

Back into the Fray

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Summary

Shore leave's over and it's time to get back to work. The next few parts will shift to Nelia, Ashley, Rana, and company as they investigate a situation that will play very heavily in events to come. We are moving to a big climactic moment, folks, but it's still going to take some time to get there, so please be patient. Hope everyone's enjoying the story and take care!

Cilla's Quarters

"And diamonds are trump." Cilla announced as Satra, her partner and dummy for this hand, laid down her cards.

"So Liara, how are you enjoying bridge?" Satra asked as Cilla laid down the first card, the ace of diamonds.

"It is a most enjoyable and oddly relaxing game." Liara replied as she played a five of diamonds.

"You're catching on very quickly." Cilla complimented as she picked up the seven of diamonds from her partner's hand and played it.

"Especially bidding. That's what gave me the most trouble when I first learned the game." Samantha observed. Frowning, she laid down a Jack of Diamonds. "Sniffed out my only diamond. Out of curiosity, how were you able to figure out that was my only trump card?"

"I didn't have enough to bid a major and was strong in diamonds, but had only a singleton club." Cilla explained as her fellow players listened intently.

"But why did you open with two clubs?" Liara asked, "If you only had one of that suit?"

"That's what we call a 'Big Hands' bid." Cilla replied, further elaborating. "Two clubs tells Satra that I have a very strong hand, but it doesn't say anything about it necessarily being clubs. That's where her bid comes in. She talks back to me and lets me know where she stands."

"Cilla had enough to force a game, so she jumped to diamonds." Samantha concluded, receiving an affirmative head nod from the willowy blonde.

"Normally, in a situation like that, you go no trump." Cilla further elaborated, "But I was very strong in diamonds, so I decided to bid the minor suit."

"Fascinating." Liara yawned, "But I am afraid the hour is getting late and there is much to do tomorrow. I would very much like to continue playing with you all if you don't mind."

Smiling, Cilla responded, the others agreeing, "Looks like we have our fourth. Welcome to the *Gallena's* unofficial Bridge and Coffee Club, Liara."

The Media and the Spectre

"And here they are..." Kaidan sighed as the three reporters debarked their shuttles.

"They look a little lost." V'lana giggled as the reporters and a salarian took in their new environment, the look of shock and amazement clearly written on their faces. "Shall we greet them?"

Taking a deep breath and exhaling, the human biotic responded with a crooked grin, "I guess so."

"You know I'm going to dump you with the reporters and go with the Spectre once I've said my hellos." V'lana teased as the pair walked towards the newcomers.

Laughing, Kaiden smoothly riposted, "That's right. Give me the tough job." His eyes falling on Khalisah Al-Jilani, the Alliance marine raised a suspicious eyebrow, "You think it's a good idea to have her embedded?"

"No." V'lana shook her head, "I don't. But..."

"Politics." Kaiden finished, nodding his head in understanding. "Keep your friends close..."

"And your enemies closer." V'lana finished, a crooked grin on her face, "That might be a human expression, but it's a motto we Romulans fully embrace."

Arriving where their newcomers were gathered, V'lana plastered a polite smile on her face as she greeted them. "Welcome to the *Gallena*. I'm Subcommander V'lana Avesti, and I believe you're acquainted with the Alliance liaison, Staff Commander Alenko."

"Thank you for allowing us to come on board." Emily Wong replied with a smile, extending a friendly hand that both the subcommander and her human companion shook.

"I can't wait to start sending out reports from here." Diana Allers exclaimed as she cast a brief predatory glance in Kaidan's direction. "Thank you for giving us this opportunity."

"Hmph." Khalisah snorted, "We're not allowed to bring our technicians and all of us had to sign a nondisclosure agreement. What are you hiding, Subcommander Avesti?"

"You're welcome to go back to your shuttle and return if you are unable or unwilling to abide by the terms of your embed agreement." The subcommander replied in an icy voice. "If you go with us, rest assured that you will be thrown in the brig if you violate the terms of the contract. Should you choose to remain, you will be briefed on why it is important to keep to those conditions. I assure you, there is a very good reason for it. So..." she inclined her head in the direction of the shuttle, "do you want to stay or go?"

