirmation from an asset in the Cuellar system that the Second Order's fleet has departed their layover four days ahead of schedule. This, coupled with our information on their increased logistics timetable is suggestive of imminent military action."

There was the sound of fumbling in the background, and then the hiss of a hypospray. "*Understood,*" Raffaele replied in a steadier voice. "*On my way.*"

Sonel and the other twenty crew of the intelligence scout *Pétain* tolerated Raffaele's drinking because when he was sober, the man was one of the finest intelligence analysts and commanding officers any of them had ever encountered. Raffaele had been a rising star in Starfleet Intelligence until his problematic drinking had resisted multiple attempts at treatment, and in lieu of outright termination, he'd been shunted into the open command billet of what amounted to a mobile intelligence platform.

Stationed along the Federation/Cardassian border, Raffaele and his crew had been tasked with keeping eyes and ears on the ever-scheming Cardassian Union. They were part of an early-warning system that would, hopefully, alert the Federation to any aggressive actions by the Union before lives were lost.

Raffaele entered the command center moments later, his uniform rumpled and creased. It wasn't easy to do with a form-fitting one-piece jumpsuit, but somehow he managed to pull it off. Sonel's heightened olfactory senses could easily detect the alcohol on the captain's breath and seeping from his pores.

The 'bridge' of *Pétain*, if it could be called that, was a small, Spartan affair. All the workstations were set into claustrophobic alcoves save for the expansive intelligence analysis suite, the largest console in the compartment.

Sonel decoupled the lock on his chair and moved it along its floor track to make way for Raffaele as he took the compact folding jump-seat next to him. "Let's see what we've got here," he muttered blearily.

A flurry of charts, graphs, and intel reports popped up on various screens in front of him, and Raffaele drank it all in, despite his being at considerably less than one-hundred percent.

"Well... shit," he said gravely after a few minutes. "I was really hoping you were wrong, old chap."

"Then you confirm my analysis," Sonel summarized.

Raffaele heaved a sigh. "Yes," he said grudgingly.

Sonel nodded sagely. "Then it is incumbent upon you to 'show me the currency', sir."

The captain gave his Vulcan XO a theatrical look of surprise. "You're hustling me? Now? When we're likely on the brink of war?"

"A bet is a bet," Sonel offered stolidly. "You yourself set the parameters. Double-or-nothing, due to your recurrent losses in our poker game."

"I don't recall that, Mister Sonel. You must be mistaken," Raffaele dissembled, clearly stalling.

"With respect, Captain, I beat you like the proverbial expired equine. By the rules of our financial arrangement, you must make good your wager."

Raffaele gave another faux-sigh. "Fine." He called up an ancillary display to deliver the required latinum from his personal stores with one hand as he flagged their collective intelligence assessment for immediate delivery to Starfleet with the other.

"Would you care to double down, Lieutenant? We could bet on the Second Order's intended targets?"

Sonel raised an eyebrow. "By my calculations, I have already nearly depleted your present stores of gold-pressed latinum, making further high-value wagers a losing proposition from my standpoint. Additionally, betting on potential Cardassian targets where Federation citizens would be the intended victims is morally questionable."

Raffaele shrugged. "You make a good point. Okay, all wagers aside, where do you think they'll hit first?"

"Based on the capabilities of the Second Order, the military craft involved, and given Legate Verun's tendency towards exercising caution and utilizing overwhelming force, I believe their intended targets to be somewhere in the vicinity of the Setlik or Ronara systems."

Raffaele drummed his fingers on the lip of the console, lost in thought as he contemplated this. "Very well considered, my friend. However, with the information we received last month about Verun's tenuous relationship with Central Command, I believe that he needs to do something big to salvage his reputation and his career. He's got a host of young bucks nipping at his heels who'd happily take his place and would love to launch something daring with a high-degree of difficulty in order to make a name for themselves."

"You're suggesting an attack on the two closest, less well defended targets is too conservative for him at this juncture?" Sonel inquired.

"I do. Even if they razed both of our colonies in that sector, we're only talking fifteen-thousand inhabitants. It's an attention-grabber, to be sure, but Verun needs something more ambitious. Our logistics analysis confirmed he's had elements of the Fifth Order's shock troop contingent transferred to his command for an indeterminate period. That's nearly doubled his surface-troop strength. Given that unit's experiences with seizing and occupying inhabited planets, it suggests that he intends to take something big and keep it."

"A more concentrated number of larger Federation colonies?" Sonel posited.

As he called up a star chart, Raffaele tapped the display with his finger. "Here."

"The Pleiades," Sonel noted. "The Detapa Council *has* been exerting diplomatic pressure regarding the recent expansion of the Federation's footprint there."

"If Legate Verun could seize our colonies in the Pleiades Cluster, not only would he solidify his standing with Central Command, he'd also get his foot in the door politically with the Detapa Council. He'd be effectively untouchable, even by the Obsidian Order."

"Will Intel Command agree with your assessment?"

Raffaele smiled disarmingly. "They'll have to. After all, I'm right."

* * *

Sandhurst's half-hearted attack resulted in th'Skaar side-stepping, tripping him as he passed, and then assisting his descent to the padded floor.

"Use your opponent's momentum against them," the commander instructed as he helped Sandhurst back to his feet. "If you're facing multiple threats, keep as many of them off balance as possible. While a threat is busy picking themselves off the ground, they're not attacking you."

Th'Skaar gestured for another cadet to come out onto the mats and join Sandhurst. Midshipman Regina Daughtry stepped forward. The Andorian officer moved back and invited the two cadets to attack. Daughtry came at him first, ahead of the reticent Sandhurst. She threw a punch at th'Skaar, which he blocked and then closed the distance to grab a hold of her, drawing her in and using her as barrier to thwart Sandhurst's following attack as he grappled with her.

"Try as much as possible to use one threat as a barrier to the others. Unlike popular entertainment portrays, your enemies won't attack one at a time. They'll rush you all at once if they can."

He set the class to sparring among themselves, more senior cadets instructing the junior ones under th'Skaar's watchful eye.

Lar'ragos was moving to pair up with Sandhurst when Bartolo intercepted him.

"Mister Lar'ragos, with me."

He dutifully followed the larger man to a corner of the mat-room. Bartolo turned to face him. "Attack."

Lar'ragos advanced, throwing a slow training punch which Bartolo easily parried and then answered with a series of strikes; jab, cross, uppercut and hook. Lar'ragos blocked some of the blows and covered his face with his forearms to absorb others.

They fell into an easy rhythm with one playing the aggressor and then the other.

"It's good that you're looking out for Donald," Bartolo said, blocking a strike before dropping to a crouch and delivering a low-power blow to Lar'ragos' exposed ribs, "but you're missing the whole picture."

"Picture's pretty clear from where I'm standing," Lar'ragos replied, driving a hook at Bartolo's head which he intercepted with a gloved hand.

"You've known the kid for two weeks." More combinations now, changing up the tempo and targets on one-another's bodies. "I've been with him for a year. There's a method to what I'm doing, one you're not privy to."

Lar'ragos threw a kick at Bartolo's legs, which the larger man blocked with a raised pad-clad shin. "So bullies have better organization than when I was young," Lar'ragos remarked dryly. "I guess that's progress."

“Donny’s just like my kid brother, a total gear-head. Great with machines, not so good with people.” Punch, kick, block, punch. “That awkwardness makes him a target for real bullies, and unfortunately the academy still has its share of them.”

“I’ve noticed.”

Their tempo increased along with the power behind their strikes as each man came to their own determination that the other could cope with such.

“I give him grief, but never more than he can handle. I’ve also marked him as my ‘territory.’ Other would-be bullies know the only person who can mess with him is me.”

“Then why mess with him at all? Why not just leave the kid alone?”

“Because he has to learn. Life is friction and humanoids are cliquish. We handle him with kid gloves here and then what? His first assignment out of the academy and he’s got some jackass junior lieutenant trying to make his name by riding the ensigns into the deck. How’s he going to deal with that if he’s had no experience with it?”

Their conversation was cut short by th’Skaar calling the training session to a close. The other cadets filtered out heading for the sonic showers, but Bartolo and Lar’ragos remained in their corner. The Andorian gave the pair a questioning look.

“With respect, Commander, Mister Lar’ragos and I have some issues to work out.”

Th’Skaar looked from one to the other and then nodded fractionally. He turned and left without a word.

Bartolo turned to look at Lar’ragos. “You’ve been holding back. Let’s see what you’ve got.”

“That’s a bad idea,” Lar’ragos warned.

The security cadet rushed him, throwing punches at full speed and power as he did so. His suspicions were confirmed when, seconds later, he was face-down on the mat with his arm locked agonizingly behind his back. He tapped out and Lar’ragos relinquished his grip.

He rolled over to look up at the smaller man. “Sciences? Really?”

“New leaf,” Lar’ragos answered. He extended at hand to Bartolo and pulled him to his feet.

“Starfleet’s good for that, Lar’ragos. Countless people have joined to remake themselves or redeem themselves.”

“You think that’s what I’m doing?”

“Maybe. I don’t really care. That’s your path; I have my own. You’re right about me being a legacy. My grandfather retired as an admiral, and my mother died commanding a starship in battle against the Tholians. I’ve trained my entire life for this. I know who I am and where I’m going. Unless I miss my mark, you don’t know any of those things.”

Lar’ragos bristled at that. “You sure you shouldn’t be a psychologist?”

“No, I’m a leader, born and bred. I’m also pretty good at reading people.” Bartolo removed his sparring gloves and moved to towel off. “I’ve only got a year left before I graduate, and Project Sandy won’t be completed by then.” He gave Lar’ragos a meaningful look. “Are you up to the challenge?”

Lar’ragos had no answer to that.

* * *

Chapter 6

“Oh, pretty,” th’Skaar remarked as he took a seat next to Morozov in *Sagan’s* conference room. He gestured to the image of a starship on the compartment’s viewer which Morozov appeared to be studying. “That’s the new Niagara-class, isn’t it?”

“Yes. This is the *Robau*,” Morozov replied with a wistful sigh. “Scheduled to launch from Utopia Planitia in eight weeks for trials and shakedown.”

Morozov turned to see th’Skaar’s suspicious expression. “It’s... not what you think. Probably not.”

“You’re thinking of putting in for another command?”

“Not me, no.” Morozov let that thought linger as th’Skaar digested it.

The Andorian’s antennae went rigid with surprise. “You mean for Adi to command her!” he blurted.

Morozov cocked his head. “I’ve had worse ideas.”

“You’re trying to... get the choir back together?” th’Skaar asked.

“Band,” Morozov countered. “And yes. If you and Carol are agreeable, we could present this to the captain as a united group.” He turned to th’Skaar and gestured to encompass the ship as a whole. “Tell me this doesn’t feel right, Scar. All of us back here, working towards a common purpose.”

Th’Skaar placed a hand on his friend’s arm. “That’s a lot to drop on someone so suddenly. We all have other obligations now. Yes, we were all able to arrange to get away for five weeks to shepherd a cadet cruise, but that’s a far cry from becoming active Starfleet line officers again.”

Morozov stiffened. “So, that’s a ‘no’ from you?”

“I would never dismiss the idea so quickly my friend. However, I have three mates and among us, five children who I’ve only recently come to know again after years of absence. Going back to active duty would throw our family into chaos.”

The Russian nodded soberly. “I understand. I’m sorry to have sprung this on you so abruptly.”

“Don’t be. Your passion for this is genuine, and I share your feelings for our time aboard *Prokofiev*.”

They were interrupted by the alert klaxon. It blared three times in unison, followed by, “*Senior officers and midshipmen department heads report to the bridge.*” The captain’s voice issued from the overheads. “*We have been alerted that Cardassian military forces are converging on several Federation colonies along our mutual border, and Command has placed all vessels in this region on red alert.*”

Morozov’s face tightened with anxiety as he rose from his chair. “I was hoping this could be avoided.”

His face was serene, but th’Skaar’s antennae twitched with apprehension. “It appears the Cardassians have other ideas.”

* * *

The troop billet aboard the Cardassian military transport *Grutaal* was anything but luxurious. The soldiers housed here slept on bunks stacked five high in the dank, musty, and poorly lit compartment.

Dal Durak Var sat on his floor-level bunk, listening to the strains of Oltari highlands music wafting from two stacks over. The tune from the Banik Province on Cardassia Prime was an uncomplicated rural musical strain. Despite its simplicity, or perhaps because of it, the melody served to sooth the young man’s nerves as he prepared for his first time in combat.

Next to him atop his bunk Var had laid out his plasma pulse rifle, four energy-cell magazines for the weapon, his combat knife, and his grandfather’s battered old scatter-gun. He had tended to each of the other weapons, readying them for whatever was to come. The knife he sharpened slowly against a whetstone that his father had used during his own military service.

Arvik approached, his own rifle slung over his shoulder. “Have you heard?”

Var, still focused on honing his blade, merely grunted in response. “Heard what?”

“Why we’re being deployed, of course.”

Var paused, looking up at his excitable friend. “I assumed it was for the greater glory of Cardassia.”

“Well, of course!” Arvik exclaimed. “But it’s in response to the Federation attacks on our colonies.”

His knife rasped against the stone again. “First I’ve heard of it.”

Arvik gestured towards the oval-shaped viewer set into the nearest bulkhead, cables snaking to it haphazardly, a clear last-minute addition to the billet compartment. “Our colonies in the Chin'toka and Crolsa systems were bombarded by Starfleet after our ambassadors confronted the Federation about arming the Bajoran rebels.”

Var appeared skeptical. “That seems quite... bold... for the Federation.”

His friend's head bobbed animatedly. “Yes! It's clear their peace overtures were only a ruse to try and lull us into passivity!”

“Lull us into...?” Var laughed. “I doubt you've ever used that phrase before in your life. You repeat the media ministry's proclamations like a Toalia'an Mimic.”

“It's what they *told* us,” Arvik insisted. “We must be ready to take our revenge on their own colonies now. They butchered our women and children, and we cannot let that go unanswered.”

Var nodded towards Arvik's rifle. “You've never shot anyone with that before, let alone an unarmed woman or a child. You may find what awaits us is more difficult than you'd imagined.”

Arvik glanced around and then whispered, “You shouldn't speak so, Durak. The Obsidian Order has operatives everywhere. Such cynicism could place you in their sights.”

“You are correct, of course,” Var conceded. “My words were ill chosen. I am... anxious about what lies ahead for us. My father told me that war experienced firsthand is far different than how it is portrayed in the popular entertainments.”

His friend gripped his shoulder in an overly enthusiastic gesture of camaraderie. “We shall face combat together as a unit, just as So-Dal Urtrim has drilled us these many months.”

Var gave him a smile that was devoid of genuine warmth. “Of course we will, my friend. I too am eager to prove my loyalty to the state.”

“For Cardassia!” Arvik called.

“For Cardassia,” Var repeated in a voice more subdued.

* * *

The klaxon and announcement from the bridge had roused both cadets from their bunks, and Sandhurst and Lar'ragos hurried into the corridor from their cabin with the young engineer still pulling on his uniform jumpsuit.

Sandhurst turned in the direction of the nearest turbolift but paused to glance back at Lar'ragos. “What's your emergency post?”

“Damage control team five,” he answered. “Somewhere on deck six forward of frame Seventeen-Baker. You?”

“Main Engineering,” Sandhurst said, his voice thick, Adam's-apple bobbing.

Other cadets and enlisted personnel raced past them in either direction and Lar'ragos could read the tension emanating from Sandhurst as easily as a holographic billboard.

“It'll be fine,” he assured the young man. “Just do what your section leader tells you. Keep your mind on following your orders and addressing the task at hand. The rest will take care of itself.”

Sandhurst bobbed his head, a hint of color returning to his features. “Yeah, sure. Thanks.”

Then he was gone.

Lar'ragos gave himself a moment to watch the retreating cadet before looking down at his hands. His left hand trembled, ever so slightly, and he curled it into a fist. “Every damn time,” he muttered.

* * *

Chapter 7

Nehru Colony, Arandis IV

“It’s not fair, mom, she’s twice as strong as anyone on our team!”

Ciadra McCullough nodded as she scooped salad onto her plate from the serving bowl. “Yes, honey, she’s Vulcan.”

“Mom, *I know that!*” Presley practically wailed. “But she’s so *fast!*”

“You have strong players on your team as well, dear. You’re one of them.” Ciadra was being irritatingly rational, she knew, but it was her only effective defense against her daughter’s righteous indignation.

“But with them playing T’Priel as an attackman, they’re damn near unstoppable.”

“Language,” Ciadra chided. “And despite T’Priel’s abilities, Springbrook Prep has defeated Rennley Academy by a substantial margin their last two games.”

“Prep has the Dantalli sisters,” Presley observed, as though Ciadra didn’t already know that. “And it takes both of them to keep T’Priel away from the goal.”

Ciadra looked across the table to her wife, but Ja’Vari merely grinned and shook her head as she speared a fork-full of Thettlefish. “Oh, no. Don’t try and drag me into this. I wanted her to play football. You were the collegiate lacrosse champion.”

“Mère, I’m *good* at lacrosse!” Presley said in her most deeply offended tone, giving Ja’Vari a baleful glare full of adolescent outrage. “Football is for fragile glass-girls who can’t handle a stick.”

Ciadra gave Ja’Vari an impish smile. *And now you’re involved, my dear.* She took a bite of salad and was trying to decide whether or not the dressing needed more ama-spice when her handheld comm-link warbled a three-tone alert, accompanied by a distracting red flash.

“Damn it,” Ja’Vari sighed in exasperation. “Not another drill! I thought you’d told them to knock that off during dinner-time?”

“Language, Mère,” Presley admonished with a smirk.

“I’m sorry,” Ciadra mouthed to Ja’Vari as she collected the comm-link and rose to her feet. She walked through the kitchen and stepped outside into the cool night air. “McCullough here.”

“Boss,” came the apologetic sounding voice of her shift supervisor at Colony Operations. “*I’m sorry to bother you during supper, but we just received a regional alert from Starfleet Command that there’s a Cardassian task force inbound. They’re not sure where the Cardies are going to strike, but they’re pretty certain it’ll be someplace in the cluster.*”

Ciadra felt an electric shock race up her spine at this revelation, and her dinner settled into the pit of her stomach like a stone. “Shit.” She turned and opened the door just long enough to call to Ja’Vari and Presley that there was an emergency at Ops and she had to go. Ciadra’s mind raced as she took the steps two at a time down to where the family’s flitter was parked. “Please tell me Starfleet has ships in route?”

“*The border cutter Janah is nine hours away. No word on the nearest starship yet.*”

She climbed into the flitter, powered it up, and continued as the comm-link synced with the vehicle’s systems and went to hands-free comms. “I want a full level-two diagnostic on all orbital assets and the torp-launchers on the ridge. Call Fergus and tell him I want him to get his ass up there and check the equipment personally. We can’t afford to have anything fail because someone forgot to update the targeting software again.”

“*On it,*” he replied.

“Have Borenson head over and open up the civil defense shelters. I want him to make sure the shield generators are functional and the replicators are working and have sufficient protein stores and battery backups.”

“*Copy that, boss.*”

Please let this be a sensor error or some damned ill-timed Starfleet drill, she thought fervently as she piloted the flitter over the houses and civic building below towards the Operations complex. Living so close to the Cardassian border was a risk each and every colonist lived with daily, but the thought of actually having to fend off an attack by the militant species was almost too harrowing to contemplate.

Nehru Colony had an orbital defense grid of some two-dozen phaser-armed satellites and a battery of photon-torpedo launchers up on Guffin’s Ridge, but those were their last line of defense. Starfleet had always been intended to forestall such aggression merely by their presence, but they’d cut their scheduled patrols through the cluster by more than a half after the armistice had been signed.

