

The Long Road

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The Long Road

by [Gibraltar](#)

Summary

A collection of short stories detailing the life and times of the El-Aurian Pava Lar'ragos, both before and during his career in Starfleet.

The First Day

The drizzling rain was so damnably cold that the young man thought he could feel his bones freezing as he and his fellows stood shivering at attention in the muddy field under heavy grey skies. Clouds of steam rose from their combined breath and the curlicues of vapor that ascended from their sweat soaked heads following the ten-kilometer run. That grueling excursion had signified the first of many challenges to face them during their time in basic training.

The sergeant major who strode onto the mockery of a parade ground glared at the collective rabble, a mish-mash of conscripts, recruits, and a few unfortunate souls who'd been Shanghaied out of Murial's seedier drinking establishments. "What a sad assortment," he assessed gravely. "To think that the empire's future rests in the hands of you shit-heels makes me queasy."

The grizzled giant walked down the line, making the occasional pointed observation about a recruit's size or physical characteristics. Eventually he came to a stop in front of the young man. "Poet, you're still with us? I didn't think you'd survive the run."

The young man barked reflexively, "Sir, yes sir!"

"Did you compose a moving sonnet for the brigade during your leisurely jog?" the sergeant major asked, leaning in so close to the young man that he could smell the rank scent of eidleberry tobacco on the non-com's breath.

"Sir, no sir!" he repeated, now shivering so hard his teeth were chattering.

The sergeant raised an eyebrow, staring deep into the young man's eyes. "You don't like me, do you Poet?"

"Sir... uh... yes, sir!" The recruit blinked, realizing his error. "I mean no... uh... no, sir!"

The sergeant major laughed heartily as he stepped back to address the rest of the formation. "Poor Poet! He's come to us because he has nowhere else to go. Someone ate his planet, isn't that terrible?"

There was a smattering of laughter from down the line as the sergeant continued, "His people were so busy painting and singing and studying the wonders of the universe that they couldn't be bothered to arm themselves. When the hordes finally arrived on their doorstep, his people tried to talk their way out of being annihilated. And what do you think that got them?"

"*That got them dead, sir!*" was the unanimous reply, save for the young man who held his tongue.

"Let that be your first lesson," the sergeant major roared. "What you do not control and cannot defend against will *kill* you!"

He leaned in toward the young man again and the sergeant major growled, "Your people died because they were weak, Poet. Just like you."

The young man forgot himself as he replied hotly, "That's not true!"

"No?" the sergeant major asked with mock dismay. "It's not?"

"Sir, no sir!" the young man managed to blurt, working mightily to rein in his churning emotions.

"Tell me, Poet, do you think your whore of a mother and that pathetic coward who called himself your father died clinging to each other in the wreckage of their house? Or do you wonder if perhaps the cyborgs didn't take them?" The non-com raised his hands dramatically towards the horizon, as if painting a picture with words. "Can you see them now, soulless zombies with wires and tubes sticking out of them, shuffling around their mighty ships, forever enslaved as they lay waste to countless other worlds?"

The young man snapped, letting loose a guttural cry of rage as he charged the instructor. He'd barely moved a foot before he found himself sailing through the air to land heavily in freezing mud, unable to breath from the lightning-quick strike the sergeant major had delivered to his midsection just before flipping him up and over his shoulder.

The recruit lay in the cloying mud, gasping for breath and clutching at his stomach. As his vision cleared, he could see the sergeant major looking down at him. "You're angry, Poet. That's good. Anger is something I can work with." He gestured for two other men in formation to come forward and pull the young man to his feet. "Welcome to the Hekosian Royal Army, Mister... "

"Lar'ragos," the El-Aurian croaked, still fighting for air.

The sergeant major shook his head. "I prefer Poet, don't you?" Taking the young man's silence as approval, the instructor turned his back and began moving down the line. "Remember, Poet, always cheat, always win. The only unfair fight is the one you lose. The advice comes too late for the rest of your people, but you just *might* be salvageable."

"Sir..." the young man coughed, "yes sir!"

Shell Shocked

Chapter Summary

His first real taste of this new life he's chosen.

Marushta Prime

Delta Quadrant

Circa 1975 A.D., Terran Calendar

The armored flyer's ramp slammed down with a hollow clang of metal on dirt, and Lar'ragos felt himself shoved forward as the two lines of fusiliers surged forth to exit the vulnerable craft.

"Go, you sons-of-bitches!" their platoon sergeant roared, "*Move!*"

As he stumbled off the bottom of the ramp, Lar'ragos emerged into an inferno of light, noise, and the concussions of overlapping explosions. He flinched involuntarily at the sudden scream from a flight of Hekosian assault-drones that flashed past, their auto-cannons seeming to rip the fabric of the air with sustained fusillades of lethal metal.

Lar'ragos gaped at the carnage surrounding him. Fifty meters away the burning hulk of another, less-fortunate flyer lay crumpled as Marushtan anti-aircraft missiles corkscrewed through the air to savage a half-dozen others on approach to land. The load-bay of the wrecked flyer had burst open as the craft folded in upon itself on impact, spilling the smoldering, dismembered bodies of dozens of Hekosian troopers onto the gritty, unforgiving soil.

'*Gone, just like that,*' Lar'ragos mused numbly. '*All that training, all those simulations... and they never even got to fire a shot.*'

Another fusilier raised her plasma carbine, the weapon cackling as the woman fired at the scuttling form of an insectile Marushtan warrior as it darted behind cover. Lar'ragos turned to look towards his squad leader, only to see the man's head removed from his shoulders in a ghastly spray of blood that avulsed across the front of Pava's battle-armor.

Someone grabbed Lar'ragos roughly from behind and shoved him down, face first onto the stoney ground, just as something sizzled close overhead. Lar'ragos could feel the hairs on the back of his neck singed off at its passing.

A body rolled off from where it had lay atop of Lar'ragos, the person gasping in shock and pain. Lar'ragos lifted his head and turned it to see the horrifically burned form of *Subadhar* Jorl, their platoon sergeant, writhing in agony as smoke wafted upward from dozens of charred patches across his body.

Lar'ragos scrambled to his knees, reaching for his battle-aid kit with shaking hands as Jorl bit down on his own fist to keep from screaming, eliciting rivulets of blood that trickled down a forearm the skin of which had been charred to a crisp.

He stared numbly at the contents of the kit, trying desperately to remember what of the various med-vials, bandages, or protoplasers would be of use in this situation. So fixated was he on his task that he almost failed to notice the arrival of a combat med-bot as it charged forward out of the wafting smoke and knelt beside Lar'ragos to assess Jorl's injuries.

"*Poet!*" a voice yelled through his headset, shocking him out of his daze. "*Leave him to the 'bot and get your ass back in formation!*" Thus prompted, Lar'ragos pushed away from what was certainly Jorl's last moments to stagger in the general direction of his squad. The location of both Hekosian forces and their Marushtan enemies were emblazoned on the virtual screen that seemed to be hovering in the air in front of the young soldier's eyes.

Something exploded a few meters from him, showering him with dirt and debris as it threw him off his feet. Lar'ragos rolled down a slight incline before tumbling into a good-sized crater just as a flight of *something* whistled viciously past, chewing up the soil at the crater's lip.

Lar'ragos lay at the bottom of the depression, trying valiantly to catch his breath and slow his racing heart. On his eyepiece he could see green dots, signifying the positions of his comrades, winking out two or three at a time. They were being chewed to pieces, and they were only the second of six waves of this attack. An attack which was actually nothing more than a feint designed to draw the enemy's attention away from the target of the actual invasion force. '*Thousands of us are being sacrificed as nothing more than a diversion,*' he realized, aghast at the implications. This isn't what he'd been promised, nor what he'd trained for.

More explosions sounded nearby as another flight of combat-drones roared overhead, screening the third wave of transport flyers that were tucked in tight behind them. Lar'ragos caught sight of columns of Marushtan small-arms fire reaching skyward from someplace nearby, trying to bring down the flyers and their escorting drones. He girded himself to clamber up the side of the crater, extending a helmet-mounted periscope over the crater's edge.