"I'm staying." Khalisah declared defiantly. "Nothing is going to keep me from the truth."

"You'll get that." V'lana vowed, "Just remember that you cannot report it until we tell you otherwise." Taking a deep breath, she gestured to the man standing next to her, "Staff Commander Alenko will give you a quick tour of the ship and answer any questions you might have and then escort you to the briefing room where you will be filled in on everything. Hopefully, once you've been briefed, you will see the need to maintain secrecy for at least the near future."

"We'll see about that." Khalisah sneered as Kaidan led the three reporters away, shaking his head glumly at the Westerlund News reporter's attitude.

"That one could be trouble." The salarian murmured to V'lana once he was sure that the reporters were out of earshot. Looking up and smiling at the Romulan subcommander, he introduced himself, "Jondum Bau. Special Tactics and Reconnaissance. Pleasure to meet you."

"Likewise." V'lana responded as she gestured towards the turbolift, "I'm on my way to the briefing room. You're welcome to accompany me."

"Thank you." The Spectre grinned in response, "Happy to hear news that I had gotten the assignment. Do not worry, my purpose here is purely to observe and offer advice when asked. I am under your command and will obey your orders."

"I appreciate that." The subcommander diplomatically replied. "We have to work together if we're going to get to the truth as to what is going on here and then deal with it."

"Agreed." The salarian Spectre affirmed as the pair exited the turbolift and made their way down the corridor. Observing the variety of races on the ship, Jondum nodded his head approvingly. "Curious as to how you are able to get all these different species working smoothly with each other."

"Our Vulcan cousins have a philosophy called IDIC." V'lana explained, "While I don't ascribe to all...or even most...Vulcan beliefs." She digressed. "You must understand, Jondum, that we Romulans have a rich culture and heritage and we have made our own path in the universe apart from our Vulcan ancestors. While I want to see us reach a better understanding with the Vulcans, I think it's important for us to retain our own identities and values."

"Of course." The Spectre readily agreed, "Thousands of years of separation leads naturally to biological and cultural drift. You cannot be expected to throw away everything that you are just to reunite with long lost relatives. But..." Jondum grinned, bringing the discussion back on track, "You were mentioning IDIC. What is that, exactly?"

"Oh..." V'lana apologized, her face green with embarrassment. "I'm sorry. Sometimes I get wound up and can't shut up. Back on track... IDIC is a Vulcan philosophy. It basically means Infinite Diversity in Infinite Combinations. It teaches that differences should be embraced."

"Understand now." Jondum replied, nodding his head. "Pragmatic philosophy."

Shrugging her shoulders, V'lana responded with a chuckle. "Vulcans are a pragmatic people. But...they did learn from experience." She explained in greater detail as the pair walked down the corridor to the briefing room. "Prior to Surak, the Vulcans were a very emotional and warlike people—almost destroying themselves. Surak's philosophy involved the mastery of emotions. My people did not want to bury our

emotions, so we departed, 'Under the raptor's wings.'"

"Hence the prominence of the bird of prey." The Spectre astutely noted.

"Right." The Romulan subcommander nodded her head, "There is a lot to be admired about Surak's philosophy, but I like my emotions. I like being able to smile and laugh and fall in love. And yes, to also cry, get angry, and sometimes have my heart broken. For every good side... there's a bad side."

Nodding in agreement as the pair drew near the briefing room, Jondum observed, "It seems both your peoples have much to learn from each other."

"True." V'lana replied as the door opened before them, "Looks like Kaidan managed to herd the reporters okay...shall we join them?"

The Briefing

"Parallel universes? Matter—anti-matter containment? Borg?" Khalisah Al-Jilani snorted in derision. "I haven't heard such a line of bullshit in my life!"

"It makes sense. Think about it." Emily Wong argued back. "Have you seen technology like this before? I know I haven't. We just had a tour with demonstrations. Have you ever seen or heard of a device like their transporter? You saw that contained singularity...do you think we're capable of doing that? Besides, the existence of parallel universes has long been a theoretical notion. Now we have confirmation."

"Ms. Wong is correct." Jondum, who, having already received his briefing, echoed. "Existence of parallel universes now confirmed."

"So...why aren't you allowing us to report this?" Al-Jilani demanded.