The idiots who signed that document live on Earth, the safest world in the heart of the Federation, Ciadra thought uncharitably. Nobody out here on the border would have been so foolish, but then the Federation Council had never seemed too terribly inclined to heed the warnings of

mere colonists in the hinterlands.

* * *

There were so many overlays displayed on the viewscreen's map of the border region that the image threatened to evoke the work of Jackson Pollock. *Sagan's* senior officers sat at the conference table while the midshipmen department heads and commissioned instructors stood shoulder to shoulder, ringing the far side of the table.

Captain Tinubu's voice carried throughout the compartment and over the intraship to the entire crew. "The Second Order is on the move, and Intel estimates they're carrying somewhere in the vicinity of seventy-five hundred troops which they intend to land on some or all of our colonies in the Pleiades Cluster. Starfleet and the Border Service are spread perilously thin out here, and so *Sagan's* presence is doubly important.

"I've conferred with the captains of *Oberon*, *Stargazer*, *Thevid*, and *McAuliffe*, and barring any overriding orders from Command we've divided the Pleiades into areas of responsibility. *Sagan* is assigned to safeguard the colonies in the Arandis and Sterope systems. If neither of those systems are attacked, we'll assist *McAuliffe* in watching over the Tageta and Maia systems. The border cutters *Janah*, *Bluefin*, and *Thrasher* are also being deployed, along with a number of smaller patrol corvettes.

"Starfleet is sending everything they can from the nearest starbases and sector patrol routes, but the closest help is over four days away."

This drew a few audible intakes of breath, mostly from the assembled cadets.

"These are far from ideal circumstances, but we are all that stands between hundreds of thousands of Federation citizens and either slavery or death. We're all aware of the fate that befell the Bajora and a half dozen other species whose worlds the Cardassians have conquered and occupied.

"I know I can count on each of you to perform your duties to the utmost. Your lives, the lives of your shipmates, and those of our colonists all depend on it. I will relay additional information as it arrives. Please resume your posts."

Tinubu toggled off the intraship and ordered the senior staff to remain behind as the cadets and junior officers staffing non-critical posts exited the briefing room.

"*Teper' my v der'me*," Morozov whispered softly, rubbing his temple with one hand.

Dr. Cavanaugh looked to Tinubu. "Okay, how bad is this *really*?"

Tinubu fixed her gaze on the physician. "To put it bluntly, Doctor, I expect that we'll be buying time for these colonies with our lives. Given the size of the force that Intel believes we're confronting, despite our technological advantages, there's no realistic way we can do anything but slow them down. The tougher we make the going for them, the more time Starfleet has to bring greater resources to bear to blunt this attack."

"Okay... so, pretty bad then," Cavanaugh calculated.

There was a collective bout of mordant laughter.

Tinubu collected herself and then looked at each of them in turn. "None of us were expecting this, especially not the young people in our care. For what little it's worth, I'm sorry. If this does end up being our last stand together, I can't imagine a better group of officers with whom I'd want to make it."

There were nods of affirmation all around and Morozov spoke for the others. "We'll follow you anywhere, Captain."

* * *

Chapter 8

USS *Pétain*

"I would take this opportunity to remind you that *Pétain* is an Oculus-class reconnaissance vessel, not a combat-rated starship," Lieutenant Sonel offered to his commanding officer in a subdued tone.

He sat next to Lt. Commander Raffaele at the combined Helm/Ops station situated at the front of the scout's cramped command center.

Raffaele nodded sagely at his XO's counsel. "I have never been more aware of our ship's limitations than at this moment, my friend," he replied soberly.

"Then wouldn't the logical course of action here be to withdraw from the path of the Cardassian advance and utilize our superior sensor suite to keep Starfleet apprised of their movement and course of deployment, sir?"

"Eminently logical, Mister Sonel. My congratulations to you on your multi-faceted grasp of our present tactical situation."

That, Sonel knew from long experience, translated to, 'I've heard your argument and I'm going to do what I want anyway.' Nevertheless, the Vulcan had said his peace.

Raffaele piloted *Pétain* slowly through the harrowing jumble of asteroids that comprised the Desarn Belt, an accretion disc of proto-planetary debris in the inner regions of the Loyal system. This system had been identified as the site of an as-yet unfounded Federation colony, intended to be established on the Class-M fourth planet within the next six months. However, Loyal had also been selected by the advancing Cardassian Second Order as an excellent staging area for launching attacks on its neighboring star systems which did support existing Federation colonies.

"We and the other Starfleet ships in the area have seeded the border with sensor drones and Command has doubtless re-tasked the Archimedes Array to surveil this whole region. That makes us largely superfluous. I won't sit idly by in relative safety while our colonists are crushed under the Cardassian boot. The situation demands we take greater risks in order to slow the assault."

Raffaele toggled a directed comms-laser to one of the ship's three work-bees which hovered near the surface of the asteroid *Pétain* herself was using for concealment. "Chief, how goes your progress?"

Chief Petty Officer Makwetu replied, "*It's coming along, Captain. We'll have the lifepods joined and anchored in the next hour. We'll need additional tritanium to shield the fusion reactor from sensors if we want to remain undetected, though.*"

"If there isn't enough in stores, you can strip out whatever interior bulkheads in the ship you need to in order to make it work," Raffaele directed.

"Aye, sir."

Raffaele turned to direct his gaze on Sorel. "Please begin preparations for evacuation, Lieutenant. The crew has one hour. Space will be limited, so no personal belongings. Our temporary lodgings may have to suffice for days or weeks."

"Immediately, Captain." Sorel paused. "May I inquire as to how your plan is going to be executed, sir?"

"Not quite yet, Lieutenant," was Raffaele's patient reply. "Soon, though."

* * *

USS *Sagan*

"Incoming message from *Bluefin*, sir. They report they've carried out a hit and run attack on the Second Order's left wing. Two Cardassian cruisers reported damaged, and a troop transport crippled." The communications officer shot a pointed glance at the captain. "*Bluefin's* sustained significant damage to her impulse drive and has had to withdraw for repairs. She's set course to rendezvous with *Thevid*."

"Acknowledged," Tinubu said, perhaps more brusquely than she'd intended. The others were doing their part, and now it was her turn to take her ship and trainee crew into harm's way. Contemplating that rash course had been one thing, but as she looked around at the fresh faces of the cadets manning some of the auxiliary stations on the bridge, Tinubu experienced a brief pang of regret. How many of these young people would die under her command? People who might have gone on to have fulfilling careers and long lives, instead sacrificing their futures on the altar of her hubris.

"Relay my compliments to Captain Reninger. That's one hell of a tally for an old cutter."

"That's going to be our group," Morozov noted from his station. "Their course indicates that they're heading for the Arandis system. They've now passed out of *Bluefin's* area of operations."

"Second Order's projected ETA to Arandis?" Tinubu asked.

"Fifteen hours if they slow to accommodate their damaged ships, seven hours if they leave them to catch up."

"We'll call it seven hours, then," Tinubu declared. "Now that we're setting defenses in place, every minute counts. They won't dally." She turned to th'Skaar. "What are their numbers?"

"Four Gedik-class cruisers, five Likasa-class destroyers, six frigates and eight personnel transports."

Tinubu gestured to the communications officer. "Inform *McAuliffe* that Arandis looks to be the initial thrust for this wing of the attack. We'll need them to back us up if it looks like Tageta or Maia aren't priority Cardassian targets." To th'Skaar she said, "Commander, lay in a course to Nehru Colony at maximum speed. I want to implement your contingency plan for landing additional personnel to assist with the colony's surface defense."

She dared not give voice to it, but Tinubu wanted to ensure that even if *Sagan* were destroyed defending the colony, there would still Starfleet personnel on the surface to augment the colony's civilian constabulary. Their contribution to the colony's defense might only be measured in hours, but those hours might make all the difference.

"Yes, sir. I'll have Lieutenant Wójcik begin making a list of candidates for the surface team."

* * *

"You still awake?"

Lar'ragos lay atop his bunk on the other side of the cabin, staring at the ceiling. After a moment he replied, "Yes. Why?"

"Is being on alert always this dull?" Sandhurst asked.

A chuckle prefaced Lar'ragos' reply. "No idea." He turned his head and could just make out the pensive expression on Sandhurst's youthful face in the dim light. "Hey, it's my first time, too," he added. "If I had to guess, though, they've stepped us down to yellow alert until we actually make contact with the Cardassians. The next time we go to battle stations, there'll be shooting."

"What's it like? Combat, I mean?"

"Well, I've never been in ship-to-ship combat where I was a participant. I've been a passenger on ships that were attacked a few times. That's all about naked terror and helplessness. I would imagine it's pretty close to the simulations we've been running."

"Okay," Sandhurst countered. "What about surface combat?"

There was a long pause, followed by the El-Aurian's deep sigh. "Also terror, just a different flavor. On the ground it's all confusion and chaos, mostly. Regardless of all the technology they weigh you down with, there's still too much going on to really understand the full picture when you're in the thick of it. If you're advancing or defending with a defined front, that's one thing, but when it all goes sideways, and it *always* does, it turns into stumbling about and bumping into the enemy. Then when you find them, you try to neutralize them before they do you."

"Neutralize?" Sandhurst sounded dubious. "You mean kill, don't you?"

"No, not necessarily. Our phasers wouldn't come with a stun setting, otherwise."

"And will the Cardassians also have their weapons set to stun?" The tone of his voice suggested Sandhurst already knew the answer.

"Probably not," Lar'ragos conceded. "The Federation's idea of warfare is a bit... unconventional, at least in my experience."

"You were a soldier," Sandhurst said. Not a question, but a statement.

"I was. Very long ago, and very far from here."

Sandhurst turned his head, studying Lar'ragos' silhouette in the soft glow of a nearby LCARS panel. "Were you any good at it?"

"I'm still here," Lar'ragos replied laconically.

"Commander Morozov said I'm going down to the surface. He says he needs me to help set up phaser-emplacements, shield emitters, things like that."

"Yeah, you went and proved yourself useful," Lar'ragos said with a chuckle. "That was your first mistake."

"What about you?"

"Me? No need for a junior science cadet down there. I'd guess they'll find more use for me up here doing damage control or something."

"But you were a soldier," Sandhurst protested.

"I was, emphasis on past-tense," Lar'ragos riposted. "Now I'm a Starfleet cadet. If you've been paying attention, you'll know that comes with

a great many rules and behavioral expectations.”

A long silence followed, and just as Lar’ragos began to let his mind wander and drift towards sleep...

“I’m scared,” Sandhurst confessed. It wasn’t a plaintive admission, merely a statement of fact.

“Me too,” Lar’ragos said.

* * *

Chapter 9

Cardassian Cruiser Trakan

Legate Verun conferred quietly with Gul Harok and Glinn Brelesh over the tactical plot-map table. The trio moved digital icons across the board, determining potential assembly areas where the Second Order's vessels might stage prior to launching their attack on the Federation colonies in neighboring systems.

Gul Harok advised, "Sir, the follow-on contingent that will arrive in two days has a mobile mining rig. If we establish a repair and resupply node near this system's asteroid field we can extract and forge the necessary materials here. We can forgo transporting stores of tritanium from home and use that transport space for additional troops, weapons and food."

Verun appeared skeptical. "Asteroid mining in vac-suits? Isn't that highly dangerous, not to mention a waste of able-bodied combat personnel?"

Harok's smile was predatory. "The miners are Bajoran prisoners, sir. Quite expendable."

"Indeed?" Verun smiled approvingly. "Well considered, Gul. Make the preparations at once."

"My apologies, Legate," a crewman interrupted reluctantly, "but we're picking up a Federation transmission directed towards us in the clear, sir."

Verun inclined his head towards the technician. "Very well, let's hear it."

"*Cardassian forces,*" came a hollow, vaguely digitized sounding voice. "*You have violated the recognized territory of the United Federation of Planets. This is an act of aggression, and if you do not withdraw immediately we will be forced to take whatever measures are necessary to forcibly remove you.*"

Verun smiled at that and joined in the round of quiet laughter that greeted the Federation's toothless threats. "My, they are feeling bold today, aren't they?" he joked.

"*Verun,*" the voice said, causing him to snap his head around towards the speaker. "*I'm talking to you, Verun. If you'll excuse the human aphorism, you've bitten off more than you can chew here. This operation will either see you killed in the line of duty, or with your carefully built career in tatters after your people are expelled from our space. Do the smart thing. Turn around and go home.*"

There were no more smiles in the command center, and the legate's laughter had died in his throat.

* * *

"Are you certain goading the man is the wisest course, sir?" Sorel asked.

Raffaele tapped away at his compact console, humming softly to himself before replying. "Tweaking Verun's ego is all part of the plan," he answered, his broad smile radiating confidence. "Please confirm our mines are in position and have been armed."

Sorel spun slowly in zero-g to access the panel closest to him. He tapped a few commands into it and reviewed the subsequent response. "Affirmative, sir. All mines have been positioned according to your instructions and have been armed."

"Very well. I'm maneuvering into position. This will have to be fast. We won't have long before we've shown our hand and the Cardies move to take countermeasures."

"Respectfully, sir, the Federation does not use mines. They are expressly prohibited by several Starfleet regulations and Federation policies."

"Precisely why our Cardassian friends out there won't be expecting them, my friend," was Raffaele's glib reply. "After our provocation, they'll enter the asteroid field to see if there's any further Starfleet presence here and will start triggering the mines. That will not only lead to casualties, but it will greatly slow their operation to clear the field. As they've already started the build-up here to use this system as a staging area, they'll *have* to make sure there aren't any more surprises lurking here. They'll be caught between two bad choices. Either pull up stakes and use another system as their jumping-off point, or take the excruciating time necessary to completely clear out this one. Both will cause significant delays to their invasion timetables and will make an utter hash of their logistics schedule."

"I would advise you, sir, that you may be subject to court-martial proceedings if you pursue this course of action," Sorel warned.

Raffaele continued to work his console feverishly, lining up his shot like the expert billiards player he was. Without looking to his XO, he nonetheless replied, "The needs of the many, Lieutenant. In the grand scheme of things, the career of a single lowly lieutenant commander is small price to pay for delaying an invasion of our territory and hopefully saving the lives of many thousands of people." He spared a brief glance at Sorel to favor the man with a smirk. "Besides, rumor has it the stockade allows alcohol. I'll be just fine."

Sorel's only reply was a raised eyebrow, the Vulcan salute of incredulity.

Raffaele's console trilled, confirming that his aiming point met the pre-set parameters that he'd established. He opened the comms again, sending a burst transmission through a dozen micro-satellites to scramble its point of origin. "I see you're still here, Verun. So be it. Here begin your consequences..."

* * *

As the infuriating threat rang in his ears, the command center's sensor specialist announced, "Legate, we've just detected what appears to be a Federation scout craft emerging from behind one of the asteroids in the inner field."

"Sound battle stations," Verun ordered. He looked to Gul Harok, "All this bleating and chest-beating and all they have to threaten us with is a scout?"

Harok gave the Cardassian variant of a shrug. "As you said, sir, they're feeling bold today."

"Legate, I'm reading a power build up in the ship's warp engines!"

"Bring disruptor banks to bear and energize shields," commanded Verun.

He gestured for an open communications channel. "Federation vessel, surrender or you will be destroyed. The Cardassian Second Order has claimed this and the neighboring systems for the Cardassian Union. This will be your only war—"

"They're jumping to warp," Harok observed. "Fleeing as they sh—"

The warship *Trakan* convulsed as it was pelted by pieces of debris accelerated to incredible speeds from the destruction of two nearby vessels. Those personnel not seated were thrown violently to the deck.

As he clung to his command chair, Verun croaked, "Report!"

"Hyper-relativistic impact!" someone on the bridge cried out. "Two of our troop ships have been completely destroyed. Significant damage to two others."

Four-thousand of my troops! Verun thought with genuine shock. *Wiped out in a single blow.* He could not fathom that a Federation crew would engage in a suicide run against his task force. It was beyond the pale. The weak, effete Federation was not supposed to possess such mettle.

"Multiple hull breaches and major systems damage from debris impacts," came the report from the engineering station.

* * *

Within a kilometers deep crevasse on an asteroid that could easily have been classified as a small moon, lay a conglomeration of escape pods, *Pétain's* single Autonomous Survival and Recovery Vehicle and the ship's sole shuttle. They had been hurriedly cobbled together to create a primitive habitat even smaller in volume than their original ship. Over top of this makeshift shelter had been constructed a façade that mimicked the surface of the asteroid, the structure further masked by employing thoron fields to scatter sensor returns.

Here it was hoped Raffaele and his crew could hide and wait until Starfleet had retaken the region. It was a slim hope, as Sorel had insisted on pointing out, but as he had discovered Humans were irritatingly good at playing even the longest odds.

Having remotely piloted *Pétain* to warp, Raffaele now turned to favor Sorel with a strangely detached expression. "And there we are. I've just consigned thousands of Cardassian personnel to death. I believe that I may now be considered a war criminal, Lieutenant."

His opening assault on the invading Cardassians had been effective, but in return it had cost him everything. There would be no hew and cry when a drunkard intelligence officer was put to trial for conduct unbecoming. The warp-ramming of troop ships and the employment of minefields were anathema to the righteous morality espoused by the upper echelons of Starfleet Command. It was simply not how things were done, no matter how desperate the circumstances.

Sorel regarded him with an expression devoid of overt emotion, but the cast of his eyes spoke volumes to Raffaele. "Lieutenant Commander Raffaele, I hereby relieve you of duty and place you under arrest until such time a board of inquiry may be convened to review your recent actions."

"I understand."

Sorel produced a bottle of Teeling single malt Irish whiskey that he had been saving to present to Raffaele at the conclusion of their tour together. "Seeing as we are effectively stranded here, I would simply ask you to retire to your sleeping arrangements. I trust that this will make your confinement somewhat more... bearable?"

Raffaele took the bottle and momentarily seemed about to be overcome with emotion. He cleared his throat. "It will. Thank you."

* * *

Chapter 10

Nehru Colonial Command Center, Arandis IV

Colony Director Ciadra McCullough presented the calm eye in the center of a storm of activity. All applicable contingency plans had been enacted, all preparations that could be made were underway. The population had been evacuated to shielded survival bunkers and all defensive systems were on high alert. Now all that remained was gleaning what little intelligence could be had from Starfleet and civilian sources, a mish-mash of sensor logs from civilian transports and hourly updates from Starfleet's massive Archimedes Array.

McCullough had been apprised of multiple Starfleet delaying actions that had bought her colony much needed preparation time, but now a wing of the Cardassian invasion force was only hours away from the Arandis system.

Hal Lindström, the colony's assistant director, approached with a padd in hand. His expression was drawn, even more serious than he'd been the past few days. "Boss, I finally received confirmation from Starfleet on the ship they're sending us. You're not going to like it."

She quickly scanned the document, her eyes widening in unwelcome surprise. "A cadet training ship? We're facing a full-scale invasion, and they're sending a starship full of raw recruits?"

Lindström winced in sympathy. "It *is* a fully equipped starship, Constellation-class. Hell, they were supposed to be a sector-and-a-half away on a training mission but her captain diverted here when the invasion kicked off."

"I suppose under the circumstances we should be grateful," she sighed. "I'd feared Starfleet wouldn't be able to muster a ship to send to our defense at all. If it has to be one full of green-as-grass cadets, so be it."

Ai Zhijuan, the colony's chief constable, approached wearing full body armor and cradling a phaser rifle. In the decade that Ciadra had known her, she had never seen Zhijuan so equipped. The most common crimes within the colony were occasional brawls in drinking establishments or petty theft, usually carried out by bored adolescents. The colony's constables typically carried nothing more dangerous than a stun-baton.