He could just make out the frantic, gyrating movements of Marushtan warriors in close-quarters combat with a small knot of Hekosian soldiers, both sides emptying their weapons into each other a point-blank range. Some of the clashes closed to hand-to-claw combat, savage struggles involving knives and razor-sharp mandibles. Lar'ragos gripped his plasma rifle so tightly his hands trembled as his instinct for self-

preservation warred with his brief yet memorable fusilier training.

'*Just do it! Get out there and help!*' he screamed internally. But he couldn't move. His legs felt as though they were encased in concrete, and no matter how he yearned to take the fight to his enemy, Lar'ragos remained rooted to the spot.

A grunt and the sound of rattling body-armor sounded behind him, causing Lar'ragos to spin around and discharge his rifle in a blind, stuttering arc of fire, screaming maniacally as he did so.

A booted foot kicked out and forced the muzzle of the rifle skyward as Lar'ragos came face to face with a fellow Hekosian. The older, larger man cuffed Lar'ragos roughly across the face and then pulled him to the ground by the collar of his armored breastplate. "Calm the hell down you little shit!" the man roared. "I didn't survive all *that* just to get snuffed by some rookie conscript!"

Lar'ragos struggled to rise, and when he found the other soldier's grip unbreakable, finally relented and sank back against the sloping wall of the crater. "Sorry," he muttered quietly. "You surprised me."

"Well, that makes two of us," the other man relented, finally releasing his hold on Lar'ragos. "No more spastic moves, kid. I don't want to have to shoot you, but I will if you make me. We clear?" The man suddenly raised a hand-pulser towards Lar'ragos, causing Pava to cover his face and cry out as the weapon thundered.

The sound of something sizzling above him and the realization that he was unharmed finally prompted Lar'ragos to look up and over his shoulder. There, at the lip of the crater, was the perforated remains of a Marushtan drone-warrior, dribbling purplish blood-analogue from a dozen mortal wounds to its chitinous carapace.

The older soldier gave Lar'ragos a wizened smile. "First taste of combat, eh?"

Lar'ragos allowed a reluctant nod as he finally had the presence of mind to change out his weapon's empty power cell for a fresh one.

"The next fifty hours or so are going to be the hardest for you," the man said. "After that, the odds of your surviving this little party begin to climb."

"I can't believe anyone can survive for more than a minute out there," Lar'ragos groaned, gesturing weakly to the surrounding battlefield.

"That's the secret," the soldier said with a knowing smirk. "Nobody can. Not until the number of Marushtans has been whittled down significantly. That's why you and I are going to stay right here and cover one another until say... the fifth wave comes in. Then we'll climb out and join the fight."

Lar'ragos blinked at the man in disbelief. "We just sit here? Isn't that cowardice?"

"Nah," he answered with a sharp laugh. "It's enlightened self-interest. Think of it as fighting smarter. Let those other idiot hard-chargers die for the honor of the Hekosian Empire. We'll still kill our fair share of the enemy, but unlike the others, we'll live to fight another day."

Lar'ragos eyed the man warily but settled back against the crater wall just the same. "That sounds oddly rational, given the circumstances." He flinched as debris from a nearby explosion pattered down around the both of them.

The man laughed. "Stick with me, kid. I'll make a soldier out of you yet."

"I'm afraid," Lar'ragos blurted, unsure as to why he made the sudden admission.

The older man nodded sagely. "That will never change."

Sand Scoured Souls

Vot'u-Shay City

Planet Dabroth, Ig'Vean Principalities

Delta Quadrant

Circa 1983 A.D., Terran Calendar

It was the textbook definition of a backwater planet, the fifth such world that the 507th Royal Fusiliers had been assigned to in the past three years. A technological mélange of the ancient and state-of-the-art, Vot'u-Shay City was the headquarters for Dabroth's merchant warlords. These men trafficked in all manner of goods: narcotics, weapons, slaves, and even did a brisk business in the sale and transport of humanoid organs into the quarantined and blockaded Vidiian Sodality.

The subahdar leaned against the side of the crumbling tenement, shrouded in the suffocating multi-layered robes that were worn by the natives to protect against Dabroth's glaring sun and churning sandstorms. He was hot, itchy, and irritable. His plasma pulse rifle was dangling from a shoulder harness beneath his robes, but even if the locals could have seen it, they'd have given him little notice. Everyone here was armed; it was a society whose only laws flowed from the gun barrels of the warlord elite.

The city stretched out to the horizon. It was a decaying, fetid mishmash of multistory mud-brick hovels interspersed with stark glass and metal towers which looked as though they had been intentionally misplaced here by some capricious deity. There were few straight avenues, and much of the city was a rabbit's warren of interconnecting roads and alleyways. Some of the streets had been paved centuries earlier, but now they consisted of dirt and the ever-present blowing sand. Above the buildings was a crazed web of electrical power lines that crisscrossed the skyline and created a confusing buzz of electromagnetic interference that played hell with Hekosian scanners.

The people here, clad in the ubiquitous *shaura* robes moved with the slow deliberation of those without hope for the future. Chaos and squalor was all they knew, and for them there could be no other way.

The Empire had come to change all that.

"Unit One to Lead, we're in position." The message crackled in the earpiece of his comms headset.

The subahdar accessed the chronometer displayed across the special contact lens in his left eye. T + 1 minute. They were running late. He keyed his mic, "Copy, standby. Awaiting confirmation of target's presence."

"Boss, the skimmer's idling. They can't hang there much longer without attracting attention."

His voice took on a stern edge. "Copy. I said *standby*."

He sensed someone approaching and instinctively grasped the handle of his combat knife in the sheath on his leg as he turned to confront the new arrival. It was only Nellit. The man wagged his eyebrows expressively at the subahdar; the gesture spoke volumes even though only his eyes were visible through his layered *shaura*. "Greetings, boss. Aren't we about due to start spreading hate and discontent?"

"We're on hold," the subahdar hissed.

Nellit's impatience was evident in his stance. "He's not in there, Pava. We've got solid intel that he's spending the night in Lort, and you damn well know it. Wishing on all the stars in the night sky won't make it otherwise." Nellit reached out a hand encased in a thick tactical glove and grasped the subahdar's arm. "I know you were hoping for a shot at the old man himself, but that's not the Op." His grip hardened, conveying conviction as well as mounting anger. "Either give the word or scrub the mission."

After a moment, 1st Subahdar Pava Lar'ragos gave a terse, reluctant nod. In response, Nellit fumbled with something bulky beneath his robes and began moving towards the main entrance of the warlord Jebrosk's multistory compound. He keyed the comms and Lar'ragos barked, "Sandstorm! Repeat, Sandstorm! All teams go!"

Instantly, a dozen of the shrouded, shuffling figures in the streets surrounding Jebrosk's dilapidated palace surged into action. They cast aside their robes in favor of the desert patterned camouflage and ballistic armor hidden beneath. The soldiers charged the building as they freed their plasma rifles and laser carbines and scanned the vicinity for prospective targets.

A series of loud snapping noises overhead heralded the deaths of the warlord's rooftop spotters on the surrounding buildings, eliminated by the 507th's pre-positioned snipers. One of the spotters, felled from the roof above Lar'ragos, thudded into the dusty street just meters away from the subahdar.

Nellit dropped to one knee in the middle of the street, flinging his *shaura* away from him and hefting a menacing looking tetryon cannon to his shoulder. He took careful aim and fired. The weapon sent a white-hot bolt of energy into the main entryway of the building, obliterating the massive and ornate wierwood doors, as well as the four bodyguards the team knew to be stationed on the other side.

The scream of the skimmer's engines announced its arrival as the squat craft, bristling with weapons ports and studded with missiles, flared out to a hover above the target building. The aft hatch dropped open, and a squad of fusiliers jumped down onto the roof and engaged the few surviving roof sentries with short, controlled bursts of fire. Using shaped demolition charges, they blew their own entry points through the ceiling and stormed the top floor, catching the defenders who lurked near the stairwells to the roof by surprise.