"What do you think the reaction would be among the populace in the Systems Alliance and Citadel Space if they were to suddenly find out that not only do parallel universes exist, but that in many ways they're far more advanced technologically than you are." V'lana countered maintaining a cool exterior.

"*Gallena* can defeat any dreadnought in Alliance and Citadel space." Jondum noted, "Even the *Destiny Ascension* would be defeated given the *Gallena's* cloaking technology and use of energy weapons. Not to mention torpedoes."

"And the *Gallena* is by no means the largest ship that we have." The subcommander pointed out as she activated the monitor to display a variety of Federation, Romulan, and Klingon vessels. "The Federation has the *Galaxy*, *Sovereign*, and *Presidio* classes for starters. We in the Republic and our enemies in the Romulan Star Empire and Tal'Shiar have the *Scimitar* and *D'Deridex* among others. And the Klingons have the *Negh'Var* along with a variety of other ships." The images now shifting to other vessels, V'lana remarked, "And these are Borg, Cardassian, Tholian, Gorn, Orion, and ships belonging to other powers—both allied and opposing."

"They're right." Diana Allers stated in a hushed voice as images of the Battle of Wolf 359 appeared on the monitor. "If people in the Alliance or among the Citadel races were to ever see this, there would be panic."

"So...when can we reveal what we know?" Khalisah demanded, "Humanity has a right to know this."

"Hopefully in the near future, we can release you to air the truth." V'lana responded, "Believe me, I know full well that this sort of news cannot be kept quiet for long."

"Council and Systems Alliance are carrying out campaign of gradual release of information." Jondum interjected for the reporters' benefit. "First goal...get people used to the idea of parallel universes and prepared for eventual contact. Second...admit the existence of alternate universes. Must be done carefully to avoid fear among the populace—both human and nonhuman. Salarian society...for example...would be devastated at the extent of scientific inferiority. Other Council races would have similar reactions."

Kaidan illustrated further, "Imagine the reaction of the turians at the notion that there are entities with fleets that dwarf them in numbers and capabilities."

"That is why we must be very careful and why you are being censored." V'lana declared in a firm tone of voice, "I should also remind you that according to the agreements you and your agencies signed in order for permission to embed here, the penalty for violating the nondisclosure clause is a charge of treason." She concluded pointedly, "While both the Federation and Romulan Republic forbid the use of capital punishment, unfortunately, both the Systems Alliance and Citadel Council do permit it as a sentence for treason. I'll let you connect the dots."

"We understand." Emily replied, giving her fellow reporters a warning glance, "We'll keep quiet until you give us the all clear—right?"

"Agreed." Diana affirmed, nodding her head.

"Khalisah?" Emily asked, staring into the eyes of the Westerlund News reporter.

"All right." Al-Jilani grudgingly acknowledged, "I'll agree—under protest."

"Duly noted." V'lana replied with a nod of her head. "Now...if you'll join me on the bridge, you can observe as we depart Citadel space. You will also get your first taste of warp travel."

"Can't wait." Emily grinned as she picked up her gear, urging on her fellow reporters, "C'mon! You don't want to be late for the show!"

"Think they'll take the hint?" Kaidan asked both his lover and the salarian Spectre standing with him.

"I don't think we're going to have any problems from Emily as long as we live up to our end of the deal. And as you've told me, Allers essentially works as a propaganda organ for the Alliance military. She'll do as she's told."

"Al-Jilani could be a problem." Jondum noted, "History of human supremacy and xenophobia in reporting."

Nodding in agreement, V'lana observed, "We'll need to keep careful surveillance of her. The moment she gets out of line—she gets thrown in the brig and stays there until we transfer her to Council authorities. Now...we better get to the bridge." A smirk appearing on her face, the subcommander quipped, "Jondum...you're gonna love this."

Playtime's Over

Entering the bridge with her entourage tailing behind her, V'lana ordered in a firm voice, "Stand here..." She pointed at a location near the turbolift doors. "You're welcome to observe, but please do not interfere." As she approached the center chair, the ship's XO stood up, vacating the seat. "Status, Centurion?"