McCullough looked Zhijuan up and down, muttering, "Is it bad that I didn't even know you *had* that kind of gear?"

Lindström imparted a curious look at the director but held his tongue.

Zhijuan was actually able to muster a small grin despite the circumstances. "Probably." She slung the rifle over her shoulder with a self-conscious frown. "I'm going to need a priority channel to the starship when they're in real-time comms range to arrange surface defenses with their security personnel."

"We're already on it. They'll be RT in twenty minutes and word has it they're already putting together plans to supplement your constables and our home-guard volunteers."

"Good to hear." Zhijuan affirmed. "Dare I ask who gets here first, Starfleet or the Cardassians?"

McCullough and Lindström shared a look before the director said, "Based on what we know at present, the starship should be here at least six hours before the Cardassians arrive."

Zhijuan blew out a breath. "That's a pretty narrow margin."

"Tell me about it," McCullough grumbled.

Zhijuan turned to Lindström. "How's Fergus coming with that transporter scrambler?"

The big Swede grinned. "Very nearly finished. For something he cobbled together out of spare parts, it's pretty ingenious. From what little I know about the ones Starfleet employs, Fergus' version is about twenty-percent more powerful with a third greater range."

"Heavens bless that man," McCullough breathed.

"I doubt very much if our new Cardassian friends are going to be blessing him," Lindström said with an evil grin.

* * *

Officers, cadets, and enlisted personnel jostled past one another as they navigated *Sagan's* narrow corridors in response to the red alert klaxon.

Commander th'Skaar's voice carried over the intraship, "*Now hear this, all personnel are to report to their primary alert duty stations. All those selected for landing-party detail report to transporter rooms one and two. Duty gear will be issued prior to departure. Medical and damage control teams assemble at your designated rally points and await further instructions.*"

Lar'ragos was observing Chief Petty Officer Kurati demonstrate how to don a pressurized fire-fighting garment when Commander Morozov tapped him on the shoulder and gestured for him to step out into the corridor.

Lar'ragos followed grudgingly, glancing back towards the demonstration, clearly not wanting to miss any critical details.

"You won't be needing one of those where we're going," Morozov apprised him.

Lar'ragos' head snapped back around and his eyes narrowed. "Sir?"

"Mister Bartolo tells me you were a soldier in a former life, and he suspects you were likely a good one. Is that accurate?"

Lar'ragos hesitated. "It is, though it was a long time ago, sir."

Morozov nodded reluctantly. "I see. I'm truly sorry but leaving you up here to patch holes in the hull is a waste of talent. I need you down there with us."

Lar'ragos gestured to the blue collar of his uniform jumpsuit. "I'm Sciences now, sir. I—I don't know if I'd do you any good down there."

Morozov leaned in, whispering, "We both know the likelihood of *Sagan* surviving the next few hours is effectively zero. Staying up here is a death sentence. I'm giving you the chance to stand on your own two feet down there."

"Please don't do this," Lar'ragos pleaded. "You don't know what you're asking—"

"That's why I'm not asking, Mister Lar'ragos. This isn't about what you want. It's about what's needed. We *need* soldiers. If nothing else, you can help Bartolo keep an eye on young Mister Sandhurst. We'll have to run interference for our support personnel down there, to keep them safe so they can do their jobs."

The El-Aurian took a deep, steady breath and nodded. "Understood. May I be so bold as to stipulate conditions, Commander?" he asked.

Morozov appeared curious. "Go on."

"I'm not fighting in this," Lar'ragos said, gesturing to his form-fitting cadet jumpsuit. He then pointed to the 'dust-buster' style phaser Morozov was armed with. "Or with one of those ridiculous things. How can you expect to shoot straight?"

Lar'ragos outlined his demands quickly.

"Fine, go gear up." Morozov allowed. "I'll authorize your specialty items as a priority for the replicator. Transporter room two, twenty minutes."

* * *

As soon as the transporter's confinement beam had released him, Sandhurst slung the strap from his engineering kit over one shoulder and hefted the supply crate at his feet in both hands. He began trudging along with his cohort towards the cluster of buildings they had beamed down near. So focused was he on the task at hand that it barely registered that this was the first planet outside the Sol system that he'd set foot on. In fact, aside from a trip to Utopia Planitia on Mars earlier that year, he'd never left Earth.

Ahead he could see Commander Morozov speaking with a civilian as a team of colonist engineers behind them erected fortifications with robotic industrial movers along a ferroconcrete surfaced roadway.

Lieutenant Petrich announced, "Alright, everyone set the gear down here until we know where it's needed. Take the opportunity to re-check your phasers and confirm they're set to heavy stun."

Sandhurst withdrew the bulky hand phaser from its holster at his waist and activated the setting display. He verified it was set to the appropriate discharge level and re-holstered the weapon. The moment felt decidedly surreal, as he'd only ever handled phasers in training simulations previously.

Petrich stepped back to the group of mingling crewmen and cadets. "Mister Borensen here is directing the construction of a choke point where we'll be setting up some of our automated phaser emplacements and portable shield generators. Latest reports have the Cardassians at four hours out from planetfall. Time is of the essence, so let's move!"

Sandhurst busied himself for the next hour helping to set up multiple automated phaser banks and shield generators, creating a 'fatal funnel' along what was projected to be a main avenue of Cardassian advance into the colony. As he worked, he noted that the civilians working alongside their Starfleet contingent were focused and professional. There were no signs of panic or disorder that he might have expected of people who were only hours away from invasion. Their proximity to the Cardassian border must have something to do with it, he mused. It struck him that if it were Earth that faced such grim circumstances, the response might have been quite different.

As he knelt calibrating a shield generator's emitter, Sandhurst noticed a pair of heavy duty boots step up to him. He glanced up to see an irritated looking Lar'ragos standing over him.

"Oh, hello there," Sandhurst offered brightly. "I thought you were staying on the ship."

"Me too," Lar'ragos replied gruffly. He was clad in an ensemble Sandhurst had only seen in history holos. This was a uniform variant from the more rough-and-tumble days of the late 23rd century. The old field duty uniform consisted of a durable tan British commando-style sweater

over turtleneck undershirt. Over the sweater he wore security armor that covered his shoulders and torso, also a throwback to that earlier era. His lower half was adorned in military-style cargo pants held up by an equipment belt festooned with gear. His combadge was affixed to his armored breastplate.

It appeared that rather than the current style hand phaser the rest of them were armed with, Lar'ragos had a late-23rd century pistol phaser in a holster strapped to his leg. It was a menacing looking black and metallic number.

Sandhurst stood, pointing at Lar'ragos' belt as he did so. "Geez, is that a grenade?"

Lar'ragos nodded toward the shield emitter. "Mind your work. I'm here posting guard so that you can do your thing undisturbed."

"Uh, right. Sure." Sandhurst moved to where a civilian was sinking bolts into the concrete roadway to support the next shield emitter. As he opened a carrying case containing the disassembled emitter, Lar'ragos took up a position from where he could see Sandhurst and the other engineering personnel from their group.

Bartolo walked up to Lar'ragos, fresh from a conference with Lieutenant Petrich. "The lieutenant wants us covering this area when the attack begins. We're to hold here and give the others time to fall back to secondary positions before retreating by bounds." He looked Lar'ragos up and down. "What the hell are you wearing?"

The older man's response was flat, devoid of the deference one typically showed a superior officer. "Combat gear, or the nearest thing I could find in the Starfleet database. Your people used to wear this for killing Klingons. That's good enough for me." Lar'ragos turned to survey the scene, frowning. "Who picked this as a choke point?" He gestured in an easterly direction. "You see that hill? It'd be very easy to flank us, take position on the high ground there, and pound us to dust with indirect fire."

"Indirect?"

"Mortars," Lar'ragos offered. "Conventional explosive or plasma if we're lucky. If we're unlucky, they might even have photon mortar rounds. That'd make for a really bad day."

Bartolo gave the overlooking hill a long look. "I'm not sure who decided to make this a strong point. Probably the colonists before we arrived."

"Well, regardless, I'd advise sending a squad up there to secure that hill before the Cardassians arrive."

"I'll be sure to mention it to Commander Morozov," Bartolo said with a frown.

"You do that," Lar'ragos replied, spitting into the dirt at his feet.

* * *

Dr. Cavanaugh looked around to her assembled staff who were all gathered around on her in the center of Sickbay. Nurses, medical technicians, and medical-division cadets all carried treatment satchels and medical tricorders.

"Trust in your training and your abilities. I've been coaching you on emergency medicine and battle triage for over a week, and you're ready for this. I know you're anxious, and for many of you this will be your first time in combat. Remember to keep your wits about you, because you can't save lives if you're panicking. When things get hectic, and they will, remember to breath and focus on the task in front of you. Your training will kick in and you'll know what to do." She offered a confident smile to the group. "Please move to your alert duty posts."

As the personnel trickled out of Sickbay, Cavanaugh turned back to calibrating medical tricorders that would be placed in emergency medical kits to be distributed to the bridge, engineering, and other critical areas of the ship.

"As speeches go, it was short, simple, and poignant. Nicely done."

Cavanaugh started with a quiet gasp then turned to see Captain Tinubu standing behind her, the merest hint of a smirk gracing her features. "I really wish you wouldn't do that, Captain."

Tinubu shrugged. "Sneaky captain's prerogative." She gestured to the CMO's nearby office. "Join me please, Doctor."

Cavanaugh followed her into the office. The doctor waited until the captain had seated herself in a guest chair before she slid into the seat behind her desk. "What can I do for you, Captain?"

As was her habit when delivering bad news, Tinubu began without preamble. "Carol, I'm going to need for you to collect your staff, to include all of your cadets, gather what medical equipment and supplies you can muster and beam down to the planet. You'll be supplementing the civilian medical community in the colony and helping to treat our surface battle casualties."

Cavanaugh's eyes widened in alarm. "Captain, we're about to go into battle with—well, I'm not even sure how many Cardassian ships. There are sure to be casualties on board. I can't leave that kind of workload behind for untrained personnel to cope with. It wouldn't be medically ethical, and it would be an abrogation of my Hippocratic oath!"

Tinubu's eyes softened and she leaned forward, exuding candor. "Carol, this is a one-way trip. We have no chance of stopping the Cardassians

in orbit, only slowing their advance and hopefully whittling down their numbers in the process. Once we've engaged them, our life expectancy will likely be measured in minutes."

"A suicide-mission, you mean?"

"I'm afraid so," Tinubu confirmed. "We won't last long enough to warrant keeping medical personnel onboard. You'd all just die needlessly with the rest of us. At least down on the surface you can help make a real difference."

As she slumped back in her chair, Cavanaugh shook her head in disbelief. "It can't be that grim, that certain, Adi. It just *can't*."

"And yet it is," Tinubu countered. "Believe me, this isn't how I saw my career ending, let alone my life. Regardless, this is the card we've been dealt. We have an obligation to place ourselves between our colonists and the rampaging Cardassians."

Cavanaugh briefly covered her eyes with her hand, fighting back tears. "I meant that I'm not ready to lose you, or th'Skaar." She laughed bitterly through her grief. "I'm a physician, death is part of my profession, and yet I can't wrap my head around losing either of you. After everything we survived in the Tyresian Expanse, to think that things should turn out like this!"

"Every story has an end," Tinubu said quietly. "I'm not looking forward to it by any means, but dying in defense of the helpless isn't the worst way to go."

Cavanaugh stood abruptly, turning away from Tinubu. "I'm glad you can be so cavalier about this!"

"I'm being realistic, Carol." Tinubu stood, reaching out a hand and placing it on the doctor's shoulder. "I will miss you my friend. I hope you and Evgeni come through this. At least our little 'family' would live on through the two of you."

The doctor's shoulders shuddered as she wept silently, unable to form a reply.

"You have thirty minutes to assemble your people and equipment, Doctor."

With that Tinubu exited as silently as she had entered, leaving Cavanaugh to collect herself.

* * *

Chapter 11

USS Sagan

“Cardassian attack force has dropped out of warp at the system boundary, Captain,” Ops reported. “Four cruisers, three destroyers, five escorts, and eight troop carriers in javelin formation.”

“Acknowledged,” Tinubu said, turning her gaze to th’Skaar at the helm. “They’ll either hold that formation and drive straight for the colony or they’ll split up and attempt a pincer or envelopment maneuver.”

“Yes, sir,” th’Skaar answered. “Only time will tell.”

“ETA?” she asked.

“Thirty seven minutes if they maintain their course and remain at three-quarters impulse, sir.”

Tinubu called over her shoulder to the tactical officer. “Status of our minefield?”

“We’re dropping the last string now, sir. Estimated ten minutes until that’s completed.”

Lieutenant Vantley turned back from Ops to regard Tinubu. “Sir, I’m obligated to point out that deploying mines is in direct violation of several Starfleet regulations and Federation laws.”

Tinubu smiled grimly. “I’ll be sure to note that in my log, Lieutenant. However, as Starfleet traditionally doesn’t pursue posthumous courts-martial, we’re not likely to face prosecution.”

The bridge crew shared in a moment of mordant levity before Tinubu directed them all back to the mission at hand.

“Our priority will be the troop ships. We’ll try and draw the cruisers out and then double back to make a run on their transports. The more of those we can destroy or disable, the better chance the colony has to survive until help arrives.”

The bridge crew nodded their understanding.

“I thank you all for volunteering to remain behind with me,” Tinubu offered. “It was easy to speak the words of our oath when we were first inducted. This... this is where our true mettle is proved. May fortune favor our endeavor here today.”

* * *

Civil Safety Shelter #2 – Nehru Colony

Daniel Craddock stepped into the small operations room that controlled the shields and power systems of the bunker complex, nodding to Nina Acharya as he did so.

“Safety seals check out,” he reported. “Atmospheric processors are optimal, and we’ve topped off the replicatable matter stores.”

Acharya blew out a relieved sigh. “Glad to hear it. Now we can button this baby up tight and wait for the cavalry. It’ll take the Cardies a lot of time and firepower to punch through our shields.”

Cardies, Craddock reflected. It was strange that for the briefest of moments, he’d actually shared Acharya’s dread of the Cardassians. He was legitimately sad that Nina was on ops duty today, as he rather liked her. Hers had always been a calm, steady, and positive influence on the people around her.

Craddock stepped forward as he withdrew the plasma torch from his tool belt. He activated the device and jammed it against Acharya’s neck as she began to turn, reacting to the sound of the torch igniting. Her scream was mercifully cut short as the torch killed her almost instantly.

He eased her body gently to the floor, struggling with overwhelming regret for having had to murder her. It was his duty, of course. It had been for just such an eventuality that he had been surgically altered and sent to live here among the Humans some two decades earlier.

He was from a poor family, and his service to the state had provided his parents and siblings with food and shelter, things they would have otherwise lacked. Now, despite his reservations, he would carry through with his mission. To refuse or to fail would result in the death of whatever family of his still remained on the homeworld. Such was the price of obedience to the Obsidian Order.

Craddock severed the communications and data links to the colony’s main operations center, knowing that an armed response would arrive within minutes to investigate. However, the same formidable defenses that were designed to thwart Cardassian invaders would prevent the colony’s constabulary from making forced entry before it was too late. He locked and secured the door to the operations room and sealed all of the shelter’s interior pressure doors to prevent anyone inside from attempting to stop him.

He then released the primary safeties on the bunker’s fusion reactor and spent long minutes introducing the painstakingly crafted computer

viruses smuggled to him weeks earlier that would disengage all remaining safety overrides and allow the reactor to go supercritical.

Two thousand of the Nehru Colony's thirty thousand inhabitants would be consumed in the ensuing explosion. The facility's shields would prevent the five-megaton detonation from annihilating the rest of the colony, but the collateral damage would be extensive.

Eight kilometers away, another surgically altered Cardassian operative was carrying out the same treachery in Shelter #5. Following these attacks, it was expected that the remaining shelters would be evacuated to prevent any additional sabotage from claiming further lives.

That would send tens of thousands of civilians into the streets just as the Cardassian invasion force touched down, throwing what had been a prepared defense by the constabulary, home-guard, and Starfleet ground forces into utter chaos. Now their foes would have to struggle to shepherd panicked civilians as Cardassian troops closed in.

Craddock, or more correctly Agent Velis Kinaar entered the final command string into the computer to push the fusion reactor into overload.

He paused before toggling the final key stroke and closed his eyes. "My life for Cardassia," he whispered before unleashing hell upon the very people he had spent the last twenty years with.

* * *

A famished Sandhurst was munching on a Starfleet survival ration bar when his combadge chirped and Morozov's voice issued from it. *"Sagan has signaled that they've engaged the Cardassian force in high orbit. We can expect Cardassians on the surface in minutes. Be prepared for them to beam in or to come down in landing craft. This is it, people. Take up your assigned positions and remember to confer with your civilian counterparts."*

He took a swig from his canteen and then put it back in his backpack. Hefting his pack onto his back, Sandhurst fell in with the rest of his engineering support team as they moved to a small bunker constructed from newly poured ferroconcrete over a tritanium mesh. From here they would monitor the status of their portable shield generators and automated phaser emplacements, ensuring that the power feeds from the firehose like EPS trunk running between them was maintained.

As he hustled towards the bunker, he could hear a familiar voice raised in agitation.

"So, you're telling me nobody's going to clear and secure that hilltop?"

Sandhurst paused to see Lar'ragos facing off against one of the colony's constables as Cadet Bartolo stood by.

The constable looked to Bartolo. "Is this guy one of yours or is he some kind of historical reenactor who wandered in here?"

"Don't talk to him, talk to me!" Lar'ragos demanded, taking a step closer to the man. "If the Cardies get a fire team up there, we're finished. This whole elaborate 'choke point' of yours is going to last all of five minutes, and then they'll sweep into the colony through here."

"I don't know who the hell you think you are, Cadet, but you'd better step back before—" the man reached out a hand to push Lar'ragos back and was surprised when Bartolo caught his wrist and forced his arm down.

"Trust me," Bartolo said, "you really don't want to do that."

"I'm not trying to get into a pissing contest with you," Lar'ragos pressed, "but you're ignoring some very basic rules of surface warfare here."

"I understand you think that," the man replied hotly. "Just what makes you such an expert?"

Lar'ragos paused, shooting a guilty look at Bartolo before replying to the constable. "Because I used to plan and execute attacks just like the ones the Cardassians are carrying out here." He pointed to the hill. "And seizing that high ground to use it against you would have been a priority for me."

"Well, if you want to hike all the way up there and—"

A breathtaking flash of light erupted to the west, causing all of them to reflexively cover their eyes. A shockwave convulsed the ground just a moment before a wall of wind and debris knocked everyone standing in the open off their feet.

People cried out, crawling or scuttling behind whatever cover was nearest. Amid the coughing and cursing someone began screaming, "Orbital bombardment! Orbital bombardment!"

Sandhurst had fallen backwards into the makeshift bunker during the explosion and came staggering out to help Bartolo, Lar'ragos and the constable to their feet. All three men were blinking rapidly, trying to clear their vision from the effects of the blinding flare of light.

"What the hell was *that*?" the constable croaked.

"Something went boom," Lar'ragos said helpfully.

The group heard the whine of intermittent phaser and stunner fire as panicked defenders began shooting at sensor ghosts and fluttering debris in the twilight.

Bartolo grouched, "That's just great. Now they're giving away our firing positions."