The ground level assault team blasted through the building's reinforced first story windows, then hurled concussion grenades inside that detonated with muffled thumps. The raiders lined up in entry team formation to one side of the now shattered main doorway, then rushed inside, covering pre-assigned quadrants of fire.

The fight for control of the compound was brief, and ridiculously one-sided. They took the structure floor by floor, exercising speed and violence to overcome the remaining guards. Within five minutes it was over. The sounds of battle from within the building began to wane, and moments later Lar'ragos observed a line of civilians, hands atop their heads, being marched out of the entryway and into the street.

The fusiliers had them kneel in the street, and the prisoners dropped reluctantly to the scorching sand and gravel. These were Jebrosk's wives, children, cousins, courtesans, retainers, and a handful of his security detail who'd chosen the humiliation of capture over certain death at the hands of the 507th.

Lar'ragos motioned to one of his men, who lowered his rifle and raised a holocamera. He focused on the subahdar with the captured civilians arrayed behind him in the background. Pava pulled the hood of the *shaura* back to expose his face to the camera. "*Iton-mai* Jebrosk, the Hekosian Empire approached you with the hand of friendship. We offered you trade and the promise of greater influence for your clan with the off-world commerce guilds. In return for your fealty, the Empire would have awarded you the protection of our laws and the soldiers who enforce them." Lar'ragos spat theatrically into the sand at his feet. "You dismissed our entreaties and executed our envoy."

He stepped aside to allow the camera to pan across the faces of the prisoners. "Now your family and loyal followers are in our hands. They shall remain safe and healthy, so long as you sign our treaty in good faith and abide by its provisions." The camera zoomed in on the El-Aurian's severe expression. "If you refuse, we'll send them back to you, a piece at a time."

Lar'ragos made a cutting motion at his neck, and the soldier ceased recording. He activated his comms and the subahdar ordered, "Fusiliers, we are leaving!" He swung his arm in a circular motion above his head as a sign for his men to assemble for exfiltration; it was an anachronistic gesture, a throwback to the days when the Hekosian military used rotary aircraft for troop transport. The skimmer roared overhead and then settled slowly into the street to collect the platoon and their prisoners.

Taking the camera's holodisk from his subordinate, Lar'ragos stalked across the road to the side of the building. He pulled a plasma flare from his tactical vest and ignited it. With swift, brutal strokes he carved a crude representation of the Hekosian Royal Crest into the wall, and then dropped the holodisk on the sand beneath the smoldering graffiti.

The departing platoon hustled the prisoners aboard the skimmer, pushing or dragging those who resisted. Lar'ragos lagged behind to cover their egress with a handful of troopers until he was the only one remaining. He took a last look around, then spat again into the shifting sands of Dabroth as he bid the miserable planet farewell. He stepped up onto the landing ramp as he shook his head. *For honor... for empire*, he thought wryly as the whine of the powering engines drowned out the sounds of whimpering hostages.

* * *

Stains of Conscience

Taniss Orbital Station
Demarcation Border, Vidiian Quarantine Zone
Delta Quadrant
Circa 1983 A.D., Terran Calendar

Nellit held the holocam with one hand, sure to keep the subjects in frame despite his vocal reservations with this assignment. He glanced at the man next to him and noted his furrowed brow and rigid posture. "You can still change your mind," he offered hopefully.

"We're not having this conversation again," Lar'ragos growled. The El-Aurian's hands grasped the railing of the observation platform so tightly that they trembled.

Nellit persisted, determined to vent his anger at not only having to watch this travesty, but record it for posterity as well. "It isn't right, and you know it. Better we had shot them down in the street and left their bodies for Jebrosk to find."

Lar'ragos stood stiffly, eyes focused like laser beams on the tremulous line of prisoners as they were herded towards their destination. "Better for whom, Nellit? Each one of those people down there will save countless thousands through their sacrifice."

Nellit barked out a sarcastic laugh, thankful the audio gain on the holocam had been deactivated. "I'm pleased you can justify this to yourself so poetically, boss."

1st Subahdar Pava Lar'ragos turned to face him, eyes blazing. "Without this gesture, the 507th and all successive Hekosian units assigned to Dabroth would have to repeat this lesson time and again. How many would die, Nellit? Five thousand? Twenty?" He turned his gaze back to the straggling line, as containment-suited Vidiian guards prompted them onto the gangway leading to the waiting transport. Children clutched at their mothers, and the terrified men tried desperately to carry themselves with some degree of dignity.

Lar'ragos imagined that even at this distance he could see the avaricious look in the Vidiian's eyes at the prospect of so many 'recruits' to their cause. The population of the Vidiian Sodality had been infected with a horrific degenerative disease some fifteen hundred years earlier. Known only as the Phage, the disease's mutagenic nature made it invincible to medical treatments, the syndrome consuming the bodies of its victims by disrupting their genetic code and destroying them on the cellular level. Their decaying, gangrenous bodies were the greatest fear of the local stellar governments, and the Sodality had eventually been cut off and quarantined by their neighbors.

Now, the Sodality harvested the bodies of various humanoids to keep its own infected citizens alive. They had perfected anti-rejection medicines that allowed them to utilize the organs of other species. As luck would have it, the Vidiians' needs were met illicitly by local governments and criminal syndicates who occasionally needed specific individuals or groups of people to disappear. In return, the Sodality provided their suppliers with a host of advanced medicines researched in their ongoing struggle against the Phage.

Nellit continued to record Warlord Jebrosk's family and retainers marching reluctantly up the transparent gangway tube and into the hold of the Vidiian ship.

Lar'ragos said quietly, "Jebrosk and the other warlords regularly sell their captured enemies to the Vidiians. They gave *us* the idea. When the other leaders see this recording, they'll know exactly how serious the Hekosian Empire is about annexing the Principalities. This one recording will keep us from having to conduct hundreds of raids, and will ultimately save lives, Nellit."

Nellit switched the recorder off after the last of the prisoners, a woman and her adolescent daughter, were wrestled through the airlock after attempting an ill-fated last-second escape. He gave the subahdar an icy glare, "I'm going to have to take your word on that, boss." He opened the casing on the holocam, then removed the recording disk and handed it to Lar'ragos. "Last I checked, I was a soldier, not a slaver and certainly not a murderer." Nellit started back towards the Hekosian navy frigate moored on the opposite side of the station. "Tell me, Pava... which one are you?"

Lar'ragos remained silent and merely watched as the Vidiian transport departed the station and slowly navigated the outpost's bustling traffic pattern.

Nellit's damning query rang in his ears long after the younger man had gone.

"Tell me, Pava... which one are you?"

Princely Prerogatives

Royal 51st Forward Combat Hospital
Planet Makshar, Trabe Confederacy
Delta Quadrant
Circa 1994 A.D., Terran Calendar

So much for the privileges of command, Subahdar-Major Lar'ragos thought mordantly as he counted the ceiling tiles for the umpteenth time. Pava's hospital bed was only one among dozens, arranged within flimsy pre-fab buildings designed more for logistical necessity than the comfort of the patients.

They had been ambushed. It hadn't even been that well organized an attack, really, but it had been effective enough to shoot down one of his insertion team's two heavily armored skimmers. They'd crashed in the stinking, hellish bogs outside of the capital city. In the dead of night, the injured survivors had slogged through marshes of chest-high water, cloying mud, razor-grass, and colonies of sting-beetles, all the while locked in a running skirmish with Trabe guard units.

The Trabe themselves were only middling soldiers, vacuous nobility playing at army life. Their Kazon vassals, however, were another matter entirely. The barbarian tribesman had been enslaved by the Trabe generations ago and were used as both an involuntary labor force and as front-line shock troops. The Kazon hunting parties had pursued the Hekosian team relentlessly, and only their amateurish Trabe leadership had allowed Lar'ragos' people to eventually outmaneuver their enemy.