"All stations report ready, Subcommander." Tovan crisply responded as he presented a padd to his commanding officer. "Cloaking system... weapons...shields...engines...all report ready for duty."

"Very good." Raising her voice, she commanded, "Joker? One-quarter impulse until we're out of Citadel space."

"Aye, Subcommander." The helmsman acknowledged, "One quarter impulse."

"Impulse?" Allers inquired.

"Our sublight drive is called the impulse drive. It's basically an augmented fusion drive." V'lana explained.

"How fast can it go?" Emily asked.

"We can reach speed of light with it. Once we're clear of the Citadel, we'll be going to warp."

"Warp?"

"Our superlight drive." The subcommander explained. "Simple explanation..." V'lana elaborated, "is that it produces warp fields that generate a subspace bubble. That takes us faster than light."

"Why didn't we develop that?" Allers queried.

Answering the reporter's question, Jondum replied, "Discovery of mass effect technology and relays rendered the need to develop alternative means of FTL travel moot. Can see now that was a mistake."

"We're clear, Subcommander." Joker reported, a smile on his face as he anticipated the reactions of the newcomers to going into warp for the first time.

V'lana ordered from her position in the center chair. "Set course for the Doradus system, Mr. Moreau. Warp factor six."

"Aye, Subcommander. Course laid in, engaging warp."

The newcomers gasped as a bright light appeared before the ship. Then a green glow as the ship took off into warp."

"Woah!" Emily exclaimed, "That was something."

"Are we in this subspace now?" Diana inquired curiously.

"We're in a subspace bubble, yes." V'lana replied, "If you'd like more detailed information, Lieutenant Veril, our chief engineer, will be happy to provide it for you."

"Thanks." Emily replied before questioning further, "Can you tell us why we're going to the Doradus System?"

"Yes." V'lana answered back, "We're deliberately going to systems without mass effect relays in order to investigate the possible presence of wormholes or other non-mass effect driven technology in these systems. It is theoretically possible that there is at least one wormhole that exists that will allow transit from one universe to another. The question then becomes which universe and is the wormhole stable."

"How are you going to determine that?" Khalisah, momentarily stunned by the transition to warp space, asked.

"Through probes and sensor scans." The Romulan subcommander replied. "Of course we're not the only ones doing this. There is a multi-species exploration flotilla that's doing the same thing we are. Hopefully, someone will find what you humans call the Holy Grail."

"And what are the odds of that happening?" Al-Jilani countered with a smug grin.

"S'tov?" V'lana signaled with a finger gesture a Vulcan lieutenant wearing a blue 23rd century shirt.

"Approximately 49838.5038 to 1."

Her lips turning up in a sly grin, the subcommander asked another question. "What were the odds of us surviving travel from one universe to another."

“Approximately 93033820 to 1, Subcommander.”

“See...” V’lana smirked as both Emily and Diana tried without success to suppress their snickers, “We beat the odds once already. I think we can do it again. There’s something else you should consider. We’re going into completely unexplored territory and that’s one of the reasons why we’re here. She gestured to the viewscreen, “To find out what’s out there. Aren’t you the least bit curious?”

“I don’t know about you two...” Emily remarked, “But I am.”

“Gotta admit...” Diana interjected, “I wouldn’t mind seeing what’s behind the next hill. What about you, Khalisah? Don’t you want to discover something new?”

“Only if it can be of benefit to humanity.” Al-Jilani sniffed. “What I am afraid of is that we’re going to poke something we’re not supposed to and humanity will suffer as a result.”

“There’s always that risk.” V’lana conceded, “That’s why in this business you always have to weigh the risk versus the reward. But I think here...the reward is well worth the risk. Now...if you’ll accompany Staff Commander Alenko, he’ll escort you to your quarters so that you can get settled in. No offense, but I’ve got work to do.”

Once the turbolift door had shut on their guests, V’lana whispered to her old friend, “That Al-Jilani woman is going to be trouble. I want her watched and monitored. Also, limit her access to the computer. Allow her basic stuff, but anything having to do with ship’s systems or sensitive intelligence or military information...shut the door hard. Preferably on her fingers.”

“Will do, Little Sister.”

“Thanks. Now...” she grinned as her attention was focused on the starry scene before her, “...let’s earn our pay.”

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