The Starfleeter's combadges erupted with static, followed by Morozov's voice which sounded tinny and distorted with electromagnetic interference. *"This is Morozov at Colony Operations. We've detected a fusion explosion at one of the civil defense shelters. It appears the shields there contained much of the detonation, which is why we're all still here. The colony director is telling me that shouldn't have been possible, and they're looking into it. For now, maintain your defensive positions under cover in case this isn't an isolated incident. We have no verified reports of any Cardassian boots on the ground as yet. I repeat, no verified reports of Cardassian troops on the surface. Sagan and the colony's orbital defenses are still engaging the enemy."*

Sandhurst looked up and could just make out faint traces of energy beams and flashes in the darkening sky he presumed were explosions.

Bartolo chucked Lar'ragos on the shoulder. "I'm going to go get our people sorted out and instill some trigger discipline. *Sagan's* doing their job, it's time we did ours." He pointed to Sandhurst, and then up to the hill that had so agitated Lar'ragos. "Take Sandhurst and a squad up there and set up the last of our phaser turrets. I don't want the Cardassians dominating the local terrain."

"On it, sir," Lar'ragos nodded. And he meant it. Whatever Bartolo lacked in experience, the young man made up for it in raw charisma and solid judgment. He was a natural leader, the kind that inspired loyalty, even in a man nearly four-hundred years his senior.

* * *

The troop compartment of the aged drop ship reeked of solvent, lubricants and the stink of too many nervous men crammed together into too tight a space.

Dal Durak Var wondered if this old workhorse of a landing craft had ever carried his father into battle a generation earlier. He reflected bitterly that while he and his comrades would have to descend into the target planet's gravity well on this rickety museum piece, risking being blotted out of the sky by enemy weapons, the Second Order's elite commandos and shock troops would be allowed to utilize the Union's new transporter technology to simply materialize on the surface.

Such was the fate of a Cardassian conscript, he mused. To suffer countless dangers and risk spilling one's blood in the dirt of an alien planet, all for the greater glory of the state. He gripped the barrel of his pulse rifle that sat butt-plate to the deck with its neck held between his knees. The ancient scatter-gun was cocooned in a leather scabbard slung over one shoulder.

Var jostled against the hard, narrow jump seat as the drop ship screamed into the atmosphere, maneuvering violently to try and throw off the enemy's targeting scanners.

Across from him Arvik sat rigidly in his seat, his face a rictus of naked terror as the craft plummeted down the gravity well.

"Is this the grand adventure you'd hoped?" Var shouted across to him.

In response, Arvik struggled valiantly to keep from throwing up.

Var glanced over his shoulder out the milky, pitted viewport just in time to see another drop ship holed through by a phaser beam. Flaming bodies tumbled out the breach as the craft yawed wildly and then exploded.

Var returned to studying the juddering barrel of his rifle as his recently departed comrades rained towards the surface far below like blazing comets.

* * *

"Tighter turn radius," Tinubu gasped as she pulled herself back into the command chair.

Consoles flickered, fizzled and sent goutts of sparks into the already smoke-laden air of the bridge. The reek of burning electronics and plastics assaulted Tinubu's nose as she reflected distractedly that Ensign Kaigler's body had broken her fall after the last volley of Cardassian missiles had savaged *Sagan's* port shields.

Th'Skaar's only response was a pained grunt as he slewed the ship between a Cardassian destroyer and the wreckage of a frigate they'd immolated during their last pass through the enemy formation.

"Two enemy transports to starboard!" Lieutenant Saadeh called from the Science station, one of the few left operable on the bridge's outer ring.

The Tactical console chimed repeatedly, signifying outgoing phaser fire directed by th'Skaar on the cruiser as *Sagan* streaked past. He swung the ship hard over and suddenly visible through the wavering, static-filled viewscreen were two of the large troop ships disgorging a swarm of landing craft.

"Torpedoes!" Tinubu ordered. An instant later, crimson orbs of destructive energy rifled from *Sagan's* forward tubes to blast apart both transports and a handful of drop ships caught in the troop ship's death throes.

Another jolting impact seemed to slam the starship sideways, beginning a lateral spin that th'Skaar struggled to correct.

“That’s it for the port and ventral shields!” Vantley cried out from Ops, as he labored to glean data from flickering readouts.

“Phaser energy is dropping,” th’Skaar growled, throwing a few weakening beams at a cruiser that had just stumbled into one of their mines.

“EPS junctions are out all over the ship,” Vantley confirmed. “Engineering has their hands full just trying to keep the main reactor online right now.”

“Okay, let’s fall back to the planet,” Tinubu ordered. “The defense grid can take some of the heat off us. We need to pick off the rest of those drop ships.”

“Still... still trying bring us around,” th’Skaar gurgled, forcing himself to ignore the bluish blood welling from his neck. “Helm’s... sluggish.”

A cruiser, flanked by a damage frigate, bore down on the wounded *Sagan* as she slewed to-and-fro under diminished helm control.

Knowing that th’Skaar had his hands full with flight control, Vantley quickly reconfigured his console for weapons control and lashed the oncoming vessels with a volley of torpedoes and the last of their dwindling phaser energy.

The prow of the oncoming cruiser buckled under the onslaught and she veered hard away, trailing atmosphere. The frigate, however, continued on undaunted.

Saadeh cried out a warning, “Collision course!” as she tried in vain to reroute all remaining shield power to cover that quarter.

Tinubu shouted, “Emergency power to shield—”

The two craft met at a combined velocity of nearly half-impulse, one-eighth the speed of light. The blossoming antimatter explosion that marked their union could be seen from the surface.

Sagan’s fight was now bequeathed to her personnel on the surface of Arandis IV and the civilians they sought to safeguard.

* * *

Chapter 12

Colony Operations Center – Arandis IV

Chaos reigned as frantic console operators tried to determine the source and reason behind the massive detonation. The electromagnetic pulse that had accompanied the explosion was wreaking havoc on all manner of data systems, especially as the aging LCARS operating systems in use here were not hardened like their military-grade counterparts utilized by Starfleet.

Morozov stood from where he'd sheltered behind a bank of consoles, thankful that the transparent aluminum windows had withstood the blast. He desperately wished he were out on the front line with a phaser in his hand rather than trapped here as a glorified data-jockey. Morozov glanced towards Director McCullough as she picked herself up off the floor and immediately moved to study the colony's status monitors.

"It was Shelter Two!" someone called out above the din. "We'd just lost data telemetry and comms with them. We sent a squad of Home Guard to make contact but hadn't heard back yet."

"The readings are consistent with the bunker's reactor overloading," a technician announced.

"Not possible!" McCullough raged. "There are a dozen separate safeties to prevent that!"

"It can't be a coincidence," Morozov said to the director. "There may be Cardassian infiltrators or commando units here already."

"Not a chance," came the response from a Home Guard colonel manning their communications station. "We've got personnel guarding all critical infrastructure—" he stopped mid-sentence, touching a hand to his comms earpiece.

One of the technicians looked up from her console. "The bunker's shields remained up just long enough for the shield blister to contain nearly eighty percent of the blast." She shook her head in disbelief. "If not, the explosion would have taken out most of the settlement."

McCullough's face paled as the full weight of the disaster finally settled on her. "How many in that shelter?"

There was a brief pause before someone answered, "Around twenty-two hundred."

There were collective gasps and muttered curses in response.

Morozov took the opportunity to open a comms channel to all Starfleet personnel on the surface and update them as to the source of the explosion and the status of the Cardassian's incursion. "This is Morozov at Colony Operations. We've detected a fusion explosion at one of the civil defense shelters..."

Just as he completed his transmission, two troubling reports arrived nearly simultaneously. The Home Guard colonel called out, "Shelter Five reports they've just subdued a systems technician who tried to seize control of their Ops room. He killed two people before being overpowered by constables."

A sensor operator at a nearby station also noted, "Reading antimatter explosion in orbit. One of our satellites just recorded a spacecraft collision in the ionosphere." He shot a guilty glance at Morozov. "I—I'm sorry, Commander. I'm detecting energy signatures and debris consistent with a Federation starship warp reactor breach."

Morozov's head dropped fractionally as he struggled to maintain composure. Two of his oldest, closest friends were dead, along with nearly a hundred and fifty others who'd volunteered to remain aboard during *Sagan's* final stand. He'd known that this was the likeliest outcome, but part of him had still held out hope for some kind of miraculous last moment reprieve. There had been so many close calls in their time together aboard *Prokofiev*, the kind of odds-defying narrow escapes that led one to subconsciously believe that the no-win scenario was just a myth.

No longer.

He raised his gaze to meet McCullough's expectant stare. "I'm sorry about your ship and crew," she offered.

Morozov nodded numbly in response. "*Spasibo*," he murmured.

"Commander," she pressed regretfully. "I'm going to presume that it's the Cardassians behind the destruction of our civil shelter and the attempted takeover of the other. What would you estimate the probability is there will be attempts on the other shelters?"

"Can't say," he replied heavily. "If it's the Obsidian Order that's turning colonists into saboteurs, there could be dozens of them. They are very good at what they do."

"Should we evacuate the shelters?" McCullough asked.

"Sensors now tracking inbound craft entering the upper atmosphere... they look to be landing ships," a voice called from the back of the room.

"I wouldn't," Morozov said, wincing at this latest report. "Now is the worst time to fill your streets with panicked civilians. I'd send Home Guard detachments to secure the ops rooms of the remaining shelters. It sounds as if they're sending single operatives to each bunker."

McCullough nodded, gesturing to the Home Guard colonel. "Get a squad to each bunker's ops center."

"Orbital defenses are continuing to engage the Cardassian ships in orbit, planetary defenses now opening fire on the descending drop ships."

Morozov folded his arms across his chest as he watched the outbound weapons fire on the tactical plot map. He crossed his fingers surreptitiously under his arms, murmuring a silent prayer to whatever deities oversaw this region of the universe that their aim would be true.

* * *

Lar'ragos led a team of ten Starfleet personnel up the hill, lugging two mobile phaser emitters, forty meters of coiled power cable and a bulky sarium-krellide battery pack between them. Most of the group were armed only with hand-phasers, though three of them cradled the awkward, bulbous-ended Type-III rifles that Starfleet had recently issued. These were weapons, Lar'ragos suspected, that had never been tested under actual combat conditions.

He had studied Starfleet history thoroughly before enlisting and knew that the organization had a tendency to forget lessons learned at great cost by previous generations. Vicious battles had been waged against the Xindi, Romulans, Klingons and a host of others, but despite the brutality of those conflicts, Starfleet would inevitably bend back towards a more pacifist stance. This trend historically culminated in a lowering of the Federation's collective guard just in time for the next war to break out.

Starfleet personnel and civilians would then die needlessly before the more martial among their ranks rose to prominence and rediscovered the secrets of warfare that the service as a whole had forgotten. It was a damned shame, Lar'ragos thought, given how incomparably rare a gift the Federation was to the galaxy.

It was full dark by now as the group huffed up the steep incline following a narrow switch-back trail. The only ambient light was provided by Arandis IV's twin moons, both in waxing crescent that delivered an anemic light onto the surrounding terrain.

A stuttering coughing sound issued from the east and the team's heads turned as one in that direction. A volley of photon torpedoes, launched from their silos by compressed gas, ignited into fiery red brilliance as their thrusters kicked in and slashed skyward.

"That means assault teams are landing," Lar'ragos remarked to the others. Securing the chest strap of his backpack, Lar'ragos started off again, double-time. "Let's get to the top and set up our observation post."

Just as the team crested the hill, brilliant strobes of phaser fire began to erupt from emplacements along the western ridge of the valley. They turned to observe the blossoms of distant explosions in the night sky where the beams terminated, followed by flaming debris that fell like bright smears of luminous liquid flowing across dark glass.

Lar'ragos directed the others, and the group unpacked their backpacks to begin assembling the portable phaser emitters they'd lugged up the hill. Meanwhile, the El-Aurian removed a tube-like device from his own pack and began setting it up on a base plate. Chief Petty Officer Schäfer knelt next to him, retrieving a large carrying case from his own pack and setting it down gently next to Lar'ragos. Schäfer unfastened the clasps on the case and opened it to reveal dozens of ping-pong ball sized spheres swaddled in padded egg-crate, each emblazoned with tiny cautionary emblems.

"Do you know how to use this?" Schäfer asked him.

"Oh, yes." Lar'ragos picked one of the spheres up and examined it gingerly. "To hold the high ground while in possession of a photon mortar is no small gift," he breathed reverentially.

Schäfer shared his conspiratorial grin. "Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights," he quoted from ancient scripture.

"Amen," Lar'ragos agreed as placed the mortar round back in its case and returned to assembling the mortar tube.

Without warning, a high-pitched whine filled the air and nearly two dozen cascading columns of energy began to form in a cluster near the hill's peak.

Lar'ragos froze, momentarily transfixed by this sight, only to be spurred to action by Chief Schäfer's shout of, "Transporter! Take cover!"

The team scattered and Lar'ragos drew his phaser pistol as he moved to take cover behind an outcropping of rock.

A phaser beam from one of their number caromed off the transporter's annular confinement beam, prompting a shout of, "Cease fire, cease fire!" from the chief. "Wait until they've materialized!"

There was a horrendous shrieking sound, like dozens of voices howling in surprised agony as the contents of those beams began to roil and distort. Then, as suddenly as it had arrived, the transporter effect faded, the harrowing screech echoing for a moment longer before blessed silence fell upon the hilltop.

"Mother of God," the chief muttered.

"What— what the hell was that?" Lar'ragos stared at where the apparition had been an instant earlier.

Sandhurst stepped forward, illuminated by multiple flashlights. “Transport scrambler field,” he said with a knowing bob of his head. He squinted against the light from the palm beacons for a second before turning and stumbling away a few paces to evacuate his stomach into some scrub brush. After a few shuddering gasps he continued, “I heard – heard one of the Home Guard soldiers saying that they’d cobbled together a homemade transport inhibitor.” Sandhurst rose shakily, looking pale. “Seems pretty effective.”

A roaring sound emanating from the direction of the incoming drop ships caused the assembled Starfleet team to crouch and look for cover. Nearly fifty jets of drive flame, all that was visible from a wave of guided missiles, flashed overhead to impact the western ridge where the colony’s planetary defense phaser arrays were housed. A rippling string of explosions tore across the ridge with secondary detonations following in their wake.

“This... is getting intense,” Sandhurst muttered aloud to himself. He stumbled on his way back to where he’d been calibrating the newly assembled phaser emitter at the top of one of the trails to the crest of the hill. He felt a strong hand help him back to his feet and turned to see Lar’ragos aiding him. “You were right about war, this is crazy.”

“We’re not even to the worst parts yet,” Lar’ragos said, more to himself than to Sandhurst. He shook his head fractionally and gestured in the fading glow of the explosions for Sandhurst to resume his work.

* * *

Chapter 13

The drop ship bucked and slewed wildly as the pilot tried to evade incoming phaser and torpedo fire. What inertial dampening systems the old craft did have were primitive, and the passengers in the troop compartment were spared little of the g-forces generated by the ship's wild maneuvers. There were gasps, groans, and the sound of someone retching further down the line.

Var felt the thumps of the craft's missile payload dropping from the wing pylons and heard the whoosh of the rocket motors igniting even over the roar of the drop ship's own engines. The overhead lighting turned from orange to red, an indication that they were approximately two minutes from their landing zone.

Urtrim, their platoon's So-Dal, stood and grabbed hold of a steady bar above his head. The grizzled old sergeant called out above the whine of the engines, "Establish a perimeter around the ship when we egress. Make sure you know what you're shooting at before you pull the trigger. We've lost many of our comrades in orbit, and more on the way down, so we can't afford to go killing each other by accident. Our enemy has phasers that are more powerful than your pulse rifles. They also have surface shields. They are more advanced technically, but they are *soft!* We have been hardened by life on Cardassia. All the depravation, the hunger, the violence... surviving all of that has made each of us stronger than the mightiest among them. Remember that and show no mercy!"

The roar of guided anti-personnel rockets leaping from their pods signaled that the drop ship was saturating the landing zone.

"Weapons check!" Urtrim ordered.

Var checked the charge on his rifle's energy magazine and made sure that his three extra e-mags were secured in the pockets on his tactical vest. He leaned forward and moved his grandfather's ancient scatter-gun in its leather scabbard across his back from where it had dangled over one shoulder on their descent. His knife was securely sheathed on his belt and a coil of garotte wire was secreted in the inner wrist of his right tactical glove. He wore the heavy, padded, leather-like armor of conscript service. It would absorb physical blows and some shrapnel, but it would be useless against phaser weapons.

Now Var heard and felt the chatter of the drop ship's plasma turrets opening up from the ship's nose and sides, as the gunners bathed the landing zone in fire to suppress any remaining opposition to their disembarkation.

The engines whined louder as the craft slowed to land and the egress ramp at the front of the compartment slammed down with a crash.

"*Go, go, go!*" Urtrim yelled, prompting the troopers to rise in unison and charge forward with a collective cry of, "For Cardassia!"

Var followed the man in front of him down the ramp and onto the soil of an alien world. His boots kicked up dust and ash as the drop ship's nose cannon chattered away only two meters above him. Var threw himself down onto his stomach, sweeping the area immediately in front of him with the night-vision scope of his rifle. The air was heavy with the smell of burned vegetation and the ground was pocked with craters.

Behind him the engines of their drop ship roared as it lifted off. Another of its sister craft some two hundred meters to their left had unloaded first and was already airborne, only to be struck by multiple phaser impacts. The craft had no shields, and its antiquated polarized hull plating was insufficient against the state-of-the-art Federation phasers fired from the cluster of commercial buildings ahead of the advancing troops.

The stricken drop ship struggled valiantly to rise, even as flames licked the hull from a ruptured fuel line. Another fusillade of phasers halted its escape attempt by severing the ship's left wing and engine pod. Its nose dropped and with a protesting death-scream from its remaining engines, the craft slammed into the ground and cartwheeled in a flaming, rolling explosion. This maelstrom of destruction tumbled through the enemy's defensive line and sent debris raining down for hundreds of meters in every direction.

Rather than seek immediate escape, their platoon's drop ship made a beeline for the source of those beams and saturated that defensive strongpoint with its remaining rockets and a sustained burst from its plasma cannons. As it passed over the main defensive line the ship released two cannisters that detonated twenty meters from the ground, saturating the area in a wave of superheated plasma.

Var rose to a kneeling position, scanning the area through his rifle's scope. He could see some of the drop ship's fire absorbed by the enemy's shields, but those energy blisters only protected specific areas. Between the shield bubbles Var managed to make out what looked to be burning bodies and equipment scattered haphazardly.

A few enthusiastic conscripts in Var's platoon began shooting at the defense line but were quickly stopped by So-Dal Urtrim's angered shouts to cease fire. At this range all they were accomplishing was giving away their position.

Urtrim assumed a low crouch and motioned to the platoon to rise and follow him. He occasionally paused, touching a hand to his comms earpiece.

Var followed along, glancing back and to the sides trying to catch a glimpse of Arvik. Var wondered idly why the first defensive line was still there. The plan, at least to his limited understanding, had been for their commando and shock-troop units to transport in behind the primary and secondary defensive positions and attack them from the rear just prior to the main assault force making contact. That didn't appear to be happening.

So much for our plans, he thought darkly, clutching his rifle a bit more tightly.

From atop the hill, the Starfleet team watched as a flight of Cardassian drop ships flared out and disgorged their cargo of soldiers some five hundred meters shy of where Bartolo and the others had established their choke point in the commercial complex.

As Lar'ragos and Chief Schäfer finished assembling and ranging in the mortar, one of the drop ships was knocked out of the sky only to cut a blazing swath of destruction through one of the more heavily defended portions of the outer perimeter line. One of its sisters then delivered a devastating attack on the defenders with shockingly primitive weapons. There was frantic, confused comms traffic over their interlinked communicator network, panicked voices drowning one another out calling for help.