Now Lar'ragos waited. It wouldn't be long until the commandant's internal security apparatchiks arrived to take him into custody. He had disobeyed orders after all. Without prior approval Pava had scrubbed the original insertion plan and changed targets in mid-mission. As a result, he'd led his team right over a previously unknown Trabe firebase.

The airlock door at the far end of the medical ward cycled open, admitting Na-Vizier Nellit. Lar'ragos' old protégé looked unaccountably dashing in his formal dress uniform, his red baldric complementing his dark blue tunic which was adorned with medals, ribbons, and the accoutrements of royalty. Nellit scanned the rows of beds, finally setting his gaze on Lar'ragos.

He pulled up a stool to Pava's bedside, then removed his campaign hat and tucked it neatly under one arm as he sat. Nellit cleared his throat as glanced around to assure their relative privacy. "Major, you're looking well, considering the extent of your injuries."

Lar'ragos smiled, drinking in the irony of the moment. "Yes, sir. Thank you, sir."

Nellit leaned in close, and his expression grew hard. Voice barely above a whisper, the nobleman hissed, "Ten dead, seven more wounded? What the hell were you thinking, Pava?"

Lar'ragos tried to shrug, but his bandages wouldn't allow it. "I made a command decision, sir. I'm certain you're familiar with the necessity of changing—"

"Do *not* exercise that attitude with me, Major! You are speaking with a crown prince of the realm; one who has the power to bury you so deeply no one would ever think to find you." Even without his innate senses, Pava could tell Nellit was deadly serious; it was in his eyes.

Pava's jaw muscles twitched. "You sent me to blow up a school."

Nellit's head dropped in exasperation. "Not just any school, and you know it. It was the Trabe's top military academy."

Bile rose in Lar'ragos' throat, "Semantics. Our righteous sovereign, your uncle, ordered us to kill innocent children."

Nellit raised his head and gave Lar'ragos a disbelieving look. "And when has that ever stopped you before?" He gestured to their surroundings, "We're on the cusp of victory here, Pava! The Trabe Confederacy is the last obstacle to the Empire controlling everything within sixty light years of the homeworld." He rubbed his face with one hand, his exasperation cracking his reserved noble façade. "Everything we've fought for, sacrificed for in the past fifteen years, it's all come to a head. If you'd successfully planted explosive devices of Kazon design, it might have caused a rift between them and the Trabe."

Pava turned his head away; his El-Aurian bred principles warring with his sense of duty.

Nellit sighed, "I don't understand this. You're the man who taught *me* the necessity of hardening my heart when it came to fulfilling the cruel demands of our duty to the Empire." He shook his head sadly. "You've picked one hell of a time to rediscover your moral compass." The airlock cycled again, and two field medics entered carrying an empty litter between them. The prince glanced up at them, then turned back to Lar'ragos. "I can't protect you anymore, Pava. Even my influence has its limits. Commandant Shuvan's drafting an arrest order for you as we speak. A perfunctory tribunal should take perhaps a day at most, and then you'll be shot."

Lar'ragos turned his head to meet Nellit's eyes. "I'd often wondered how this would end. I suppose it's long past time for me to join my family." As ridiculous as it seemed, he found himself fighting back tears, "You don't know, Nellit. You'll only have to live a lifetime with the burdens of what we've done. I might have suffered those memories for millennia."

Nellit gestured the medics over, who then transferred Lar'ragos onto the litter. As they did so, the prince smiled darkly. "You're not going to get off that easily, old friend. I owe you my life a dozen times over. Lest you forget, *I always* pay my debts."

As the medics carried Lar'ragos to an awaiting transport, Nellit offered him a final salute. "I shall reluctantly inform the commandant of your unfortunate escape. It's been an honor serving with you."

Pava raised one hand with great effort and called out, "No, please, let me stand before Shuvan!" but it was too late. The transport's aft hatch closed with a loud clang that tolled the end of Lar'ragos' military career.

* * *

Collateral Costs

*Come dancing with devils
Need not know their names
We'll waltz like an army
For the fear of our pain
Our souls become useless
As the day they were born
In a rusted arm rocking chair
Away from your storm*

Come in Closer, - Blue October

Songwriters: Lonnie Rashid Lynn / Chad Hugo / Pharrell L Williams

* * *

The fires had largely extinguished themselves by the time he had managed to pull himself out from under the wreckage.

He stumbled past the piles of smoldering wood, the shattered brick work and twisted metal that were all that remained of the village's homes and civic buildings. He heard the plaintive keening of the mortally wounded from beneath mounds of rubble but was both too injured and too bone weary to care.

They had come for him, again. In the dark of night, twenty-three light-years from their last encounter some six months earlier, the training cadre had descended upon the hapless village. They arrived like a horde of reapers intent on filling the afterlife's coffers with souls.

The people of the village had been repaid for their hospitality in the currency of death. For all their warmth and welcome, they had been mere appetizers, an amusing distraction for the dark hunters as they butchered and bulldozed their way through the small community in their search for him.

He paused and looked skyward as his breath rose in plumes above him in the chilled night air. The clouds and snow were now past. The naked stars stared back at him with cold indifference.

He was cursed, damned. He had *known* better. Innocents had died before because he had elected to hide among them. His own weakness had led him here. In his arrogance and weariness and desperation for humanoid contact he had made the unwarranted assumption that they had finally left him in peace, that he had finally run far enough to evade them. For years he had eschewed civilization for fear of endangering others by his presence. But what use was a Listener without others to commune with? Without people and their stories he was less than nothing. The unhearing ear, an empty vessel, a shell of his true potential.

He had been a soldier in a former life, countless years and parsecs ago. He thought he had left those crimes and burdens behind him, but the universe had other ideas. A penance was to be exacted, and so the Hirogen had come for him five years earlier on an otherwise unremarkable journey between worlds on a simple transport.

They had scythed their way through the other passengers with all the zeal of eager students seeking the approval of their instructor. Of all those aboard the tramp freighter, only he'd survived. He had fought with a manic intensity born of desperation and had somehow managed to wound two of the monstrous creatures. It had been a fluke of fate, a terrible mistake. Had he died with the other passengers, it would have ended there. Instead, he had the terrible misfortune to have piqued their interest.

They had poked and prodded and tortured him as they sought to understand what made him different, what had made him worthy prey. They discovered his people's longevity, and that fact had sparked their hideous intellects to conceive of using him as a long-term teaching aid. A beast of prey to be hunted, captured, tormented and released again into the wilds for those times when the Hirogen found themselves without suitable prey in their vicinity.

They had told him to run as far and fast as he could, that they would be coming.

And so he had.

He looked back at what little remained of the inn that had hosted him. The Yanuk family, an extended group of Zetrarian merchants, had taken him into their inn and showered him with the milk of companionship - food, drink, song, and story. He closed his eyes as the images of their last moments replayed upon the screen of his mind...

The fire in the giant hearth burned hotly as Eden'Baugh filled his stein with another portion of their homemade brew, a heady mix of fermented local grains that had the kick of a matter/anti-matter reaction. She had favored him with a smile and a lingering touch that promised that further adventures might be had once they had retired to their rooms for the night. Ontus was regaling him with an amusing story about the legendary idiocy of the local stockyard owner when he felt a familiar tremor in the recesses of his mind.

It had been months since he'd felt the unwelcome sensation that accompanied the proximity of the psi-hounds, the quasi-sentient telepathic tracking animals favored by the Hirogen. It was not unlike *deja vu*, a slightly surreal feeling that something was amiss before a consciousness

brushed across his mind. It was as if he was gazing into a warped mirror as his consciousness mingled with a simplified and distorted copy of his own mind-state through which the trackers sought to predict his movements.

Without thinking he leapt to his feet, startling his hosts in the process. "Get out!" he shouted. "Get out, now!" They simply stared at him as if he'd suddenly gone stark raving mad.

He was weaponless for perhaps the first time in recent memory. Clad in the simple, threadbare style of the locals, he had refused to carry his usual litany of knives, pulsers, slug-throwers and disruptors that frequently left him a comical, clanking mockery of the soldier he'd once been.