Cadet Waller, who was monitoring comms and message traffic on a tricorder, relayed, "Colony Ops is ordering the defensive line to pull back to the buildings. They're going to leave the surviving automated phaser canons to cover their withdrawal."

Schäfer raised his binoculars and switched to thermal imaging. "The troops those ships dropped off are on the move. Four hundred and seventy meters out from our line. I'm counting... somewhere in the vicinity of three-hundred and fifty of them."

Lar'ragos spared a moment to take a glance through the chief's binoculars as one of the departing drop ships roared overhead. "We took a pasting down there," he noted with a dissatisfied grunt.

Phaser beams began to lance out from the upper stories of the commercial buildings as sporadic plasma bolts lashed back in angry reply from the advancing Cardassians.

Schäfer clapped Lar'ragos on the shoulder. "Let's help cover our people as they fall back, Cadet."

"Aye, Chief," Lar'ragos confirmed. Schäfer scanned the position of the Cardassian infantry with his binoculars and transferred the coordinates to the mortar's ranging computer.

"Set the shells for stun discharge," Schäfer instructed. Lar'ragos looked skeptical but followed the senior enlisted man's instructions. True, Bartolo had placed Lar'ragos in charge of this group, but now wasn't the time to have a pissing match over authority. The El-Aurian harbored doubts about the wisdom of merely stunning enemy soldiers in this situation, but Starfleet's ethos had been drummed into him continuously during his first year at the academy.

Lar'ragos set the charge on the sphere as ordered, then double-checked the projected impact coordinates before dropping the sphere into the tube. There was a quiet 'pop' as the charge launched on an electromagnetic pulse. "On the way," Lar'ragos called out, a habit ingrained in him centuries earlier that he'd completely forgotten.

A minute and a half passed, during which time seemed to crawl. As they awaited the weapon's impact the group atop the hill watched as shoulder-fired missiles reached out from the advancing Cardassian formation to blast apart sections of the commercial buildings' upper stories. The returning phaser fire from those locations began to slacken.

Finally, having completed its two-kilometer arcing trajectory, the photon mortar round detonated some ten meters above a squad of Cardassians with a bright blue flash. The dozen soldiers within the blast radius immediately collapsed to the ground, insensate.

"Range is good," Schäfer judged. "Fire for effect!"

As Schäfer continued ranging targets and uploading the data to the mortar, Lar'ragos continued to calibrate and drop the spheres. Working in tandem, the two men managed to fire a round every four-to-seven seconds, walking the charges along the front wave of the Cardassian advance.

The forward ranks of troops faltered, though rocket fire from among their positions continued to savage the commercial structures, where multiple fires were now burning despite the best efforts of the buildings' fire-suppression systems.

Now the surviving automated phaser turrets began firing, bathing the follow-on formations of soldiers with stun energy. The beams reached out, fanning back and forth to cut down swaths of men like grain before the scythe.

Lar'ragos primed another round, but before he could drop the sphere into the mortar's waiting maw, the ground around him erupted and he felt himself catapulted into the air. He returned to consciousness a moment later, laying on his back and blinking dazedly skyward. A flurry of plasma bolts flashed across his vision, stitching a line of destruction across the hilltop only meters from where he lay.

A Cardassian drop ship screeched overhead, clearing the top of the hill by a scant fifty meters. The craft's cannons rained destruction down across the crest of the hill in zig-zag patterns. Lar'ragos' mind wandered lazily and he absently pondered why nobody had been scanning the vicinity for strafing aircraft. It occurred to him after a moment's consideration that his team was made up largely of his fellow cadets. *They were watching the show down below*, he surmised. *They're used to enemies beaming in to attack, not using landing craft that double as air-support. This is an older kind of warfare, one the Federation no longer understands.*

He brought up a trembling hand to activate his combadge, only to withdraw it with a painful start as he touched the scalding, faintly glowing dent in his armored vest. Lar'ragos realized just then that he had not breathed since waking and so attempted to draw in a gulp of air. He couldn't.

Well, he thought numbly, we're off to a great start...

* * *

Chapter 14

Var charged towards the four-story building with a squad of five other men, having separated from the larger platoon at So-Dal Urtrim's instruction. They were to stage a diversionary attack on the upper stories of the structure, already much abused by rocket and plasma-rifle fire. During their diversion, another squad led by Urtrim would gain entry to the building and clear the structure of defenders floor by floor.

Their platoon and others had taken significant casualties from the automated phaser emplacements and mortar fire before they'd been able to knock those damnable robotic devices offline. Their drop ship air-cover had strafed the hilltop and thankfully silenced the mortar.

Var skirted a smoking crater before taking cover behind a smoldering ground car tipped onto its side. From his vantage, he could see up into the defender's firing positions in the mangled third and fourth stories of one of the few buildings in the commercial center not engulfed in flames.

The occasional phaser beam lashed out from up there, targeted towards the Cardassian troop formations still advancing farther behind his platoon. Those above were apparently unaware the enemy had already closed with them.

Arvik dropped to a knee at the back of the upturned vehicle, calling softly to him. "We don't have an angle for a direct shot. Grenades?"

Grabbing a grenade from his torso harness, Var nodded soberly to his comrade. He primed it and waited for the digital timer to count down to three before lobbing it overhand through an already shattered third story window.

A bright flash and accompanying *whump* belched debris from the opening. Shouts and an injured shriek issued forth as Var and Arvik raised their pulse rifles for the expected reaction.

A silhouetted figure looked out the window and fired a broad swath of phaser energy down at the base of the building, causing the plants and grass there to wither and smoke. It was a futile gesture, as the attackers were sheltered behind cover a dozen meters farther out.

Var and Arvik opened fire in tandem, riddling the figure and the surrounding window frame with scores of plasma bolts.

There was a gasp from the figure before it collapsed forward and pitched out the window to hit the ground with an audible thud. Var peeked out around the car to see a female Human laying crumpled there, curlicues of smoke rising from multiple impacts.

Three others from Var's detachment, having found cover of their own, now began peppering the third and fourth stories with fire.

Only a few more phaser blasts came from the fourth story as follow on platoons began adding their fire to the increasing storm of Cardassian ire that gnawed away at what remained of the building's upper façade.

Var then heard more plasma weapons chattering from within the building. He motioned for his squad to cease fire as he used his comm-link to spread the word to units farther back. Intermittent flashes issued from within the structure, followed by yells and the occasional scream. After a few tense moments of waiting, a green flare was tossed out from what remained of a fourth story window. Their comms sounded with Urtrim's voice, "*Cease fire, we've secured the building!*"

The platoon rallied on the ground floor of the building, Urtrim's entry group supporting a wounded man between them who'd clearly been shot by a weapon set to something higher than the stun setting. Their medic attended to his wound as Urtrim briefed them.

"Good work," the So-Dal assessed gruffly. "There were more than fifteen defenders here, and we overcame them with only one man wounded. Most of their weapons are set to incapacitate, not to kill. Many of those we lost on the approach to these buildings are already being revived."

Arvik goggled, clearly perplexed. "Why would they do such a thing, So-Dal?"

"As I said," Urtrim replied, "they are soft. They actually believe displaying mercy on the battlefield is a virtue." He pointed up, gesturing to the battle just fought on the floors above. "Not a single one of them still breathes. None of them shall threaten Cardassia ever again."

Urtrim checked his digital-slate, receiving a download from his tactical interlink. "We've cleared out this commercial district. From here we'll assault towards the colony proper. There are a number of additional defensive lines that we'll have to overcome or skirt around, depending on the situation on-scene. Change out your magazines and replenish any expended ordinance from our supply sled. Be ready to move again in five."

The So-Dal motioned for Var to join him. "You did well with your mission," Urtrim noted. "You and your squad accomplished the task without taking foolish chances. Durata was struck by enemy fire on our approach, and I don't know when or if he'll be rejoining us. You will now take his place as squad leader until you're killed, wounded, or until you fail me. Questions?"

"None, So-Dal," Var answered.

* * *

Sandhurst sat up, causing a layer of displaced soil to spill down from where it had covered him. He shook his head and glanced around to see nothing moving in the darkness. It occurred to him that they needed to get off this hilltop immediately. *What if the next strike on us is an*

orbital bombardment?

He withdrew his palm-beacon and switched it on, calling out, "Who's still here?"

There was a cough and groaning from somewhere nearby, and Sandhurst moved towards the sound, scanning the beacon back and forth. "Who's there?"

Cadet Trioni Waller lay with her upper back against an outcropping of rock. Her head lolled and she was making a low, moaning sound. Sandhurst crouched down next to her and practically recoiled as he realized that her right arm was missing just above the elbow. The pool of blood next to her caused him to freeze as his mind blanked, wiped clean of all his first-aid training. He closed his eyes and forced himself to breathe calmly, and then remembered his med-kit contained a tourniquet. Sandhurst reflexively reached for his med-kit, only to find it missing.

Sandhurst scabbled back to where he'd fallen, panning the light around attempting to locate the med-kit. He couldn't see it anywhere, making him question how far the explosions had thrown him. He dug frantically through the dirt where he'd lain, but again found nothing. Sandhurst realized that he could not leave Waller to bleed out, and that he'd have to fashion a tourniquet from something else.

He sprinted back to where she leaned against the rock and moved to tear away part of his pant leg, only to find the durable material to be far stronger than he anticipated. He had no knife to cut away the material and continued to struggle with it in vain.

It dawned on him slowly that Waller was no longer moaning or moving. He reached out to feel for a pulse at her neck, finding nothing that he could detect. Only then did he spot Waller's own med-kit affixed to the waist of her uniform jumpsuit. He grabbed the kit, pulled it open and fumbled with the tourniquet, finally managing to apply it correctly to the stump of her right arm. He then placed the small adhesive bio-monitor strip to her forehead with trembling hands, leaving a smear of her blood across her face. The monitor immediately issued a soft, trilling alarm, indicating no cardiovascular activity detected.

Sandhurst moved to pull Waller away from the rock and began performing chest compressions. He lost track of time, focused only on his ragged breathing, the sweat pouring down his back, his aching, weakening arms... until a firm hand on his shoulder gave him pause.

Votor, the Vulcan cadet, observed, "She is dead." He spoke again over the continuing trill of the bio-monitor, "There are others here who require our assistance, and then we must leave this place."

Sandhurst struggled against Votor's superior strength only briefly, reluctant to leave Waller alone. Wasn't he supposed to close her eyes, or bury her or something?

Votor led him to where Lar'ragos lay as the man began to slowly pull himself into a sitting position. He gasped, trying to catch his breath as he finally appeared to see his fellow cadets kneeling next to him. "Ju—just got the... wind... knocked out."

As soon as he'd ascertained that Lar'ragos required no medical intervention, Votor turned to search for others as Sandhurst remained, looking distractedly back towards where Waller lay in the darkness somewhere behind him.

"Who?" Lar'ragos said, followed by a fit of coughing.

"Trioni," Sandhurst murmured. "Cadet Waller," he announced with more volume.

"Sorry," Lar'ragos offered, then hissed in pain as he rolled onto his hands and knees. "Yep, yep, that's definitely broken ribs."

The sound of weapons fire from somewhere down below the hill wafted up to them. Lar'ragos took in a sharp breath and stood with Sandhurst's help. He reached down and confirmed his phaser pistol was still holstered in his thigh rig. "Okay, let's get down there and get back in the fight," he said, his voice carrying more bravado than he felt.

Sandhurst helped him limp towards where more palm-beacons were flashing, panning around in the darkness. "Shut those off! You want to attract another run by those drop ships?" Lar'ragos demanded.

The lights were extinguished and in the weak illumination of the twin crescent moons the two of them made out Votor and Cadet Maurice Rennenger. Rennenger was cradling his left arm in his right, a makeshift sling fashioned from Votor's uniform sleeve supporting his injured arm.

"This is everyone," Votor advised them. "The others are deceased and I am unable to locate Chief Schäfer. He was either blown from the crest of the hill or otherwise vaporized." The Vulcan held up the binoculars Schäfer had been using. They were battered but still usable. "Cardassian forces are securing the commercial center below. I would advise another destination."

"Okay," Lar'ragos told the group. "Everybody find a phaser. We'll descend the back side of the hill, away from the buildings. We'll make our way back to the main colony."

With that, they began their slow, awkward, and painful descent back into the ongoing battle.

* * *

Chapter 15

The sounds of fighting grew louder as Lar'ragos, Sandhurst, Votor and Rennenger neared the bottom of the hill. It appeared that advancing Cardassian forces were skirting the base of the hill, seizing a collection of small family farms and light industrial areas from colonial defenders in series of brief but violent clashes.

Through his binoculars set to thermal imaging, Lar'ragos could make out Home-Guard and constabulary units falling back piecemeal from these engagements. Some of the groups carried wounded with them while others seemed to have abandoned their weapons during their hasty retreat.

Lar'ragos looked skyward, but the airspace above the colony appeared free of craft. At maximum magnification he could make out signs of continued fighting in orbit as the Cardassian squadron engaged the colony's remaining orbital defenses.

His cramping hip joint was finally beginning to relax, allowing him to move without assistance. However, the sharp pain in his chest that accompanied every breath spoke of broken ribs. The old-style tactical armor he'd replicated had doubtless saved him from whatever piece of high-velocity shrapnel had collided with his torso.

The El-Aurian scanned the area ahead, using both the binoculars and Votor's tricorder. At present there appeared to be no opposition between their group and the colony's outermost suburbs. That wouldn't last, he knew, especially if the defenders continued to surrender ground as quickly as they had so far.

"We need to find some working ground transport," Lar'ragos said between clenched teeth. "The enemy is swinging around the hill to our right and making good time."

"Are they utilizing vehicles?" Votor inquired.

"Not that I've seen, only foot-mobile so far. They're advancing at a quick pace, though. At this rate they'll overtake us in about an hour."

Sandhurst pointed off to their left, moonlight reflecting off metal objects in the distance. He gestured for Lar'ragos' binoculars then raised them to his eyes. "That looks like a farm," he said. "Even if they've evacuated, it's a good bet they've left some kind of transport behind."

"Maybe they have a replicator," Rennenger posited. "I'm starving."

Lar'ragos fished a survival ration bar out of a pocket of his fatigue pants and handed it to Rennenger. "I don't suppose anyone grabbed their backpack before we came off the hill?"

There were guilty glances all around and Sandhurst cleared his throat. "No... we—uh, only grabbed phasers."

He gave a resigned bob of his head in acknowledgement, reminding himself that given the overwhelming nature of the combat environment, he needed to continually remind them of the basics. It was only after the tumult of battle had become commonplace that they could expect to begin functioning more or less normally.

"Okay, we're heading for that farm. Sandhurst and Votor, you two have phasers out. No more scanning until we get closer, in case the Cardies are looking for electromagnetic energy traces."

* * *

Var and Arvik entered the structure, discovering it to be a small warehouse containing different types of robot agricultural equipment. Var gestured for his friend to go and get something to eat at a table where their platoon had set up a makeshift kitchen as he moved to report to So-Dal Urtrim.

The fight for the commercial complex had been little more dangerous than a training exercise, but the battle for this agricultural station had been significantly more ferocious. The Federation defenders' weapons were no longer set to stun, and their assaulting force had suffered four killed and another seven wounded.

Urtrim was busy comparing the tactical map on his digital-slate to a relief map of the colony site displayed on a large viewer in one of the building's storage bays. Var stepped forward, offering a Cardassian salute. "Squad Four reporting in, So-Dal. We suffered one wounded, Dal Lenek, though not too seriously. He's being attended to by the medics and should be reporting back to duty soon."

Urtrim spared him a glance. "Understood. Your men are eating and gearing up for the next push?"

"They are, So-Dal."

The sergeant went back to his maps, noticing after a moment that Var was still standing there. "What is it?" he asked tersely.

"Our first wave, So-Dal... the commando units and shock-troops. What happened to them?"

Urtrim set the slate down on a nearby work bench. "The enemy utilized some kind of transporter scrambler. I didn't know such a thing even

existed. All of them died as a result, three-hundred of our best.”

Var digested this. “I see. So, we are now the point of the blade?”

“Just so,” Urtrim confirmed. “That is why I promoted you and other promising young leaders, Var. Fate cares nothing for men’s plans, and we must be ready to adapt when that happens as it so frequently does.”

Var came to attention. “I see. Thank you for telling me, So-Dal.”

“Keep it between us, Var. The men have enough to worry about.”

Arvik stepped up to them, issuing respectful nods to both. “The squad has requisitioned gear and are eating. They’ll be ready in ten,” he reported to Var.

Var replied, “Good.”

Distant screams caught Var’s attention, and he craned this thick neck to look back through the garage’s open cargo doors towards another cluster of pre-fab industrial buildings nearby.

In answer to his questioning look, Urtrim provided, “The Obsidian Order is interrogating enemy soldiers.”

Arvik smiled thinly at this revelation and began heading in that direction. Var called after him. “Dunan,” he said, using Arvik’s given name. “I wouldn’t. You may see things you’ll later regret.”

Another shriek could be heard, this one sounded like a female.

With a slight shake of his head, Arvik answered, “It is only the enemies of Cardassia receiving justice. Nothing to fear from that.” He walked away, his gait purposeful.

Var sighed. Urtrim watched him for a quiet moment before observing, “You may have a future in soldiering, Var. You fight well, you think quickly and correctly in dynamic situations, and you don’t crave casual violence.” He cast a glance in the direction of the screams. “They have a duty to perform; I know this. It is not necessary for them to enjoy it, however.”

“You don’t approve?” Var asked.

“There is a stark difference between interrogation and torture,” the So-Dal said. “One is of genuine military value, the other is merely an avenue of personal gratification.”

The younger man gave Urtrim a questioning look. “Such candor, So-Dal. You don’t fear the Obsidian Order?”

Urtrim shrugged as he picked up his data-slate and returned to mapping the platoon’s next advance. “Die at their hands or at the hands of Cardassia’s enemies... what’s the difference? Dead is dead.”

* * *

There was something indescribably comforting in the low hum of the truck’s a-grav drive as the four cadets barreled towards the colony along a deserted roadway. Lar’ragos and Sandhurst were up front, while Votor sat silently in the back seat with a well-medicated Rennenger sleeping next to him.

From the passenger seat, Lar’ragos looked across to where Sandhurst drove. “And how does a nice Earth boy like you know how to hotwire a farm truck?”

Sandhurst smirked in the darkness of the truck cab. “It’s a century old duotronic module design. I started hacking those when I was eight.”

Lar’ragos chuckled. “You’re full of surprises, kid.”

“Don’t call me ‘kid,’” Sandhurst snapped back. “As of the end of this training cruise, we’re no longer plebes. Given that *Sagan* is almost certainly gone now, I’d say our cruise is over.”

Lar’ragos gave him a sidelong glance. “Okay. Sorry. Didn’t mean to make you angry.”

“Besides,” Sandhurst added, “You’re not that much older than me. A decade or two doesn’t count for much these days.”

The El-Aurian turned his head to regard the young Human. “I’m four-hundred years older than you, Donald.”

Sandhurst snorted derisively, “Sure you are.”

Lar’ragos shrugged in the dark, then pointed ahead towards the road. “Start slowing down, we’re approaching the outskirts. I don’t want to roar up on our defense line and get shot to pieces.”

A moment later, a silhouetted figure stepped out onto the road ahead of them and began waving frantically. Sandhurst slowed, and the truck whispered to a halt just meters away from what looked to be a hastily assembled roadblock manned by Home-Guard and colony constables.

From beside Sandhurst, Lar'ragos growled under his breath, "You have got to be kidding me."