The entire wall of the building imploded and showered the occupants of the great room with a storm of splinters and brick shrapnel. He dove for cover beneath the table and avoided the worst of the onslaught, then scrambled back to his feet as the first of the psi-hounds charged into the room amidst a flurry of snow from outside.

His mind raced as he searched for anything nearby that could be used as a weapon. He spotted potential and dove for a fireplace poker, its tip still glowing orange from where it had been inadvertently left extending into the flames. The poker hissed terribly as he grasped it, and the stench of his own burning flesh filled his nostrils. The searing pain was offset by the flood of adrenaline his glands pumped into his bloodstream in response to his naked terror.

One of the hounds had pounced on Jovis, Ontus' eldest son. The young man shrieked horribly as the ravening, genengineered beast flayed him open with its claws.

He raced forward and drove the scorching end of the poker into the animal's flank. It howled and flailed; its foot struck out and sent him flying backwards where he splayed across the top of the table.

As he tried to gather his wits, a shadow fell across him. His eyes cleared and he saw the hulking form of a Hirogen hunter as the giant loomed close. He coiled his legs and struck out, making contact with a bubbling cauldron of soup that his hosts had just set upon the table. The kettle clanged noisily off the Hirogen's armored chest as its contents sprayed across the monster's unprotected eyes.

The giant bellowed in pain and shock. Its massive tetryon rifle clattered to the ground as the hunter clawed at his own face.

He pulled himself towards the end of the table and rolled onto the floor where he grabbed hold of the rifle and heaved its muzzle upwards. He hooked his other arm through the ridiculously large trigger guard and pulled desperately with the crook of his arm. The rifle discharged with a blinding flash and roar that knocked the Hirogen backwards at least five meters and punched his armored bulk through the far wall.

He had no time to savor his victory, for he turned back towards the now exposed outer wall of the inn in time to see another Hirogen eviscerating Ontus with swift strokes of its curved blade. He levered the unwieldy rifle up and onto the tabletop where he placed the young Hirogen apprentice in his sights. Just as he was about to pull back on the trigger, a psi-hound barreled into him. He fell forward onto the tetryon rifle and the portable cannon flipped up and fired into the ceiling. As the hound struggled to find purchase on the hardwood floor and turned to rush him again, the entire structure collapsed in a creaking, popping mass of cascading timbers.

Now, hours later, he stood examining the ruined village as he cradled his broken arm protectively with his other limb. He found no solace in the growing stillness and so he started off and trudged through the drifting snow with no particular destination in mind.

The catch-web that engulfed him delivered a jolt that set his nerves on fire and mocked the pain of his burned hands and broken arm in its intensity. He awoke to see five pairs of metallic boots surrounding him, the cadre, he realized with renewed dread. They had simply waited him out, prolonging their hunt by busying themselves with the remaining villagers like felines toying with their prey.

He began to shut down his cognitive centers one by one in preparation for the agonies to come. Following the depredations of his captors, he would be released yet again to flee across the stars and thereby provide the Hirogen with a pleasant and educational diversion. He reflected that this was his lot in life and honestly no less than he deserved, given the gross misdeeds of his youth. Perhaps that fact is what kept him from taking his own life in those endless hours of soul-wrenching despair as he awaited the inexorable approach of the hunters and their hounds.

He had earned this.

Thus ended his two-hundred and twenty-seventh year...

* * *

The Last Man

June 2372 - New Kolma City, Tzenketh - United Federation of Planets Diplomatic Compound

The pillars of black smoke rose into the heavens, casting an otherwise cloudless orange sky with a dull pall of grey. It was the season for power struggles in this imperial capital, and the old saying advised that Tzenkethi internal strife never stayed internal. Today, it seemed, would be no different.

The first attack on the Federation embassy had come less than an hour earlier. A squadron of corsairs laden with shock troops had attempted to breach the embassy's perimeter, only to find that the Starfleet security detachment was more than sufficiently prepared. The smoldering remains of several of the corsairs littered the grassy savanna that abutted the UFP compound, testament to the power of isomagnetic disintegrators and the aim of Starfleet Marines and security personnel.

Seemingly random attacks on foreign embassies were nothing new on this planet. Every time the ruling autarch was overthrown, political instability invariably led to chaos, and those who'd grasped the reins of power liked to distract the fickle Tzenkethi public by shifting the focus of their frustrations on 'meddlesome off-worlders.' That usually ended up being the representatives of a handful of governments who were brave, stupid, or persistent enough to have maintained a diplomatic mission on Tzenketh.

Marine Major Su'Od Mubak, a three-armed, three-legged Edosian, stood like a battle-ready weapon's tripod in the center of the anarchy, directing the evacuation of personnel to the awaiting shuttlecraft. He had beamed down from the rescue ship in orbit and was coordinating by comm-link with the Starfleet security lieutenant in command of the compound's defense contingent. The first wave of the evacuation had been handled by transporter, the civilian dependents beamed up to the awaiting starship *Crazy Horse*.

The Tzenkethi attackers, a mishmash of standing military units, home-guard soldiers, and civilian enthusiasts, had eventually activated a transport inhibitor field to prevent further beaming. That had cost the lives of eight Federation civilians, three of them children, their atoms scattered by the field and unrecoverable by the horrified transporter operators.

The remainder of the evacuation would have to be carried out by shuttlecraft ferrying personnel to orbit, threading a gauntlet of Tzenkethi military aircraft and attack satellites that hadn't yet been neutralized by the *Crazy Horse's* weapons.

As he looked through his hardened combat binoculars, the lieutenant perched atop the embassy's highest peak watched the systematic destruction of the diplomatic compound closest to their own, a mere five kilometers distant. Centuries old plasma artillery cannons had been pulled from their embrasures in local museums or from the warehouses of enthusiast clubs and had been arrayed throughout the parkland that separated the city proper from the diplomatic zone. The gunners manning those ancient weapons were busy excitedly blasting apart the Ferengi embassy and its adjoining housing compound.

The lieutenant whistled appreciatively as a volley of plasma rounds obliterated the base of the embassy's grand spire, an homage to the Ferengi Commerce Authority's mighty tower on Ferenginar. The majestic spire toppled slowly and crashed to earth amidst the low domes that housed the majority of their personnel. The overly humidified domes recreated the misty, rainy ecosphere of their native homeworld. Now rent asunder by artillery and the falling tower, sinuous ribbons of steam boiled into the air, mixing with the tendrils of black smoke wafting skyward.

The lieutenant chuckled darkly and mused, "They're really giving it to the Lobes. Those poor little trolls thought a handful of Nausicaan mercenaries were going to protect them."

"They didn't fight?" a security ensign asked meekly, understanding that the UFP's compound would be next on their list.

"Oh, they tried," the lieutenant elaborated, "but the Nausicaan tactic of head-on confrontation doesn't work so well against enraged three meter tall felines in battle armor." He shook his head in mock disbelief. "I don't even think the Nausicaans *have* a word for defense in their language."

Seeing something in his oculars, the lieutenant shifted his gaze to the built-in tricorder display overlaying the visual image. "Here we go, four more bogies inbound from the southeast. I'm relaying coordinates and vectors. Bring turrets four, five, seven and nine to bear."

"Aye, sir," affirmed the ensign, plugging away at his compact portable console. The embassy's automated defense turrets responded as ordered and rotated to meet the incoming enemy.

"They're not even shielded, the idiots," the lieutenant commented disdainfully. "The new autarch must be thinning the ranks."

It was commonly known that the newly ascended autarch would send military units whose loyalty appeared questionable into battle against the foreigners, often denying them proper defenses or suitable tactics in order to whittle down their numbers from enemy attrition.

"Mubak to Lar'ragos," the lieutenant's combadge came to life. *"We've got two more shuttles filled to capacity and ready to launch. After they're gone, it'll just be us in the rear guard to exfil."*

Lieutenant Pava Lar'ragos tapped his communicator and answered curtly, "Acknowledged, Major. We've got airborne threats coming in from the southeast and we're preparing to engage them. This may be a ruse to cover an attack from another quarter, so give my people and me a few minutes to sound the all-clear before sending them up."

"Copy that."

"Engage on my mark..." The lieutenant waited until he could make out the details of the heavily laden Tzenkethi Howler-class bombers. "Mark!"

A flurry of phaser pulses and micro-torpedoes reached out with pinpoint precision and snatched the aircraft from the sky. Lar'ragos shook his head. "Such a damn waste. All this death because some prissy blueblood wanted a bigger chair." He keyed the security net comm-link. "Everyone keep your eyes peeled for other activity. Maintain 360-degree awareness."

Sixty seconds passed without any further threat contact, and Lar'ragos gave the go head to launch the shuttles. Their shields at full, the craft rose from the landing platform and pierced the invisible defense screen that established a protective bubble over the Federation facility. The Ferengi had apparently thought such an investment of resources was not sufficiently profitable, and were now reaping the consequences of that decision.

A series of brilliant orange streaks flashed through the sky overhead; tiny explosions blossomed in their wake somewhere up in the planet's stratosphere. Lar'ragos' TacNet frequency crackled from his combadge, "Crazy Horse to *Detachment Alpha*, we've intercepted a flight of trans-atmospheric bombers heading your way. We have your shuttles on sensors and will be assuming overwatch."

"Detachment Alpha copies, *Crazy Horse*. Many thanks."

A series of thunderous flashes caught their attention, and both men turned to see an enormous cloud of debris rising up from where the Ferengi compound had been only seconds earlier.

As he muttered a curse in El-Aurian, Lar'ragos scrambled down from his perch. "Let's go, Ensign. They're through *fooling* around with museum pieces and just brought out the big guns."

On his way to the tower's doorway, Lar'ragos set the defense turret system to automatic. As he pushed the junior officer through the door and into the stairwell ahead of him, Lar'ragos flinched as the first photon mortar rounds from the newly arrived assault hover platforms began to impact the embassy's defensive screens. "All hands, this is Lar'ragos, prepare to repel Tzenkethi entry teams. They'll start beaming in as soon as our shield collapses."

The ensign grabbed the stairway's safety railing as the structure shook, and was unable to keep the terror out of his voice as he asked, "They're going to assault the embassy? Won't they just bomb us flat like they did the Ferengi?"

"No," Lar'ragos bounced off the wall of the first stairwell landing as the building jolted. "They only blasted the Ferengi because they weren't worthy of the Tzenkethi's time or effort. These guys like to toy with their prey; they like a challenge. And we're the only ones in the neighborhood fighting back."

Dust rained down from atop exposed pipes and conduits in the stairwell as the overhead shields rebuffed another salvo of photons. "The Klingons don't fight back?"

"They don't screw with the Klingons anymore, kid," Pava huffed as they reached the lowest level. The two scrambled through a pressure door into one of the compound's now empty streets. "They pulled this crap on the Empire about two hundred years ago."

"And?" the ensign pressed as they made a mad dash for the landing field under an umbrella of strobing fire.

"And that's why they call their capital *New Kolma City*, Ensign."

"Oh," was the young man's only reply through ragged breaths as they sprinted into the innermost courtyard of the embassy.

The last shuttle, packed with Marines and security personnel, was preparing for takeoff. The Edosian major, Mubak, waved them towards the craft with one hand as he cradled an isomagnetic disintegrator in his other two. "Last flight out, people," he bellowed. "Move with purpose!"

Inexplicably, Lar'ragos skidded to a stop just short of the shuttle's ramp. He glanced back towards the spire from which he had just descended. Mubak followed his gaze, and his eyes narrowed in displeasure as he caught sight of Pava's omission. "You didn't," he said, the accusatory tone in his voice unmistakable.

"I did," Lar'ragos replied heavily. "Shit."

"You'd better do something about it," Mubak snarled. "Neither of us will live it down, otherwise."

Lar'ragos reached into the shuttle and grabbed a phaser rifle from one of his security officers. He turned to Mubak, "Give me five minutes."

"And not a second more," the Edosian confirmed as Lar'ragos sprinted back down the street towards the base of the tower.

As he cursed his own stupidity and stormed back up the trembling stairwell, Lar'ragos reflected that his detached assignment from Starfleet to the Diplomatic Corps was not concluding exactly as he'd anticipated. Shipboard duty had become so dry, so tiresome of late, and he had thought a special assignment like diplomatic security would offer new challenges. Well, that part he'd at least got right, and the thought caused him to smile grimly as he pounded up the final flight of stairs.

Just as he reached the door a horrendous impact threw him off his feet and sent him tumbling backwards down the stairs to the next landing,

amid a cascade of shattered concrete and par-steel. He opened his eyes to find himself staring at the naked sky, the entire top of the tower had been blown away by the same salvo that had decimated their protective forcefield.

Lar'ragos pulled himself out from beneath a pile of rubble. He coughed at the lingering cloud of dust as he searched frantically for his phaser rifle. Then his sensitive ears made out the sound of a transporter field engaging somewhere in close proximity. He abandoned the buried weapon and drew his phaser pistol sidearm. Lar'ragos set it to maximum, well aware that he'd need such firepower if he were unlucky enough to encounter any Tzenkethi during his quest.

He exited the door at the base of the tower moments later, then ducked behind a large piece of shattered masonry as a hulking Tzenkethi soldier rounded the corner. The felinoids were closely related to the Caitians, and were widely recognized as being their larger, meaner, more barbarous cousins. Only the lack of advanced military technology and their own constant political infighting had kept the Tzenkethi from carving out a bigger interstellar empire for themselves than the paltry thirty odd star systems they now laid claim to.

Lar'ragos stifled the chill that threatened to run through his frame at the sight of the soldier, so similar in size to the Hirogen that had hounded him for nearly a decade in the Delta Quadrant. He squeezed himself as tightly as he could into a gap between the broken blocks of cement and waited until the armored behemoth had passed.

He withdrew his tricorder and adjusted it to detect a very specific signature, and then set out to begin his hunt through the assorted rubble felled from the top of the tower. Lar'ragos approached a low, heavily fortified building, and was still scanning the vicinity when his eyes caught sight of the sign. It was the embassy's auxiliary power station. *'A brief detour couldn't hurt...'* he mused as he used his security override to disengage the locks on the shielded door.

Moments later, he emerged to resume his search. As he passed through the door and re-engaged the lock, his communications earpiece began to squawk. Within the shielded building, comms had been cut off. *"Mubak to Lar'ragos, do you read me? Lar'ragos, if you can hear me, we're taking fire at the landing pad, and we've been forced to launch. We'll be making two circuits of the embassy compound before rendezvousing with Crazy Horse. If you can signal us, we'll pick you up. If not... may you die well, Lieutenant."*

Lar'ragos tersely acknowledged the transmission and informed Mubak that he had still not recovered the quarry. The major grudgingly gave him another two minutes grace; the tumult in the background of the conversation convinced Lar'ragos that the shuttle was taking heavy fire.

His tricorder suddenly alerted him to the presence of the specified material, and Lar'ragos moved to the location indicated and sank to his knees. He clawed through dirt, rubble, and dust with his bare hands. Joy and relief swelled in his chest as his hands gained purchase on the object, and he pulled it free and stuffed it inside his uniform jacket just as his instincts alerted him to a new and unexpected presence behind him.

Not pausing to look first, Lar'ragos launched himself sideways and performed a shoulder roll as he drew his phaser. He depressed the trigger control as he came up into a crouch and sent a concentrated phaser blast into the two Tzenkethi soldiers that had been stalking him.

The burly warriors screeched piteously as they were incinerated in less than a second. Their scorched but still intact armor clattered to the ground as their molecules vacated the protective cocoons.

Lar'ragos caught sight of the shuttle as it crested one of the compound's apartment blocks, and the lieutenant double-tapped his combadge to indicate that he was ready for recovery. The craft flared out for an abrupt landing and dropped its shields just long enough to lower the rear ramp hatch halfway. The shuttle made a tempting target for Tzenkethi gunners as it skimmed the ground at a half meter, but the pilot bravely held position until Lar'ragos had jumped up and pulled himself inside with the assistance of the other passengers in the rear compartment.