A Home-Guard sergeant approached the driver's side and scanned the interior of the truck with a flashlight. "You people might be the last ones out," the man remarked.

Sandhurst heard the truck's passenger door slam shut and before he knew it Lar'ragos was around the cab and squarely in the sergeant's face.

"Who's got the tricorder?" Lar'ragos demanded.

"The what?" the sergeant sputtered.

"The scanner," Lar'ragos roared. "How did you know we were Starfleet and not a truck full of Cardassians?"

"The Cardassians are advancing on foot—"

There was an abrupt sound of bone on flesh and the sergeant went sprawling onto the road.

"Do you have it?" Lar'ragos shouted at another Home-Guard reservist. The man held up his hands in a gesture of surrender, backing away. Lar'ragos rounded on a constable on the other side of the road. "You? Do you have it?"

The burly constable shook his head, stepping forward. "Nobody here has a scanner." His hand moved towards his waist. "Why don't you calm the fu—"

The stun-pistol he'd been drawing from his holster clattered to the roadway an instant before his unconscious body did.

"This!" Lar'ragos snarled. "This... *bullshit*... is why all of you are going to fucking die!"

Two reservists and another constable rushed him in unison. Despite Sandhurst giving the headlight-illuminated melee his undivided attention, he couldn't precisely say exactly what had happened. The end result was undeniable, though. All three lay at Pava's feet, two of them sufficiently conscious as to be writhing.

Lar'ragos pointed back towards where the oncoming Cardassians were, somewhere out in the darkness. "If it were me calling the shots out there, I'd pack explosives into a truck like this one and drive it right up to you idiots! Boom! No more roadblock!"

"Okay," came a voice out of the darkness. A senior constable stepped into the glare of the truck's headlights, her voice stern but steady. "You've made your point. Stand down, cadet."

Lar'ragos stepped over the prostrate bodies at his feet, shaking his head in disgust as he made his way back around the truck. "Where are the Starfleet personnel from the commercial district?"

"Those that made it out alive are helping to man a defensive strongpoint about five klicks west of here," she answered him. She stepped forward with her hands up, one them containing a padd. "I can show you on the map."

She did so, and afterwards Lar'ragos gestured to the truck, still obviously seething. "Would you care to examine the vehicle to make sure we're not being held hostage by Cardassians hiding in the back before you allow us to go about our business behind your lines?"

A cursory examination by an armed party followed and then the constable-captain waved the truck through.

"Goddamn amateurs," Lar'ragos muttered as he clambered back into the truck.

"Your predilection for unanticipated behaviors continues," Votor noted from the back seat.

"Shut up, Votor," Lar'ragos said with no small amount of satisfaction.

* * *

Chapter 16

Nehru Colonial Command Center, Arandis IV

Director McCullough looked up from the map-display table where she and the head of the Home-Guard were tracking the multi-pronged Cardassian advance on the colony proper. Their defenses were crumbling along the main axis of enemy advance after the Cardassian air assets had overwhelmed the colony's defensive strongpoint at the commercial complex.

There were at least three other enemy formations advancing from other directions, but these appeared to be weaker attacks, possibly diversionary in nature. For now, their focus was on throwing as many Home-Guard, constabulary and Starfleet units as they could into the breach to slow the main Cardassian thrust.

McCullough's eyes settled on Commander Morozov who stood a few paces away, kitted out in Starfleet away-mission uniform and cradling one of their new bulbous-nosed phaser rifles.

"Hopefully they won't get this far, Commander," she remarked.

"I intend to make sure of it, Director," he replied. "There's nothing for me to do here that you can't do for yourselves. I'm going out there to lead my people."

She held his gaze for a moment as she decided that arguing the point was fruitless. McCullough had no authority over Morozov or his surviving crew, and his argument was valid. He likely could do more out on the front lines than he could in the Ops Center to support their cause.

"I understand. Good luck out there." McCullough stepped forward and extended a hand.

Morozov shook it firmly. "To us all, Director."

He beat a hasty exit and McCullough turned her attention back to the map display. "What's between their spearhead and our water reclamation center?" she asked.

The Home-Guard colonel nodded towards Morozov's retreating back. "About seventy Starfleet personnel and soon to be one very determined captain."

"Commander," she corrected him with a confused expression. "I thought Morozov was their first officer?"

"He took a temporary reduction in grade for this mission," the colonel replied. McCullough remembered suddenly that the colonel had served in Starfleet as a junior officer before transferring his commission to the colonial Home-Guard when he emigrated to Arandis IV. "A ship can only have one captain."

McCullough furrowed her brow. "I guess I don't get the difference."

"He's wearing four pips now," the colonel observed. "And regardless of actual rank," he added with a note of admiration in his voice, "that man is a starship *captain*."

* * *

Casualty Collection and Triage Center

Dr. Cavanaugh had, rather uncharitably, expected the emergency medical processes on this crisis-stricken colony to be chaotic and slipshod. To her surprise and appreciation, the civilian medical staff had proven professional, creative, and stalwart.

Casualties from the battlefield were transported via ambulance or other conveyance, as the colony's transporter scattering field remained active. Once they arrived at the makeshift hospital, they were triaged and those in most critical need of emergency care were quickly seen to.

Once stabilized, the post-operative patients were moved to the colony's hospital, a structure nearly as well shielded as one of the hardened civil shelters.

Cavanaugh stood in a pre-fab surgical module, closing a surgical incision with her protoplaser. Her patient was a constable who had taken three plasma bolts to the torso and by all rights should have died from her wounds before reaching help. However, the young woman simply refused to die, and had held on long enough to receive advanced medical care and surgical intervention from Cavanaugh.

Though the Cardassians plasma-based small-arms were technically more primitive than Starfleet's phasers, they were rapid pulse weapons rather than firing a single columnated beam and inflicted ghastly damage to unprotected humanoid tissue.

A humanoid wounded by these weapons would experience severe systemic shock, a byproduct of the plasma burns they suffered, both external and internal. The superheated gasses that comprised the jacketed plasma bolts tended to expand once they had penetrated the body, pulverizing organs and creating cavitation effects that shattered bone and created massive internal wounds and secondary hemorrhaging.

The patient Cavanaugh had operated on immediately before the constable had been one of the cadets from *Sagan*, a young man that she only vaguely remembered from her brief time aboard. He had died on the table when Cavanaugh had been unable to locate a massive internal bleed that had begun as she had worked to repair horrific damage to his liver.

Cavanaugh stepped to the sterilization field at the door to the operating theater, doffing her gloves, facemask and apron as she exited, telling her chief surgical nurse, "I need a cup of coffee if I'm going to stay on my feet. Back in five. Please work with Dr. Hoang to get the next surgical patient prepped."

As she moved towards a small portable replicator unit nearby, Cavanaugh could hear distant sounds of battle. The crackle of plasma-rifle fire provided counterpoint to the whine of small-arms phasers amid the random **crump** of explosions. People here moved with purpose, transporting wounded on litters and hauling crates of medical supplies, but nobody was panicking. Even with the fighting now on their proverbial doorstep, the colonists maintained an air of grim determination.

A hand grasped her shoulder causing her to start as she reached for the cup of coffee in the replicator's delivery slot. Cavanaugh spun around to find Morozov staring intently at her.

"For God's sake, Evgeni, you scared the hell out of me!"

"Forgive me," he said breathlessly, grasping her by the shoulders. "I have to go. I'm heading out to join what's left of our crew."

His meaning was plain to her, but her mind was too shocked to fully accept what he was saying. Her discussion with Abidemi Tinubu about the captain's impending death had brought Cavanaugh to tears. In this moment, however, the thought of her lover's potential demise left her speechless.

"You... can't," was all she was finally able to utter.

"I have to, Carol. They're a bunch of kids with a few junior officers commanding them. I can't stay in a command bunker and direct them remotely. It's not who I am."

She took in a deep, steadying breath and gave a weak nod. "I understand. I still don't have to like it."

"While all of this is happening all I can think of is that farm in Alberta we talked about," Morozov said quickly, knowing he lacked the time to say all that he needed to. "If we survive this, I'm yours. All I want is you, the farm, some animals, we'll leave Starfleet behind us."

"Yes," she answered. "Yes to all of it, but first we have to make it through this mess." Cavanaugh grabbed hold of his jacket collar and pulled the shorter man in for a brief kiss. "Go. Do what you have to out there while I do the same here. But you'd damn well better come back to me, Evgeni Vladimirovich."

He embraced her for a fleeting moment and was then gone into the crowd.

* * *

They rode in silence for approximately ten minutes before Lar'ragos had calmed sufficiently to be able to navigate to the coordinates of their shipmates from *Sagan* provided to them at the checkpoint.

"You hurt people back there," Sandhurst finally said. "Our people."

"They're fools," Lar'ragos snapped back. "They're just lucky it was me and not the Cardassians. The Cardies would have killed them."

"Just try to remember whose side you're on," Sandhurst chided him. "What will you do if we come up to another checkpoint manned by our crewmates and you find the same situation?"

Sandhurst could hear Lar'ragos' dissatisfied exhalation at that idea. "If I have to repeat the lesson, so be it."

"Injuring our people is counterproductive," Votor offered from the back seat. "The 'lesson' as you call it is delivered at the expense of our collective security."

"I don't remember asking your opinion," Lar'ragos replied coldly.

Votor shifted in his seat, leaning forward and reaching for the nape of Lar'ragos' neck with his right hand.

Lar'ragos caught the Vulcan's hand at the wrist, bending and twisting the joint despite Votor's superior physical strength.

There was a sharp intake of breath from Votor, but he did not cry out.

A bright flash of orange light filled the truck cab, accompanied by a high-pitched screech. Lar'ragos slumped unconscious in his seat, releasing his grip on Votor's wrist.

Sandhurst holstered the phaser he'd drawn unobserved during the El-Aurian's brief struggle with the Vulcan.

“Are you okay?” he asked Votor.

“The injuries to my wrist appear... reasonably superficial, though I will seek medical attention at our destination to confirm that,” he replied stolidly. He then added, “Your timely intervention is appreciated.”

“You’re welcome,” Sandhurst offered unhappily.

* * *

Chapter 17

Sandhurst's hotwired a-grav farm truck came to a stop at the defense line's assembly area after passing through a properly manned security checkpoint on the roadway.

As he and Votor assisted a pair of med-techs with removing the unconscious Rennenger and Lar'ragos from the vehicle, Sandhurst mused that given the appropriate security cordon they'd encountered, if not for Votor's impulsive attempt to incapacitate Pava, it might not have been necessary to stun the man.

Fortunately for the both of them, given the circumstances nobody even thought to ask what had happened to either of the insensate men, and neither he nor Votor were volunteering any information.

Despite the darkness and open light prohibitions, it took only a few moments for them to locate Cadet Bartolo. The older midshipman was coming from a small conference of squad leaders that had just broken up.

"Mister Sandhurst, you survived!" Bartolo exclaimed, sounding genuinely relieved.

"Only four of the ten of us that went up the hill, sir," Sandhurst replied acidly, unable to filter the bitterness from his voice.

"I'm sorry, Donald," Bartolo offered. "For what it's worth, your efforts up there allowed everyone you see here to retreat from the commercial complex. We'd likely all have been dead or captured otherwise."

Sandhurst absorbed the words but did not react.

"What is our situation, sir?" Votor asked.

"We're establishing a skirmish line to meet the Cardassians main thrust towards the colony proper. The civilians behind us are building defensive fortification for us to fall back to. This is Line Alpha. Behind us is Line Beta, and Line Charlie is our final stronghold at the water reclamation center. We're going to try and blunt their advance by falling back in stages, causing them as many casualties as we can while we stall for time."

"Time for what?" Sandhurst asked.

"For Starfleet to get reinforcements to us," Bartolo replied, letting Sandhurst's incredulous tone pass.

Sandhurst challenged, "And if they don't?"

Bartolo stepped forward to make out Sandhurst's features in the dim moons' light. "Then we fight as hard as we can for as long as we can to protect the colony. That's our duty."

Again, Sandhurst's expression was impassive, something Bartolo recognized as the cumulative shock of the situation finally descending upon the younger cadet.

"Mister Sandhurst, we've got some damaged phaser turrets we brought with us when we fell back and a couple of crates of replacement parts. Do you think you can get to work repairing them?"

"Sure," he replied distantly. Then, he seemed to remember protocol and answered more forcefully, "Yes, yes sir. I can."

"Good. Mister Votor, please take Mister Sandhurst to get something to eat and then report in to Ensign Singh. She's in charge of this sector of the defense line and she'll get him set up. Then come back to me."

"Aye, sir," Votor said, placing an arm around Sandhurst's shoulders to direct him away.

* * *

There was a brief exchange of plasma and phaser fire from almost point-blank range as Var's squad stumbled into a formation of defenders in the dark who had somehow masked their life-signs.

Var discharged a burst into a humanoid silhouette rising from behind a nearby bush in the dim light. There was a groan and the silhouette collapsed. Another form advanced quickly towards Var, yelling savagely, its rifle raised like a club.

Without thinking, Var parried the blow with his own weapon, directing the attack downward and then smashing the buttstock of his own rifle into the figure's face. The attacker cried out as he collapsed, giving Var the opportunity to take two steps back and fire into the man's prone form.

The firefight had been brief, with one of Var's squad killed and another slightly injured. Five of the enemy had paid for the poorly coordinated ambush with their lives.

Var's defensive reaction had not required thought, only reflexive response honed by endless hours of training. Var had fought other children in his age cohort, both in organized competitions at school and in the streets. He had wielded both wooden weapon replicas as a child on the youth practice fields and the genuine articles during intensive military training provided even the most basic Cardassian conscripts. Despite the grinding poverty of Cardassia, they had been raised in a martial culture where the individual was subordinate to the state, a state which only rewarded the strong.

Urtrim had been right, he reflected. The Humans of the Federation were softer than his people. However, their technological superiority still made them a dangerous foe. Their losses thus far attested to that. Var would not allow himself the luxury of overconfidence.

Arvik stepped forward to examine the enemy dead. "Starfleet?" he asked.

Var knelt next to one of the defenders, a female garbed in a dark uniform worn under a tactical carryall vest. "No," he said, gesturing to the insignia patch on her shoulder. "Local defense force."

He moved to the man who had attacked him with the rifle, finding the weapon had exhausted its power-cell despite the man having additional power-cells visible in vest pouches. It was obvious that he had simply neglected to check the weapon's charge before the ambush. Not even the most raw Cardassian recruit would make such a mistake.

"They may be fighting as best they can," Arvik acknowledged, "but they are not bred for such things. We will crush them, my friend."

Var grunted in response, standing. "The Bajorans were peaceful farmers before we seized that blighted world. How many of our soldiers have spilled their blood on Bajoran soil since?"

"Meaning?"

Var looked back at Arvik in the dim light. "Underestimate your enemy at your peril."

"Message from So'Dal Urtrim, sir," reported one of Var's soldiers. "The enemy is establishing a defensive line just ahead. He is coordinating an attack with our three remaining gunships."

"The final push," Var noted with satisfaction. "Fates willing, this should all be over soon."

* * *

Lar'ragos woke with a start, his first instinct being to lash out at a perceived enemy before he was fully aware of his surroundings. Instead of connecting with his intended strike, he flailed helplessly against a force securing his limbs to his torso.

"And that," a male voice sounded from above him, "is why I always carry a portable restraining field. You notice how his EEG readings in his cerebellum were elevated? You tend see that a lot with people who are more apt to lash out when regaining consciousness."

Lar'ragos opened his eyes to see an older male Human wearing a medical smock looking down at him. Beyond him, stars twinkled in the night sky overhead. "It's okay, I've just finished tending to your injuries," the man said. He held up a small device in one hand. "I'm going to deactivate the restraining field now. Please try to remain calm."

The man thumbed a button on the device and Lar'ragos felt the barrier binding his limbs release. He took a deep involuntary breath, then nodded his thanks to the medic.

"You had three fractured ribs, a low-grade concussion and your right hip was partially dislocated. I've fixed all that to the best of my ability, given the uh- *austere* conditions here." The man swept his arm around expansively, gesturing to the makeshift encampment that surrounded them.

"Thank you," Lar'ragos answered, his head still feeling fuzzy. "How... how did I get here?"

"I haven't the faintest," the man replied. "Someone brought you in on a litter and asked me to help you." He looked to his assistant, "You remember who brought him in?"

She nodded. "Yes, Doctor. It was a couple of Starfleet cadets in a farm truck. Someone said they were the last people to make it back from the fight at the Galleria."

The doctor sighed, his expression suddenly morose. He looked back down at Lar'ragos. "I don't suppose you saw a Bolian restaurant there during all that? I'd dearly love to know if it's still standing. Bolarus Bloom, it's called."

"Uh, no," Lar'ragos replied lamely. "Soon as we arrived my team and I were sent to the top of the hill overlooking the commercial development. There wasn't much down there that wasn't on fire when we retreated."

"Ah, well. *Que sera, sera*, eh?"

Lar'ragos sat up with effort, which elicited a soft groan.

"Normally I'd tell you to take it easy for a while," the doctor offered with a fatalistic smirk. "But under the circumstances..."

“Do you know where the Starfleet contingent is?” Lar’ragos pressed.

“All around you,” the doctor said. “They’re setting up to fight the Cardassians, and the rest of us support types are going to be falling back to the water reclamation center.”

Lar’ragos reached down, comforted by the presence of his 23rd century-era phaser pistol still strapped to his thigh-holster. “I’ve got to get back on the line,” he muttered, more to himself than to the medics tending him.

“Well, take it easy, so—” the doctor caught himself in midsentence and chuckled. “Almost called you ‘son.’ Sorry, bad habit for a codger like me. From the looks of your scans, you’re a damn sight older than I am.”

He and his assistant helped an unsteady Lar’ragos to his feet. Civilian comm-links on both their persons began to chime simultaneously, prompting the doctor to note, “That’s the alert for us to fall back. I wish you the best of luck out there, soldier.”

“I’m not a—” Lar’ragos’ voice fell away. He turned to look at the doctor and held the man’s gaze for a moment before nodding silently. He drew himself up, took a breath and pulled his phaser from its holster. “Are you a spiritual man, Doctor?” he asked.

“After a fashion,” the man allowed. “You want me to say a prayer for you?”

“For the Cardassians,” Lar’ragos said flatly, before striding off into the gloom in search of his comrades.

* * *

Chapter 18

It was difficult for Donald Sandhurst to focus on the task at hand. Usually, when confronted with a technical challenge, Sandhurst could lose himself in the work, his hands moving almost independently. Not today, though. In the here and now Sandhurst kept losing track of what he was doing, which step was next, being too preoccupied with thoughts of all he had experienced in the past few days.

He had seen people die, far too many people. He had witnessed confusion and indecision from superior officers. He had visited violence upon a fellow cadet. The clear, unambiguous ideals he had been taught in academy classrooms did not mesh with the uncertain, chaotic reality he'd discovered on this mission. Nothing here was clear cut, nothing made sense.

Sandhurst swapped a new isolinear chip into the command processor of the phaser turret that he had just reassembled, igniting a series of green tell-tails. Despite his woolgathering, he'd managed to bring another array online. He stood up from where he had been kneeling, his legs feeling wobbly from exertion and abating adrenaline.

He tapped his combadge, "Sandhurst to Ensign Singh."

"Go ahead, Mister Sandhurst."

"One more up and running, sir. Should I leave it here or bring it to Mister Saffley?"

"Saffley can come and get it, he's good for hauling heavy objects. You, on the other hand, have valuable skills. Keep doing what you're doing, Cadet."

Sandhurst acknowledged the order and set to work on the next turret, this one's outer casing dented and mud-spattered, one of its support legs having buckled.

"Hello, Donald," Lar'ragos' voice sounded from behind him, causing Sandhurst to start and spin around as the turret toppled to the ground again.

"What do you want?" Sandhurst snapped defensively.

The older man held up two hands in a placating gesture. "I'm not here to start trouble. In fact, I owe you and Votor an apology for my behavior back there."

Somewhat mollified, Sandhurst stooped to remove the outer casing from the turret. "What was all that about? Why attack our own people?"

Lar'ragos shook his head. "Outrage at their foolishness, I think, coupled with some misplaced aggression. This... it was all supposed to be different this time. I'm a science officer, or I was supposed to be. I shouldn't be fighting anyone."

Sandhurst disassembled the emitter and began to scan the pre-fire chamber components one at a time. "This time?"

"I was a soldier before, long ago. I swore I'd never do that again, but I had few other skills. When I first reached this quadrant, I became a mercenary for people I believed would accept and appreciate my abilities. I settled down and tried to start a family there, but it all blew up in my face. No matter how hard I tried to fit in, I was always the outsider. So, I came to the Federation looking for a fresh start."

Having identified a few damaged components, Sandhurst quickly swapped them out with replacements. "Starfleet occasionally has to fight," he noted sourly, sparing one hand to make a sweeping gesture. "Case in point."

"Unfortunately, that is all too true," Lar'ragos agreed. He issued a long sigh. "I'm sorry. I'm angry at the situation. I'm angry that Starfleet has forgotten how to fight this kind of battle, and I'm angry at myself for getting into such a mess."

Sandhurst glanced up. "That actually makes sense."

Both men's combadges chirped and then emitted Captain Morosov's voice, *"All Starfleet, Home-Guard, and constabulary units, be advised that the Cardassian advance is only two kilometers out. There is a high probability they'll scramble some or all of our communications as they approach. We are the colony's last line of defense, and we must hold that line until reinforcements arrive. May all of us do our duty to ensure the colonists' survival."*

The two men shared a look before Lar'ragos said, "I'll leave you to it. Good luck, Mister Sandhurst."

"You too, Pava," Sandhurst answered.

* * *

The Cardassians' three surviving transport gunships screamed in towards the colony's defensive line, jinking wildly to throw off the enemy's targeting sensors. Rather than assaulting the defenders head on, the gunships strafed down the length of their entrenchments. They disgorged their remaining rockets and sent streams of plasma bolts into the defender's prepared positions.

Select knots of defenders were fortunate enough to shelter beneath the bubbles of the few remaining portable shield emitters, but the majority of the colony's Federation forces took the full brunt of the attack. A scant few phaser beams lashed out at the gunships, but only one struck home and that was limited to blistering an empty rocket pod.

As the roar of their engines faded, screams, shouts and pleas for medical aid could be heard. The colony's first defensive line had been decimated before the advancing soldiers had even come within the range of their phasers.

* * *

Sandhurst looked up from where he had dove for cover despite being some hundred meters behind the savaged defensive line. He spied Lar'ragos sprinting back towards him from the direction of the front, backlit by secondary explosions.

"Set those turrets for air-interdiction!" Lar'ragos bellowed, skidding to a stop beside Sandhurst as the younger man clambered to his feet.

"Just these, or all of them?" Sandhurst gawped, staring up into the darkness at where the gunships had vanished into the gloom.

"You have control of all of them?" Lar'ragos asked.

"Yeah, Ensign Singh gave me the command override codes in case I needed to debug any of the units remotely."

"All of them!" Lar'ragos urged.

Sandhurst hesitated a moment, on the cusp of asking about the surviving forces in the path of the Cardassian advance. He deduced that if the gunships weren't stopped, their comrades wouldn't live long enough to have to worry about the oncoming foot soldiers. He looked around and found the padd he'd dropped during the strafing attack and proceeded to set the automated phaser turrets to sweep for and engage any aircraft not broadcasting a Federation IFF transponder.

"What now?" he asked of his fellow cadet.

"We fall back to the next line of defense."

"Shouldn't we go up there and... I don't know... help?" Sandhurst pressed, despite wanting to do anything other than that.

Lar'ragos shot a longing look behind them towards where the next defensive line lay some two kilometers distant, obscured by darkness. He heaved a sigh. "You're right. Let's go help."

The pair picked their way towards the shattered remains of the trenchworks, stumbling over obstacles in the dark but refusing to draw attention to themselves by using lights.

They heard voices ahead speaking Fed Standard and Sandhurst spared a quick look at his tricorder to identify three people approaching, two Humans and a Bolian. Lar'ragos called out to them and led the stragglers to their position with his voice. One of the three was limping, supported by the other two.

A roar sounded overhead, and multiple phaser beams lanced skyward from the surviving auto-turrets. A brilliant flash announced the destruction of one of the gunships as the craft exploded and rained flaming debris across a wide swath. Volleys of plasma fire answered, streamers of fiery bolts from the dark sky that tore into the earth near the remaining defensive fortifications.

"We need to keep going," a male voice that Sandhurst recognized as Bartolo's said. "The Cardies were almost on top of us when we fell back. I don't know how many others made it out." Bartolo turned on his rifle's light on its lowest setting, identifying his two fellow cadets. "Sandhurst and Lar'ragos, help Aquino get Kalmar back to the next strongpoint. I'll cover you."

Lar'ragos grabbed Bartolo's shoulder. "Let me do it," he said hoarsely.

"No," Bartolo countered. "Just before they hit us, Captain Morozov got word that a Starfleet task force had entered the system and was engaging the remaining Cardassian ships. Reinforcements are close. You're the best chance the rest of these people have to stay alive, Pava."

Lar'ragos opened his mouth to protest, but he found he couldn't argue with Bartolo's reasoning. "Aye, sir," he answered smartly. He extended a hand to the senior cadet. "Good luck, Mister Bartolo."

Bartolo shook his hand firmly, then clapped Lar'ragos on the shoulder. "Get them to safety." He turned away abruptly and vanished into the gloom.

Even in the dim light provided by Bartolo's phaser, Lar'ragos has seen the tears brimming in the young man's eyes. Bartolo was brave, but terrified. He had yearned to have a long and illustrious career in Starfleet, had desired to prove himself a worthy successor to both his parents and his grandmother who had all served before him. By virtue of his people's gifts, Lar'ragos *heard* the anger in Bartolo's voice at the sheer injustice of it all. Bartolo had believed he was destined for greatness, but now his legacy would be dying in what Federation history would doubtless record as a minor skirmish on a border colony of middling significance.

Lar'ragos moved to help support one side of the limping Bolian as the quartet made their way clumsily toward the hastily fortified defensive positions along Line Beta.

* * *

Discharges from his squad's plasma rifles snapped downrange towards the retreating Federation forces.

Var could see the glowing heat signatures from the defenders in his sight's thermal setting, allowing him to trigger short, well-aimed bursts into the backs of his fleeing foes.

Var took no pleasure from the slaughter, but he knew that if their gunships hadn't broken this defensive line, it might well have been he and his men being cut down in waves instead.

He ducked involuntarily as one of the heavily armored transports exploded almost directly overhead, the flash from its detonation casting eerie, distorted shadows across the briefly visible foliage and grasses.

"Run!" he shouted into his headset. "Debris incoming!"

He sprinted forward, tripping over low branches, clumps of grass, and the other impediments barely glimpsed in the gyrating light given off by the burning wreckage that now rained down behind his squad. Just as he cleared a line of low shrubs abutting a copse of stunted trees, Var's foot caught under an exposed root, causing him to sprawl awkwardly into the grass and dirt, tumbling to an undignified stop.

Var lay there for a long moment, catching his breath and assessing any injuries to his leg. A foot kicked at his shoulder pauldron. "If you're dead, can I lead the squad?" Arvik's voice sounded from above him, the humor in his tone unmistakable.

Arvik extended a hand down and assisted Var to his feet. "I'm beginning to see your point, my friend," Arvik confessed. "Even if we take the damned colony, there won't be enough of us left to hold it."

Var grunted his agreement. "Not our place to say," he offered instead.

"Yes, of course," Arvik chuckled darkly, "for Carda—"

A soldier next to them suddenly raised his rifle and began to say something, only to be disintegrated, the very air howling as it rushed to fill the void he'd just occupied.

Var released his grip on Arvik's hand and stumbled backwards just as Arvik's leathery chest armor seemed to explode an instant before the man vanished in a swirling corona of energy. Var landed hard on his back, his vision clouded with the after-image of the searing phaser beam that had vaporized his friend.

Another beam sizzled over where he lay, a mere thirty centimeters above him, close enough to feel the superheated air displaced by the discharge.

He flicked a switch on his rifle to allow fully automatic fire and proceeded to spray plasma bolts indiscriminately in the direction of the beam's origin.

A voice cried out briefly in the darkness and Var scrambled to his feet and charged forward towards the source. He found a young male Starfleeter on his side, cradling his abdomen where multiple plasma bolt impacts continued to sizzle. The man had dropped his rifle and lay gasping, clearly not long for this world or any other.

He should have been enraged, given that this man had just killed his friend and comrade, yet Var felt no hatred for him. Var found himself owing the man a grudging respect, a soldier's regard for someone who had remained behind to fight while his fellows fled.

Var moved on from the dying man, activating his comms to his remaining squad. "Continue the pursuit but be prepared for them to turn and fight. Overwatch detected more defensive fortifications some kilometers ahead."

Var's face was the last thing Sebastian Bartolo saw before succumbing to his wounds.

* * *

Chapter 19

“Allies incoming!” Lar’ragos shouted as their small group approached Line Beta.

An assorted group of constables and Home-Guard reservists sprinted out to help them carry the wounded Cadet Kalmar into their lines.

Lar’ragos was horrified to discover a barely waist-level trench with intermittent fortifications constructed from actual lumber, assorted scrap metal and a some hastily poured quick-drying cement. Upon closer inspection, nearly a third of the defenders in these trenches appeared to be civilian volunteers.

This did not bode well.

He pulled Sandhurst down into the shallow trench, whispering, “This line isn’t going to hold for more than a few minutes. We need to fall back to the final strongpoint at the water reclamation center.”

“Won’t this line hold longer if we stay to help them?” Sandhurst asked.

“By a minute or two,” Lar’ragos retorted. “It isn’t enough.” He turned and stood, shouting to the other defenders, “Do we have any photon grenades?”

A handful of others visible in light from the fires still raging at Line Alpha raised their hands in response.

“Set them for sixty-second delay, then proximity detonation at max yield. They’ll act as mines to cover our retreat to the water reclamation center.”

A Starfleet officer emerged from the gloom, crouched low as he approached. “I’m Lieutenant Faber, cadet. I’m in command of this position. Who authorized you to give orders?”

“I’m Pava Lar’ragos,” he answered calmly. “I’m El-Aurian, over four-hundred years old, and I have decades of combat experience. It is my opinion that this line won’t even slow the Cardassians down. We need every person here added to the defenses at the reclamation center if we want to have even a slim chance of preventing the enemy from overrunning the colony before reinforcements arrive.”

A series of phaser beams from the surviving auto-turrets arced skyward from behind them to explode another enemy gunship in midair.

As the lieutenant looked back to Lar’ragos from the fiery spectacle, Pava said, “You can die here, needlessly, making a purely symbolic stand, or you can fall back with me and hold the line when and where it matters. The choice is yours.”

Faber held Lar’ragos’ gaze for a moment longer before turning around to yell, “Do as he says. Set your grenades and leave them in the trench and then fall back, double-time!”

They fled towards the last remaining defensive barrier safeguarding the colony beyond.

* * *

Var paused just shy of the now-abandoned defensive trenchworks, taking a knee and pulling out his hardened data tablet. He raised a mast antenna topped with a laser comms node from his pack and sent a test signal to see if So Dal Urtrim was in line-of-sight. With comms now scrambled on all channels, a laser-link was his only hope of raising the grizzled old veteran. The link showed a solid orange light, indicating that Urtrim was in a position that allowed for a signal laser interlink.

Var patched his comms into the link and opened a channel to So Dal Urtrim. “So Dal, this is Dal Var. It appears the defenders here are falling back to what on the map looks to be some kind of sanitation center.”

“Affirmative,” Urtrim replied brusquely, “*we’re seeing the same here to your east.*”

“That facility is multistory and built into a hill. The enemy will hold the high ground.”

“*What of it?*” growled the old sergeant. Var could hear the snap of Urtrim’s plasma rifle over the comm-link.

“No disrespect, So Dal, but would it not be better to stage a diversionary attack on that location with a smaller force while we bypass the strongpoint with the bulk of our troops and seize the colony?”

Var heard a grunt of assent from Urtrim before the man replied, “*I’ve argued the same point with the gul. I have been informed that due to our heavy losses, all remaining troops that had been making diversionary attacks have been recalled to fill the ranks of this assault. We have no one left to pin the defenders in that facility down. If we bypass their fortification and move on the colony, they’ll rain fire on us the entire time we’re skirting around the hill and then attack us in the rear as we’re entering a defended urban center. There’s nothing for it, Var, we’re going to have to take that bastard in a frontal assault.*”

Var sighed. "Understood, So Dal.

"You're thinking above your pay-grade, soldier," Urtrim chided him. *"You're smart and intuitive, Var. If we survive this you're sure to get a promotion, but right now I need you commanding your squad and following orders."*

"Yes, So Dal. End-comm." Var terminated the link and was retracting the antenna when a string of brilliant explosions ahead blinded him while knocking him onto his back. He lay there, trying to collect himself as dirt and rocks pattered down all around him. He stood shakily, trying to blink away the after-images of the searing detonations.

Suddenly, one of his soldiers was at his side. "Dal," she said, "our people tripped proximity explosives in the trench. We have many killed, many more wounded."

Var grimaced, convinced that the coming assault would be even bloodier than any of them had anticipated. "Leave the seriously wounded behind to be cared for by the less wounded. We need every able soldier for what's to come."

* * *

Captain Morosov looked out upon the retreating defenders as they fell back individually and in small groups towards his position at the water reclamation center. His binoculars were linked to his tricorder, and he could detect the first of the Cardassian units approaching the now-abandoned defensive Line Beta.

"How many of our people left?" he asked Ensign Singh who stood next to him helping to coordinate their defensive scheme.

"Hard to tell, sir. Between officers, non-comms, and cadets, perhaps thirty. It's hard to be exact, though. Some of them have lost their combadges, and others might just be jammed by the Cardies' scramblers. Our survivors are mixed in with the constables and Home-Guard."

"Photon mortars?" Morosov inquired.

"None left, I'm afraid," Singh replied. "And no further word from our taskforce entering the system."

Morosov sighed. "We're jamming them, they're jamming us, it's no wonder comms are a mess."

There was a series of strobing lights followed by the crumps of explosions as the Cardassian troops reached the grenades in the Line Beta trenches. Morosov could actually see soldiers being vaporized by the rippling detonations through his optics as others were blown skyward.

"Not so eager now to be in the vanguard, are we?" he murmured to the enemy. He turned to look at his stoic adjutant. "Ensign, spread the word. As soon as the last of the stragglers are through our forward defensive line, open sweeping fire across the front."

"Aye, sir."

Morosov returned to his observations. He had been forced to quench his near overwhelming desire to keep his crew and cadets safe from harm. That was no longer possible. It was probable that he and they would all have to sacrifice themselves, regardless of whether the colony was spared or not. It would be a kindness for him to die here, he decided, rather than having to live with ordering so many promising young people to their deaths.

* * *

Chapter 20

The sounds of the exploding grenades behind them that briefly lit the night spurred the retreating personnel towards the illusory safety of the water reclamation center.

Sandhurst was gasping now, halting every dozen meters or so to try and catch his breath. Lar'ragos pushed, prodded, and half-carried him forward. "Donald, we *have* to move. I know you're tired but staying here isn't an option and falling behind means dying."

The younger man nodded in the twilight, gasping, "O—okay. Let—Let's go."

They continued forward, hearing more and louder detonations from behind them as the remaining gunships strafed the retreating Starfleet personnel.

The defenders stumbled over rocks and shrubs, slogged through knee-high water in places, and flinched at the sporadic weapons fire that randomly flashed past them, compliments of their pursuers.

People fell behind, unable to continue the pace necessary to outrun the advancing Cardassians. Many of these accepted weapons from their comrades, laying low to ambush the invaders as they passed in an effort to buy a little more time for their friends and shipmates.

Eventually, the survivors reached the water reclamation plant. The large facility was set into the side of a hill, comprised of stepped concrete reservoirs holding water in various stages of decontamination. Stairways allowed access from the ground level, branching onto lowered walkways between holding tanks. The setup had unintentionally made the reclamation center into a defender's dream, where the terraced reservoirs allowed multiple groups of defenders to hold the high ground against an advancing enemy in a surfeit of firing positions.

In defiance of Lar'ragos' expectations, the situation at the reclamation center was not chaotic. The survivors were quickly rearmed and folded into the existing defensive scheme even as snipers began engaging the vanguard of the Cardassian assault. Lar'ragos insisted he and Sandhurst remain together, and the pair were placed on the ramparts of the lowest tier, both armed with Home-Guard style phaser rifles, a Starfleet design from some thirty years earlier.

Lar'ragos and Sandhurst lay on their stomachs on the concrete lip of a filtration pool, gazing out across the battlefield as grass fires blazed near the Line Beta trenches and where the fiery debris of the two Cardassians gunships had landed. In the east, or what the locals called east, the sky had begun to lighten perceptibly. Dawn was approaching.

The El-Aurian glanced over at his much younger Human companion. Sandhurst's hair was unkempt and littered with dirt and debris, while his face was likewise caked with dirt and sweat.

"How are you?" Lar'ragos asked.

Sandhurst snorted, turning his head to meet Lar'ragos' gaze. "Hell of a time to ask."

"Well, yeah," Lar'ragos conceded, "but to be fair we've been a bit rushed."

"Tired, hungry, terrified, angry and in pain," Sandhurst replied heatedly. "Not necessarily in that order."

"That is a pretty fair summation of combat in general," Lar'ragos remarked. He squinted into the fire-lit distance towards where the snipers' phaser blasts were terminating.

"Do you think Bartolo survived somehow?" Sandhurst asked.

"No," Lar'ragos answered after a moment. "The Cardassians don't have a stun setting, and they haven't shown any tendency towards mercy."

Sandhurst released a slow breath. "He was a jerk, but he deserved better than that."

"He's a good man, Donald," came Lar'ragos reply. "He was tough on you on for a reason. Bartolo wanted you to be able to stand up the actual bullies at the academy and those in the ranks after you went out into the fleet. Hell, he asked me to keep an eye on you after he graduated."

Sandhurst gave him a scathing look in response. "I'm not some fragile crystal in need of a containment field. That's presumptuous and insulting on both your parts."

Lar'ragos conceded the point with a fractional nod. "Yes, but how were we to know that until now? Honestly, you came across as a coddled little Earther."

"Kiss my—"

The rest of his sentiment was drown out in the roar of engines as the last of the Cardassian gunships made a low pass overhead, it's cannons inscribing patterns of carnage across the multiple tiers of the reclamation plant. Splinters of concrete and metal whistled through the air, scything down scores of defenders not already sundered by the streams of plasma bolts themselves.

The attack was so sudden and devastating that there was no return fire at all until the craft swept around for another pass. Then a flurry of

phaser beams reached for the gunship, most missing due to its speed and angle of descent. One beam snatched away a piece of a weapons pylon, while another phaser discharge blasted a hole through an engine mounting and yet another scored across the ship's cockpit. The cockpit windows blistered outward as the flash of multiple internal explosions lit the craft from within.