The pilot tipped the shuttle on its tail, and the craft rocketed into the sky, trailed by plasma pulses and no fewer than five missiles. The small vessel's shields took the brunt of the attack, but as the ship raced for orbit, it was suddenly buffeted by a shockwave from a tremendous explosion. As the shaking finally subsided, Mubak moved into the cockpit to train the sensors on the surface. There he saw the telltale mushroom cloud of a fusion explosion rising into the air above what had been the Federation embassy compound.

As he stepped back into the crowded passenger compartment, Mubak fixed a dark look on Lar'ragos. "Care to explain how and why the compound just experienced a three megaton explosion, Lieutenant?"

Lar'ragos looked perplexed as he offered, "One of the fusion reactors must have taken a direct hit, Major. How terrible for the Tzenkethi, though. There must have been hundreds of their soldiers crawling over the place when it happened."

The ensign frowned. "That shouldn't be possible, sirs. There are more than twelve independent safety overrides to prevent such an expl—"

"Shut up, Ensign!" Lar'ragos and Mubak ordered in unison. The ensign blushed and fell silent as the Edosian major sidled closer to the El-Aurian lieutenant. "Did you manage to find it while you were running amok down there?"

"As a matter of fact..." Lar'ragos reached into his uniform jacket and withdrew a tattered and burned but nonetheless intact flag of the United Federation of Planets. It had been flying atop the embassy tower prior to the structure being blasted. He held the flag aloft between his hands and gave Mubak an inscrutable look as he murmured, *"Qapla'."*

Mubak turned to the rest of the Marines and security officers crammed into the back of the shuttle and gestured to Lar'ragos. "Ladies and gentlemen, I give you the last man off Tzenketh."

* * *

A Fine Klingon Morning

Metralus II – New Iskander Colony, December 2372

The Federation had been at war with the Klingon Empire for a total of thirty-seven hours by the time the *Centaur*-class starship *Mendelssohn* responded to the desperate cries for help from New Iskander Colony in the Metralus system. Caught behind the lines by the Klingon's staggeringly swift attack on Federation colonies and installations, *Mendelssohn* had been separated from Task Force Bulwark and forced to try and sneak back to Federation lines alone.

It had been one-hundred and sixteen years since the Empire and the Federation had last engaged in a protracted military conflict, and even with tensions high due to the Klingon's invasion of Cardassian territory, Starfleet had been woefully unprepared for open warfare when the Empire invaded the Archanis Sector.

As their ship practically shook itself apart to reach the colony, *Mendelssohn's* chief security/tactical officer reflected grimly that the peace-loving Federation was forced to re-learn the same lessons every generation. Armed conflict in the galaxy was a certainty, regardless of alliances made or general goodwill towards others. Despite months of lead time and repeated diplomatic failures, hope had trumped pragmatism and Starfleet had twiddled its collective thumbs rather than prepare for the war that was clearly coming.

Captain Joshua Van Cleve's voice retained its usual authoritative timbre, despite the stress of the situation and the significant vibration rattling the starship's spaceframe. "ETA to the colony?"

"Ten minutes, seventeen seconds," Heruk, the Denobulan at the Helm console answered, his control board flashing with a troubling number of red tell-tails as *Mendelssohn's* engines were pressed far past their design tolerances.

"Tactical, what are you seeing in orbit?"

"Two *Vor'cha*-class heavy cruisers and four *K'Vort*-class light cruisers—"

"That's not too bad," Van Cleve uttered with a dash of his customary bravado.

The Tactical officer continued, "...as well as twelve *K'ringa*-class destroyers and an indeterminate number of Birds-of-Prey, Captain."

Van Cleve had no response to that revelation. "Ops, status of the colony?" he inquired.

"I'm reading heavy damage to all colony settlements, sir, the result of an orbital bombardment," Ensign Ahuja replied. "All defense satellites have been neutralized and surface life signs are indeterminate from this range." He glanced back with a dour expression, "Given the catastrophic nature of the damage, I'd imagine civilian casualties are significant."

"Can we beam survivors aboard?" Van Cleve pressed the chief engineer.

The female Vulcan lieutenant, Taulass, replied from a control station that mirrored the helm's cascade of crimson warnings. "Sir, the engine damage we've sustained maintaining this speed for so long will affect all major systems, to include weapons, defenses, and the transporters."

"Not to mention that we'd have to lower shields with half the Klingon Defense Force holding station in orbit, sir," Lieutenant Lar'ragos noted laconically from Tactical.

Lt. Commander Bendis, the ship's newly appointed executive officer gave the smaller man at the Tactical station a glowering rebuke from his seat to the captain's immediate right.

The science officer offered, "Respectfully, Captain, our emergency evacuation capacity is six hundred. This colony supported a population of over eight-hundred thousand. Our efforts to that effect would be negligible."

"So, the Klingons strike from orbit and are what, just sitting there?"

"No, sir," Lar'ragos replied patiently. "The Klingons will have beamed troops to the surface to subjugate the colony. They will enslave those who surrender and kill any who resist."

Van Cleve had come up through the ranks in the Science division, and despite his admirable disposition and sense of fairness, had never been particularly tactically savvy. He turned to direct a skeptical look at the El-Aurian lieutenant. "How can you be so sure what they'll do?"

"Well, general history, sir. This isn't the first time we and the Klingons have danced to this tune. Additionally, I lived in the Empire for a time prior to gaining Federation citizenship."

Bendis shot an alarmed expression towards the captain as he exclaimed, "That's not in your service jacket, Lieutenant."

"To be fair, sir, there's a *lot* that isn't in my service records."

Van Cleve waved away the side-tracked conversation. "In that case, what are our odds here?"

"Slim to none," Lar'ragos allowed. "We're outnumbered and outgunned. A direct confrontation with the Klingons will result in our destruction within minutes of our arrival."

Van Cleve stood, bracing himself with a hand on the back of the command chair in deference to the rattling deck plates. He surveyed the bridge crew. "I'm open to suggestions."

Taulass was the first to respond. "Asymmetrical warfare would appear to be our only viable option, sir. I would recommend a hit-and-run style campaign, to use the human vernacular."

Lar'ragos smiled at his friend's forthright suggestion; she was never one to mince words. "I'd concur, sir," he added.

From the Helm, Heruk joined in, "Our maneuverability is our only real advantage, sir. Lt. Taulass' recommendation would capitalize on that."

The captain looked to his XO. Bendis shrugged reluctantly. "I'd favor a stand-up fight, sir, but I'd agree that isn't in the cards."

"Okay then," Van Cleve announced. "We're raiders then." He resumed his seat and analyzed the tactical plot map on the main viewer. "Drop us out of warp at these coordinates, and be ready to open fire with torpedoes from just over the orbital horizon. Hopefully, that'll blind their sensors long enough for us to make a run for the planet's polar magnetic field."

"Aye, sir," came the chorus of replies.

* * *

Three and a half hours later...

The fight had not gone well.

Mendelssohn's nuisance attacks on the Klingon squadron had proved a distraction, but little more. They had destroyed a Bird-of-Prey while damaging another scout and a destroyer, but had themselves suffered significant damage in the exchange. Now, a pack of Birds-of-Prey had hounded the starship back into the relative safety of the polar magnetic field.

The atmospheric filters struggled to cycle the contaminants out the bridge's smoke-laden air as the assembled officers tried to divine something from the pea-soup on their sensor returns. The excited magnetic fields surrounding the ship were as much a hindrance as a help in their present situation.

"Still nothing," Ops muttered sourly.

"They're out there," Van Cleve murmured softly, his agitation beginning to show. "But... where?"

"Another distress call from the colony capital, sir," Science officer Terrence noted. "It's garbled, but I can make out something about Klingon troops overrunning the Starfleet Marine garrison. They're rounding up prisoners and..." she blanched, touching a hand to the receiver in her ear, "...carrying out executions."