Trailing flame, the mortally wounded gunship rolled onto its back and dove directly into the upper terraced levels of the reclamation center. Its exploding power cells and remaining ordinance sent a fireball hundreds of meters into the pre-dawn sky.

Momentarily blinded and deafened by the nearby detonation, Lar'ragos and Sandhurst lay covering their heads as bits of smoldering debris rained down around and atop them.

A battered Home-Guardsman nudged the prone men with his boot toe. "They're coming!" he shouted, rifle at the ready. Sandhurst and Lar'ragos stood, rifles momentarily forgotten as a cascade of debris slid off of them.

Seemingly from nowhere, a formation of Cardassian soldiers scabbled up the low hill and broad stairs to assault their position.

Outgoing phaser beams snatched a handful of these attackers off their feet, but the majority of them boiled into the midst of the colonists' bulwarks.

A Cardassian barreled out of the twilight, his plasma rifle blazing as he fired indiscriminately into the knot of defenders. A constable and a Home-Guard reservist next to Sandhurst went down, while a plasma bolt tore into Sandhurst's shoulder in an impact that erupted in a gout of sparks and sent the young man tumbling backwards over a waist-high railing to plunge into a reservoir pool some meters below.

Lar'ragos blasted the offending Cardassian off his feet with his anachronistic phaser pistol, the beam punching a smoking hole through the alien soldier's chest.

Another Cardassian surged forward from Lar'ragos' blind side, but Pava dropped and rolled just as the soldier fired, the bolts intended for the El-Aurian tearing instead into a Starfleet petty officer behind him. Laying on his side, Lar'ragos fired again, his beam catching the soldier's rifle and blasting it apart and out of the man's hands. The soldier's momentum carried him forward though, and he landed hard atop Lar'ragos, the impact knocking the phaser pistol from the cadet's grip.

The two men rolled, locked together, each grappling to get a secure hold on the other. The Cardassian reared back and delivered a head-butt to Lar'ragos' nose, breaking it and sending a cascade of blood down the smaller man's mouth and chin.

Lar'ragos managed to roll to his left, then reversed hard and used the Cardassian's mass and momentum to send the enemy soldier tumbling away from him. He leapt to his feet and sent a kick towards the rising soldier's head. The man turned just enough to absorb the blow in his shoulder and upper chest instead as he carried forward and tackled Lar'ragos to the ground.

Lar'ragos rolled backwards, grasping the larger man's upper arms and placing a foot in the man's midsection. He then kicked out to push the soldier up and over him at the top of the arc. The Cardassian landed heavily on his back with a grunt as Lar'ragos scrambled back to his feet and began looking for his dropped phaser.

Other Cardassians had arrived, scabbling over the bulwarks and into the firing position. Individual fights had broken out between them and the remaining Federation defenders. Plasma bolts snapped to and fro and phasers replied, their trajectories ending in concrete, metal, or humanoid flesh.

Lar'ragos sensed his opponent's impending attack, forewarned by his perversion of his people's gifts. He turned to block the Cardassian's strike, only to have his arm batted aside by the sledgehammer blow of the incoming strike. The staggering punch snapped his head back and caused black spots to swim across his vision.

He sensed a follow-on kick coming and dropped to a crouch, covering his head with a bent arm. When it landed, however, the kick carried so much force that it sent him sprawling. Lar'ragos slid to a stop, pondering the irony of being able to sense an attack before it came, yet being unable to defend against it. In the heat of battle, part of him reflected mordantly that he had allowed himself to become soft and complacent, losing the edge that had enabled him to survive his many ordeals in his travels across the Delta Quadrant.

Regardless of his many years, his experience and his knowledge, he sensed the man opposing him was stronger, faster, and quite possibly a better fighter. Lar'ragos' cheats were of little use here.

Dal Durak Var advanced on Lar'ragos, drawing his knife from its scabbard. Their fight had gone on too long and was interfering in his ability to lead his squad. Var was determined to end it.

Lar'ragos regained his feet, spying a length of tritanium pipe blown free from a pump station. He picked it up and prepared to meet the Cardassian's attack.

Var rushed him and feigned throwing the knife, prompting Lar'ragos to raise the pipe defensively. Var kicked out instead, driving a solid boot toe into Lar'ragos' thigh and then slashing out and down with the blade, which sliced across Pava's chest and abdomen as the El-Aurian attempted to back-peddle.

Lar'ragos felt himself beginning to fall backwards and swung the pipe wildly to try and force separation from his attacker. His clumsy swings did drive Var back a pace, but as Lar'ragos lost his footing the Cardassian lunged again and slashed towards Pava's neck, missing just slightly but managing to slice open the El-Aurian's cheek.

Lar'ragos collapsed heavily, holding the pipe above him in both hands like a polearm as Var advanced. He felt the warm wetness on his chest and coursing down his neck, felt the searing pain of the facial wound but mused idly that he could hardly feel the damage to his chest at all. His arms trembled and his right thigh had cramped with the impact of the Cardassian's boot. This was not going at all as he'd predicted.

He rolled onto his side and then rose as far as his knees, swinging the pipe at Var again with the last of his dwindling strength. The Cardassian stepped into the blow, catching the pipe just above Pava's hands between Var's padded chest-piece and his left arm. Lar'ragos released his grip on the pipe and delivered a punch to Var's midsection that caused the larger man to grunt, but he did not fall and surrendered no ground.

Lar'ragos saw the glint of the knife in Var's hand as the man brought it around and up in a killing blow aimed to catch its victim between chin and Adam's-apple.

Four hundred years, Lar'ragos thought numbly, and this is how it--

A brilliant phaser beam flared to life above him and enveloped Var, driving the Cardassian backwards into another of his comrades who was locked in a struggle with a Home-Guard soldier. All three of them collapsed in a tangle of limbs.

Lar'ragos recognized from the sound of the beam that it was set to stun and craned his neck around to see a dripping wet Donald Sandhurst holding a phaser in his hand. The younger man stumbled forward, grabbing Lar'ragos by the back of his uniform sweater collar and began dragging him awkwardly backwards.

A bout of choking, gurgling and cursing from Lar'ragos finally convinced Sandhurst that Pava was fit to stand and move on his own. A limping Lar'ragos threw his arm over Sandhurst's shoulder and allowed his friend to assist him.

As the two retreated from the ongoing melee in the defensive position, the brightening sky was filled with dozens of streams of collimated light stabbing downward. Countless impacts scored the landscape, some discharging swaths of stun energy, while others sent flaming founts of earth skyward.

A transporter beam flashed into existence three meters in front of the pair and Sandhurst raised his phaser, only to have Lar'ragos push his arm down so that his stun beam discharged into the cement.

"Starfleet Marines!" barked a humanoid figure wearing bulky combat armor, her face hidden behind a protective visor extending down from her likewise armored helmet.

Lar'ragos drug Sandhurst down onto the ground as Marines in teams, squads, and platoons began to beam in all around them.

The wounded Lar'ragos began to chuckle as he covered Sandhurst's head while hundreds of Marine phaser carbines began to sing in unison, "Cavalry's here!" he shouted above the din, laughing maniacally.

* * *

Chapter 21

USS Sanctuary

In orbit of Arandis IV

Sandhurst started awake for the fifth time in as many hours. The quiet of the medical ward with its soft beeps and the chimes of various diagnostic equipment was in stark contrast to the bedlam of his troubled dreams. Whenever he closed his eyes, all he could see were explosions and exchanges of searing fire, the snap and whine of weapons competing with the screams of the wounded.

The images seemed to replay as if on a loop, regardless of how hard Sandhurst tried to focus on other, less troubling things as he drifted off.

The large, semi-circular ward was but a sole treatment compartment, a portion of one deck among several aboard the Starfleet hospital ship *Sanctuary*. The ship was filled with survivors of the fighting on Arandis IV, Starfleet and civilian alike. It was even rumored that one whole deck had been dedicated to the treatment of wounded Cardassian prisoners, under heavy Marine guard, of course.

Sandhurst looked down at his shoulder, admiring the synthskin graft that was helping the wound to heal. He had been shot. The very idea of it still boggled his mind. As a boy he'd always imagined that he would have time to dodge such an attack, but that had been mere youthful fantasy. The reality was that he had been hit and flung over the railing and into the containment pool before he'd even had time to realize what had happened.

The doors to the ward swooshed open to admit Doctor Cavanaugh. Despite her participation in the bloody surface battle, she had insisted on treating the surviving *Sagan* crew herself. She made her way down the row of biobeds ringing the outer bulkhead, checking charts and conversing with those who were awake.

She arrived at Sandhurst's bed, referencing her padd and checking his vitals on the headboard monitor. "I'd ask how you're doing, but these readings say you haven't been sleeping much."

Sandhurst shook his head. "Can't."

"Nightmares?" she asked.

"Can you call them nightmares if they really happened, Doctor?"

"Oh, yes," she said, nodding. "Those are flashbacks. That's your mind trying to process those experiences. Because they're so traumatic, it's having difficulty categorizing and filing them away, so they continue to run like a background program, regardless of whether you're sleeping or awake."

Sandhurst digested that. "Can you give me something to sleep dreamlessly?"

"I can, but only for one sleep-period per day. That's only treating the symptom, not the underlying problem. I'm going to have Doctor Regnard meet with you daily until the ship returns to Starbase 287. He's a counselor, and quite a good one. He can teach you some relaxation techniques and take you through a trauma incident reduction series that will help you to process what you've experienced in a safe environment."

He glanced up to meet her gaze fully. "Are there, Doctor? Truly safe environments?"

"I know in this moment that's difficult to believe, Cadet, but yes, there are."

"I keep thinking of Cadet Waller," he said suddenly, surprising himself. He hadn't intended to speak of it. "She was wounded... lost her arm, and I couldn't find my med-kit. I tried to find it, but I couldn't. By the time I remembered she had one of her own I could have used, it was too late."

Unbidden tears streamed down his cheeks. "How could I be so stupid? I was digging in the dirt for something she had on her own belt!"

Cavanaugh sat on the edge of his biobed, placing a hand on his shoulder. "You were in shock, Donald. Your emergency response training so far hasn't prepared you for anything like what you experienced down there. When confronted with the unthinkable for the first time, Humans often freeze or can't think clearly. Hard as it may be for you to believe, your reaction was perfectly normal."

He pulled himself together, trying to put on a brave face that didn't fool either of them. "Did... did Captain Morozov survive?" Sandhurst asked hesitantly.

Cavanaugh nodded soberly, though the corners of her mouth hinted at the smile she was keeping in check. "He most certainly did. He very nearly had a dropship crash right on top of him, but the man's luck is legendary."

Sandhurst dropped his head. "Would that we could all have had such luck."

* * *

Morozov found him in *Sanctuary's* physical rehabilitation gymnasium.

Lar'ragos strained atop a bench under the high-g weight bar, completing a series of chest-presses, his shirt soaked with perspiration.

The doctor who had summoned the captain stood in the doorway, arms folded across his chest. He inclined his head towards Lar'ragos, then shook it in disbelief. "He's in no shape to be doing any of this. His wounds have just begun to heal, especially the internal injuries."

Morozov nodded to the physician. "Thank you, Doctor. I'll take it from here."

Lar'ragos had rolled off the bench and nearly doubled over from exhaustion and pain before gathering himself and staggering over to a leg-press station to begin using that apparatus.

"Proving a point, Cadet?" Morozov asked as he approached.

"Cor—correcting... deficits," Lar'ragos huffed between reps.

"Your doctors are worried you're doing more harm than good," Morozov said patiently.

Lar'ragos finished a set and paused, looking up at him. "One of them beat me," he said in a low voice.

"It happens," Morozov opined.

"Not to me," Lar'ragos countered.

"That's dangerously arrogant," the captain observed, "and dare I say, you're old enough to know that."

Lar'ragos finished another set, scowling at Morozov. "In my prime, I could have killed that man without much effort at all."

"And that's a point of pride with you?" Morozov asked, voice tinged with disdain.

"Those Cardassians would have butchered our colonists," Lar'ragos countered. "So, yes, I believe my ability to defeat a lethal threat quickly is desirable. That *is* why you wanted me down there, isn't it, sir?"

Morozov sighed and leaned against the bulkhead, rubbing his eyes tiredly. "Mister Lar'ragos, you are training to become a Starfleet officer. Take it from someone who's served twenty-five years, as horrible as this situation was, it's a rarity. Combat is only a small percentage of Starfleet's mission. I'd much rather have a science officer who can scrutinize a threatening stellar phenomenon than one who can cut a swath through hostile forces."

The El-Aurian stood shakily from the apparatus, toweling off. "No, not sciences. Not anymore. I'm changing my focus to security and tactical."

Morozov felt a pang of regret, knowing that he had forced Lar'ragos into battle despite the man's objections. "Don't be too hasty, Mister Lar'ragos. You still have three more years at the academy. You needn't decide this now."

"I won't... I *can't* allow myself to be that vulnerable again. You can't know the things I endured to reach the Federation, the sacrifices I made. I'll be damned if I'll allow all of that to be snatched away from me in a moment because I wasn't strong enough or prepared enough to meet the challenge."

"That's paranoia," Morozov argued.

"Yes, sir, it is. Paranoia has kept me alive for four centuries."

Morozov dropped his head, issuing another sigh. He himself had nearly died during the attack. He had lost friends and comrades closer to him than family. He had been forced to sacrifice cadets, barely more than children, to stave off a merciless enemy. Morozov was emotionally and spiritually exhausted and had no more energy to give this troubled man.

"So be it, Lar'ragos. I wish you good fortune and safe journeys."

Lar'ragos moved unsteadily towards another exercise apparatus. "And to you, sir."

* * *

Epilogue

The weather had not cooperated, but nobody appeared to give it much thought. The old Presidio parade ground at Starfleet Academy endured a light rain under misty San Francisco skies.

The viewing stands were filled with a mix of dignitaries, Starfleet brass, and family members of *Sagan's* crew, both those living as well as those fallen in the line of duty. Media drones darted about, selecting the best angles for holo-images of the event.

A short line of officers, cadets, and enlisted personnel stood at attention. They were the twenty-seven survivors of the training starship *Sagan*, all that remained from that vessel's compliment of four-hundred and thirty-nine souls. Behind them were arrayed forty-four flag draped coffins containing the remains of those of the crew killed on Arandis IV.

Behind the coffins were rows of flag-shrouded photon torpedo tubes, representing the three-hundred sixty eight crewmembers killed aboard *Sagan* whose remains were vaporized in the destruction of that ship.

The academy superintendent, Rear-Admiral Norah Satie ascended the dais and moved to the lectern.

"All those arrayed here, both living and deceased, represent the best of Starfleet's tradition of courageous service. You faced overwhelming odds with little hope of relief, yet you held your ground. Many gave their lives aboard *Sagan* to slow the enemy's advance, and more fell defending the colony on the surface.

"Your efforts guaranteed the safety of thousands of Federation citizens. I dearly hope that the lives you've saved make the terrible sacrifices you were forced to make more bearable.

"We know that you are wounded, some in body, many in soul, and that your recovery will take time. We know that words alone cannot mend those hurts, and so as you defended the lives of those colonists, we solemnly pledge to support you as you take the necessary steps to recuperate from those injuries.

"To demonstrate our collective gratitude for your actions, I am honored to bestow upon each of you the Starfleet Decoration for Valor and Gallantry, so nobly earned in defense of the Federation."

Satie paused in front of each individual, shaking their hand and pinning the medal to their dress uniform tunic. Holographic versions of the decoration appeared atop the caskets and photorp-tubes of the deceased, signifying the posthumous receipt of the honors that would be awarded to their families.

The admiral arrived in front of Sandhurst, and as she affixed the decoration to his tunic she murmured, "Well done, Cadet."

He stood ramrod straight, eyes forward. "Thank you, sir."

The admiral decorated Lar'ragos next to him, and as she moved on down the line, Sandhurst murmured to the El-Aurian *sotto voce*, "I don't feel like a hero."

"Good," Lar'ragos replied in a similar subdued tone. "You're not."

The formation was dismissed after a handful of other dignitaries finished prepared speeches, and the viewing stands began to empty as family members and Starfleet luminaries made their way down to the parade ground to mingle or pay their respects to the fallen.

Sandhurst raised a hand, waving to his parents who began heading towards the pair.

"But aren't we supposed to be heroes? The admiral said we were."

Lar'ragos grunted sourly. "That's public relations. The only heroes were those who didn't return. They gave up their futures, everything they might have done, might have been. You and I, we simply did our jobs and were lucky enough to live."

Sandhurst glanced sidelong at the much older man. "A job, is that all this is to you?"

"That remains to be seen." He touched a finger to the decoration pinned to his chest. "They obviously appreciate our efforts, hence these shiny bits of metal they gave us."

The younger cadet shook his head. "I really don't understand you."

Lar'ragos nodded sagely as he prepared to meet Sandhurst's family. "Yeah, I get that a lot." He ran his hands over his form fitting cadet dress uniform, finally fishing an isolinear chip out of a hidden pocket. "Oh, before I forget, here's your housing info for next term."

"Mine?" Sandhurst gave him a suspicious look. "Why do you have *my* housing chit?"

Lar'ragos clapped him on the back gregariously as Sandhurst's parents approached. "Because we're going to be roomies, my friend! Won't that be grand?"

Sandhurst's mother and father found him speechless and attributed it to the magnitude of the event.

* * *

Northern Alberta, Canada

The flitter whispered to a stop at the end of the gravel road, the ten hectare farm spread out before them at the mouth of the valley. The pair exited the air-car slowly, as though savoring the moment.

The wind blustered and Cavanaugh raised the collar of her coat against its intrusion. She walked around the vehicle to where Morozov was gazing into the distance, absorbing the seemingly endless Northern Canadian vista.

She hugged him tightly and he returned the embrace.

"So... this is it?"

"*Da*," he intoned playfully in his mother tongue. "A house, a barn and several outbuildings. It can be as automated or back-breaking as we wish. When we're feeling lazy, we can let the robots do all the work."

"Where's the fun in that?" she replied, nuzzling her face into his collar for warmth. "Are you sure this is what you want, Evgeni?"

"It is," he assured her. "It reminds me of where I grew up, though this place is not quite as unforgiving as Siberia."

"And me?" she asked, looking at him directly. "You're certain this isn't just a fling? We're not just clinging to each other because we've survived yet another tragedy while our friends didn't?"

Morozov grunted, dismissing the idea. "This is our reward, Irene. Decades of service, countless years of sacrifice and delayed gratification for the sake of our careers. Here is where it finally pays off."

Cavanaugh threaded her arm through his, turning to share his view out onto what was now *their* land. The concept seemed so foreign to her after a lifetime of transient existence aboard starships and starbases, outposts and hospitals. *Home*. She shook her head at the alienness of the idea.

"It is our duty to love this place, to work the land however we see fit. Not just for ourselves, but for all those who will never have the chance. We're living for them, too."

Cavanaugh sighed, nodding. "That's a beautiful way to look at it."

"Here," Morozov said, breaking their embrace and kneeling. He withdrew a trowel from his jacket pocket and dug a small hole in the fertile earth at their feet. Into the hole he dropped their now deactivated combadges. He filled in the hole and stepped on the dirt to compact it.

"There, at least they'll know how to find us," he chuckled.

"So we're done... officially?" she asked, grinning.

"Barring an emergency reservist activation, which hasn't happened in almost a century, yes."

"The University of Alberta Hospital has accepted my transfer, and I can start there following my sabbatical."

"And how long is that, my dear?" he inquired.

"As long as I damn well please," she announced, smiling broadly.

Morozov moved forward, then turned and offered Cavanaugh his hand. She grasped it and fell into step beside him, walking towards their new future together.

"Home?" she asked.

"Home," he affirmed proudly.

* * * END * * *