Bendis slid out from under the Helm console where he and Heruk had been making field repairs to overloaded multitronics. The XO stood, brushing the bandage on his forehead absently. "Captain, with respect, our strategy doesn't seem to be making as much of a difference as we'd hoped."

Van Cleve nodded slowly, tearing his attention away from the damage reports scrolling across the display adjacent to the command chair. "I'd be forced to agree with your assessment, Commander. Did you have something in mind?"

The younger man tried to formulate his words carefully. "The colonists... our people, they're down there being slaughtered. There were over five-thousand Marines in that garrison, and I can guarantee you they all went down fighting. *We have* to do something, anything to try and help. This, this just isn't it."

Van Cleve fixed his gaze on his first officer. "Again, Mister Bendis, you're stating the obvious. What can we do about it?" He turned to gesture to the surrounding bridge. "We tried our best, and got our noses bloodied for the effort."

"I— I'm not sure, Captain," Bendis stammered.

"We are, to use another human aphorism, 'playing it safe,'" Taulass remarked from behind them, having just stepped out of the turbolift. Her uniform was smudged and torn, giving bleak testament to the conditions in Main Engineering. "We are attempting to do what little we can while keeping the ship and crew intact. Making a real difference here will necessitate sacrifice."

The captain turned to look at the Vulcan. "What kind of sacrifice, Lieutenant?"

"The one we all swore to make when we donned the uniform, sir. The ultimate one." She arched an eyebrow that Lar'ragos had learned firsthand was her expression of critical disappointment. "The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few."

Silence reigned on the bridge as they all absorbed that.

“How?” Van Cleve finally asked, his voice heavy.

“Though damaged, the warp drive is still capable of short FTL jumps. *Mendelssohn’s* mass, accelerated to warp velocities, should prove more than sufficient to annihilate the Klingon flagship leading the assault here.”

The color drained from Van Cleve’s face. “I... see.” To his credit, the captain set his shoulders and sat a little taller in his chair. “Commander Bendis, ready the crew. Prior to our ramming their flagship, I want all crew members beamed the surface, equipped for ground combat. There’s no sense in all of us dying up here, when we should by rights be down there protecting the civilians.”

Bendis accepted the order with a firm nod. “Aye, sir.” He moved to an auxiliary console and began making preparations.

Lar’ragos cleared his throat softly, garnering the captain’s attention. “Sir, I’d be the better choice to remain aboard and execute our attack on their ship.”

Van Cleve managed a wan smile. “We haven’t served together for very long, Mister Lar’ragos, but after witnessing how you pulled my bacon out of the fire back on Gelur Secundus, I’ve a sneaking suspicion that you’d do far more damage down on the surface than I could ever hope to.”

Lar’ragos cocked his head, conceding the point without protest. “Yes, sir.” He entered a series of commands into his console. “I’m inputting an automated routine that will route everything to our shields with the exception of enough power to execute the final warp jump. That should keep the Birds-of-Prey off you until you’ve got clear line-of-site on their flagship.”

Van Cleve stood and walked around to where the Tactical console was situated. He extended a hand. “Thank you, Pava. It’s been a privilege and an honor to serve with you.”

“With you as well, sir,” Lar’ragos replied, shaking his hand firmly.

“Captain,” Bendis called from his station, “Replicators are furnishing everyone with phaser rifles, sidearms, armor, and first-aid kits. We should be ready in twenty minutes. Utilizing our cargo transporters along with our personnel units, we should be able to beam everyone down in roughly fifteen seconds.”

“Good work, Exec,” Van Cleve praised. “I’ll endeavor to keep the Klingons out of weapons range long enough to lower shields and get you all safely planet-side.”

He stepped back to the command chair and toggled the ship’s public address. “All hands, this is the captain. Today is a difficult day, and not one that I’d anticipated. Federation citizens on the planet below are fighting for their lives against overwhelming odds, and despite our best efforts, we’ve been unable to affect the outcome of the battle in orbit or on the surface. That is about to change. You will all be beaming down to do what you can to stem the tide, while I neutralize their task force’s flagship. I understand that this is almost certainly a suicide mission for all of us, but I would remind you that this is ultimately what each of us signed on for. The people down there have every right to expect us to intervene and lay down our lives to safeguard theirs. Please report to your assigned transport stations to receive equipment and further orders. It’s been an honor to lead this fine crew, and you have my gratitude.”

Van Cleve looked to his bridge crew. “Let’s get this done.”

* * *

The stuttering transporter beam struggled to penetrate the periphery of the Klingon transport inhibitor fields erected throughout the capitol city. However, with a final burst of energy, the officers and crew of the starship *Mendelssohn* materialized in an uninhabited industrial park on the outskirts of the city.

The roughly three-hundred crew fanned out, following Bendis’ instructions to locate and attack Klingon forces in the vicinity.

Lar’ragos held his phaser-rifle in one hand and reached out with his other, taking Taulass by the arm. “Come with me,” he urged.

She frowned, appearing perplexed. “Commander Bendis’ orders were clear. There is a Klingon contingent less than five kilometers from us. We are to prepare an ambush of that patrol element.”

“That’s ridiculous. They’ll spot us from orbit before we’ve made it a klick and vaporize us.”

Taulass gestured to the life-sign scrambler armbands they both wore. “These should suffice to mask our bio-signatures.”

He sighed. “It won’t be enough, Taulass. Trust me. I know these people, how they think and how they fight.”

Up went the judgmental eyebrow. “I cannot willfully disobey direct orders.”

“What’s the hold up here?” Bendis snapped as he jogged over to them, cradling his rifle.

“I’m trying to convince the good lieutenant here that she’ll live longer if she comes with me,” Lar’ragos summarized for his benefit.

“You’re well aware of my orders, Mister Lar’ragos,” Bendis said pointedly. “We’re going to track and ambush that patrol we detected.”

“We should be splitting up to move into the city and get as many civilians as we can to emergency shelters,” Lar’ragos countered. “Trying to pretend we’re Starfleet Marines is just going to get a lot of people killed unnecessarily.”

“Those weren’t my orders,” Bendis reiterated. “You and I already hashed this out topside. I listened to your recommendation, but I’ve decided this is the best course of action.”

“Yes, sir. I understand. I also don’t care,” Lar’ragos replied.

Bendis goggled. “What did you say?”

“I said I’m not following your orders, Commander.”

“That’s mutiny,” Bendis snarled.

“In point of fact,” Taulass offered, “it is not. He is not attempting to seize your authority for himself or to remove you from your post by force. He is merely refusing to follow a direct order. That is a separate charge entirely under the Uniform Code of Starfleet Justice.”

“She’s right,” Lar’ragos said supportively.

Bendis sighed with exasperation. “I don’t have time for this. I’d have rather had your help as our most experienced soldier, Lar’ragos, but if you’re determined to break ranks there’s not a lot I can do about it at the moment.”

“I’m glad you understand,” Lar’ragos said dryly. He looked to Taulass. “You’re sure you won’t come with me?”

“I cannot,” she maintained.

“I feared as much,” Lar’ragos acknowledged. He raised a hand with his index and middle fingers extended towards Taulass. She replied in kind, touching her fingers to his in a surprisingly intimate Vulcan gesture that caught Bendis off guard.

“Live long and prosper, Taulass,” Lar’ragos said.

“I shall do neither,” she answered, her eyes communicating a deeper level of meaning. “However, the sentiment is appreciated.”

“For what it’s worth, good luck, Lar’ragos,” Bendis offered. “Oh, and consider yourself on report,” he added with a wry grin.

“I’ll do that—”

Their conversation was cut short by a brilliant flash overhead, a radiant blossom of energy that shone more brightly than the Metralus star for a brief moment.

“Well, what do you know,” Lar’ragos marveled, dropping his rifle to shield his eyes with his other hand, “the old man pulled it off!”

Taulass held Lar’ragos’ gaze for a moment longer. “Parting, yet never parted,” she said in a soft voice. Then she withdrew her hand, cradled her rifle, and followed Bendis back towards the others.

Lar’ragos watched them go for a brief time before remarking sadly, “Time to go to work.”

* * *

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